

EXERCISING POWER TO PRODUCE CHANGE: BUILDING SOCIAL CAPITAL IN COMMUNITY ORGANIZING

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INTRODUCTION

In studying how community organizations build power to make changes in their communities, it is important to understand what we mean by 'power' in this context.

I look at three different aspects of power that are important for organizations to exercise if they are to be successful in changing community conditions:

- The source of power
- The nature of power
- The instruments of power

Power is critical because this is the mechanism through which community organizations produce change. It is also important to understand change – how do we know when community organizations are really having an impact in communities? Is it enough for community organizing participants to become empowered without making substantial impacts in the community? If so, does community organizing really differ from support groups or psychotherapy? I am interested to see how community organizations make change, and I look at three different types of change they can produce:

- Tuning
- Incremental change
- Restructuring

CASE STUDY: COMMUNITY CHANGE PRODUCED BY CCOP IN CAMDEN

I describe the way PICO's affiliate in Camden, NJ – CCOP – worked to exercise power around the issue of vacant housing and violent crime. The mechanisms employed by CCOP are described, as are the results of their efforts. Careful steps were taken to understand whether the community impacts could be traced to the power exercised by CCOP.

CCOP's efforts resulted in:

- an inventory of vacant buildings;
- a dramatic reduction in the costs of demolishing buildings;
- altered policies on the boarding-up of abandoned buildings;

- CCOP obtaining \$ 3 million to support the city implementing these new policies;
- a dramatic drop in violent crime, particularly in areas where the new policies were implemented; and
