

THE ROLE OF CHANGE AGENT IN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

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SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

According to Chinoy (1954 27) "social organization and social structure are interchangeable concepts referring to any inter-related system of roles and statuses." Social organizations require structural conditions and work to be accomplished, and a continuous process wherein the needs of a society are met through cooperative systems (Greer 1965 6). In all societies there is need for humans to organize individual behaviors for social purposes. To study social organization from this point of view, I will use an area of applied sociology. In today's social action programs, there is an emerging role to be filled called the *change agent*. The problem selected in the democratic process, as the role of the change agent in community development projects.

In social organization the literature includes the fields of leadership development, community power structure, community organization, group dynamics, politics, and communications. But there has been little attention to the subject of providing technical assistance, and to the poor becoming meaningfully involved in planning local programs for community development. The *war on poverty* calls for citizens to help, and this requires qualified change agents who can provide technical assistance (Bell, in press).

CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

While many blunders have been made in past approaches to community and social problems, perhaps it is not too late to research and plan in the area of technical assistance for citizen participation. Here, the change agent must be able to define the problems that affect citizen participation in community development. This is more critical when the target area is composed almost exclusively black Americans and other minority groups. To understand community feelings we must reach the minds of a representative group of the citizens of the community. We must also consider the ideas of the professional technologists who are responsible to implement community development projects. Too often, these professionals presume undisputed authority to plan for the masses.

At present there is a call for citizen participation in a community development project in a predominantly black section of Tulsa, Oklahoma, with a population of 35,000, including all levels of social class. The project is called *Model Cities*, and is cosponsored by four agencies of the Federal Government. On the local level, the Mayor of Tulsa has designated Oklahoma University Extension Division in Tulsa as the Model Cities Demonstration Agency. Tulsa is one of some 60 cities receiving a planning grant for comprehensive community development. Federal Government specifically requires maximum effective citizen participation at all levels of planning, implementation and execution of the project.

The Mayor and the Cities Demonstration Agency (CDA) staff asked the local agency of the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) to provide effective mechanisms for citizen participation. The plan called for organizing the community using a basic model of participatory democracy. This called for a community council composed of elected representatives from each organization in the community that desired to participate, and members from each territorial division in the area. The Regional Office of OEO indicated that money was available to fund this program, and offered technical aid, and encouraged residents in the area to form a citizen participation organization. Within four months, it became obvious that there were many barriers to effecting maximum citizen participation.

This effort did not follow the suggestions of Alinsky (1946) who spoke of a need for new foci of power. Some effort was made to develop grass-roots groups, in an attempt to represent various classes and established interest groups. Alinsky would cultivate natural leadership among a group of depressed people. He would urge them to locate their common goals, mobilize their antagonisms toward common economies, and prepare to fight the established power foci.

While there have been many attempts in recent years to involve citizens in community development, the present national circumstances are unique. No money will be

provided by the Federal Government until the agencies and their professional planners make plans with the target area residents. This condition has created superordinate goals between the local power structures and their representatives and the disadvantaged blighted communities. Because of the diverse values and methods of operation, it is difficult to reconcile technologists with the democratic process of citizen participation including the poor. As Lindeman (1921:120) noted, long ago, the democratic method is slow, and is beset with many antiprogressive back-eddies. The specialist becomes impatient with this method, and wants to get on with the project.

The Federal Government attempt to launch community development projects without qualified personnel available for proper execution is evidence of lack of planning. Even if enough people have the potential for learning to be community organizers, it would take a long time to develop experience and proficiency in community cooperation. Each new expert in a community leaves a trail of bad experiences. And most people educated and available for training in such projects are white. White experts are perceived by black citizens as someone else to exploit the black man.

BARRIERS

Professional change agents charged with the task of providing technical assistance to the community through the Community Development Agency (CDA) encounter conflicting goals both from the Federal Government and from community organizations. Those in the community who were interviewed on this subject agreed that the change agent offering technical assistance faces unusual challenges. They agreed that the change agent must realistically face the problems involved, and that this person should have extensive training before making contact with the target area. Federal employees are distrusted locally, and further problems are encountered if the change agent is regarded as an outsider by the community. Target area residents will severely test the change agent before offering cooperation. The testing will be unreasonable, and will come in unpredictable ways.

Interviewees generally agreed that technical assistance is necessary in a community development project, and that the change agent has the most difficult job in the entire process. The change agent is usually employed by the establishment to work for and in behalf of the target area residents. If he is to be successful he must pass all the tests devised by the community and completely identify with them as their man. If he is white, working in a black community, he is automatically suspect. If he is black in the same community, he is considered an "Uncle Tom" who has sold out to the white establishment. But most of those interviewed said that the suspicion of a white change agent would be temporary if the agent were sincere and could produce.

The approach used by the change agent in offering technical assistance is perhaps more important than the agent's color or race. People of the community may be poor, but they do have pride. This pride is intensified by black power advocates and by the surge of nationalism in countries which are predominantly black. There are black leaders who have reached the point of preferring to be without federal aid if it cannot be administered by blacks. However, this is not always practical. The motives of the change agent are questioned. Some think he is only there in the interest of the establishment, to keep the project from failing, so that federal funds will continue to flow. Others do not care what the change agent's motives are, if he is effective. One agency head warned that we must work with the target area residents as they are, rather than trying to make them conform to standards that are foreign to them:

Sometimes we presuppose middle-class points of view or middle class standards. I think we all have to agree that they should have opportunity to have the same kind of education as anybody else, the same opportunity for housing, the same opportunity for employment if they are qualified. But they also must have the opportunity to do what they please and to live the way they please. If they want to have a color television in a shabby, shoddy house, they ought to have it. If they want to have two or three cars in their drive, and a shoddy house they ought to have it. These are choices they are entitled to.

CHANGE AGENT QUALIFICATIONS

It can be concluded that there are two criteria necessary for a change agent effectively to render technical assistance to the disadvantaged target area residents. 1) He must be professionally qualified. 2) He must be accepted by the people to be served. He needs more than a college degree in sociology or some related field. The agent must be knowledgeable of the methods of community organization with some practical experience in the field. He must be authorized to make certain meaningful commitments to the citizens in regard to their rights and privileges, and to the alternatives for funding. It will make little difference in the total effort whether he is black or white, if he is honest and straightforward with the people. He must be honest enough to admit that federal people have made mistakes in the past, and that they will probably make more mistakes in the future. One respondent said that in his experience, federal employees are genuinely concerned about what goes on in the ghetto and they want to help, but do not know how to help.

To be accepted, the change agent can assume no more authority than what the residents allow him. Even when it is evident to him what needs to be done, he must assume only the role of an adviser. He must show sincerity and commitment. While his real motives might not be important, it is to his advantage if the people are convinced that he is genuinely concerned about their welfare. He will need the approval of the older black leaders to avoid serious obstacles. He must have the confidence of the younger militants if he is to remain effective in the community. To avoid serious mistakes he must learn the past community problems and anticipate resistance. The four most-mentioned sources of resistance to the idea of help are:

1) reluctance to admit weakness; 2) fear of failure; 3) a fatalist expectation of failure instilled by previous unsuccessful attempts to change; 4) a fear of losing some current satisfaction, such as power or dependency.

While it is not essential to use local people as change agents, it would be beneficial. Using home-town people avoids the criticism and the distrust of an outsider. This is extremely important if the person does not have previous experience.

Perhaps the beginning point for a solution is to try to break down the distrust that now exists. Because of the polarization and distrust between the target area residents and the establishment, the technical assistant may be in a precarious position. He must consider the desires of the people, yet be courageous enough to point out any unrealistic demands. He must be dedicated to the principle of democracy to the extent that he is willing to jeopardize his employment by challenging the establishment when necessary.

Often the change agent must be prepared to deal with antagonist (power structure) as well as with a client (community). The change agent may from time to time abandon the role of change agent ... in order to assume the role of protagonist. (Lippit 1958 31)

Another area to be explored for more effective technical assistance is private funding. If a philanthropic foundation or organization would provide funds or advisory staff, it would immediately break down the attitude of distrust on the part of citizens of the community. If the funds come from a federal agency, the people should have a say regarding personnel hired for technical assistance. If federal money is used, perhaps the people should incorporate after their organization stabilizes, and ask for funding directly, as a delegate agency. Regardless of the method of funding, the people and their technical advisors need to have full freedom from purse strings and the accompanying control. If we are to get the really hard core people involved it may require hiring untrained people from the hard core element who can reach their own kind. According to one poor person from the community:

You must have somebody in each group to have some kind of say or some kind of influence reaching out — somebody who can go and talk in each group and let him organize his group and you organize your group. Then we bring the groups together. Because if we have one understanding, we will have to come together, but you have to single them out in groups and put them together.

Perhaps the real answer, to meet the needs indicated by the conclusion, is to train local people with potential in this area of work to assist the target area residents. These people,

properly trained, could then train and inform the disadvantaged citizens. It is basically a special education program that is required. This will mean extensive planning in this area as well as funds for actual training. It is strongly recommended that this training be in the field as well as in the classroom.

POVERTY WAR PROBLEMS

There are inherent problems in the military approach to the war on poverty. Careful analysis of these problems calls for experimentation, and justifies innovations by the change agent regarding a new civilian-oriented perspective on the total effort. It is a war fought by professionals on behalf of the civilian population. This comes primarily through service programs such as advising, medical care, financial aid, education, and job training. In the traditional approach, these benefits have been doled out piece-meal by service organizations to alleviate hardships as defined by social workers and their concept of minimal standards of decency. Consequently, this type of offensive has developed and maintained a donor-donee relation. While these services may make life in poverty more endurable, it has perhaps served to embed the poverty populace more deeply in their helpless estate. Even when the services are offered on a comprehensive basis, the basic relation between clients and service agencies persists. The clients understand that the agency initiates and administers the program, establishes criteria for eligibility and judges on a continuing basis whether all of these conditions are met. Every social worker and every donee is well aware what this can mean in loss of dignity, rights, and privacy. The change agent will find that the agencies and these social workers will not easily give up this position of advantage and power. A second basic problem is that mobilization of resources for war on poverty is controlled by creation of a monopoly power. It is based on a strategy planned to result in the fewest casualties among the professionals. The incumbent political administration and the existing charitable and educational institutions are maintained and incorporated into the directorship of the organization. These elements of the community are given important positions on the board of directors and usually are

granted permanent representation.

This is clearly a formidable group which easily holds a monopoly on available assistance and resources for the poor. It has the potential advantage of superior resources, efficiency, economy of purchasing power, research facilities, and capacity for innovation. But this power monopoly can be used to achieve insulation from criticism. It need not compete, so there is no standard by which to judge its effectiveness, except that the poor are still with us. The power monopoly can secure relative immunity from evaluation, and can generally ignore consumer demands. And this is the same organization which employs the change agent for technical assistance in organizing to overthrow the monopoly power. But monopolies tend to expand and to perpetuate themselves. When criticism is made, a few pictures and a series of success stories on a few rehabilitated persons serve to quiet the natives. If this does not succeed, the monopoly can easily undermine and discredit the source. If all else fails, the dissenter can usually be satiated by being hired into the organization.

Ineffective social agencies are unlikely to publicize their own failings. An evaluation which indicates lack of effectiveness usually calls for more staff and more dollars. Rarely does it indicate inadequate effort or insufficient ability. Political administrations do not welcome criticism or embarrassing revelations about a program's deficiencies, especially near election time. Any criticism is a reflection on all parts of the system.

SOLUTIONS

In this world of increased technology there is a danger of democracy being replaced or eliminated. Assuming that democracy is an American commitment, steps must be taken to assure its survival. This is the task of the change agent in giving technical assistance in community development.

To offset the problems, methods must be devised to break the pattern. Poor people must be represented. The ultimate power to govern must be somehow placed in the hands of the people. The poor must be given effective power to criticize, disagree, and have power to demand positive and helpful response from agencies and authorities.

The poor must be able to challenge the actions and proposals of the professional programmer. With deadlines to meet, the program directors and planners are reluctant to wait until the poor can be informed and can participate in decision making. We live in an era of disciplined expediency.

If we are not willing to give the poor a chance to participate in community decisions, then in essence we are saying that we have no faith in the potential worth and basic dignity of these individuals. It confirms what our system suggests — the assumption of the poor person's social impotence and subservience. We do hear from these poor people in the language of rejection, crime, riots, delinquency and dependency. We will continue to hear from them. The choice is between the vice of alienation or positive expressions of meaningful community involvement.

In the many program failures in the United States, one should realize that the experts on poverty may well be those in abject poverty. Token approval and resignation by the poor have been equated with citizen participation. We have robbed ourselves of the wisdom and potential corrective insights of the people to be served.

For the poor citizen, there must be a channel for articulation of their basic grievances. It must be so independent and so effective that no monopoly power or donor-donee relation can stifle it. At the same time, it is not easy for people with education and moderate skills to carry on meaningful community participation in decision making and planning. Here we are asking relatively untrained and uninformed people to formulate programs, set priorities, and to evaluate highly technical procedures and operations. Let us assume that

the people to be served are not ready for such participation. Then it remains that someone must do this for them on their behalf, and assist them while they go through the necessary learning experiences that will eventually qualify them for personal participation. The trained and professionally qualified change agent is the one source available to provide assistance needed to effect meaningful citizen participation.

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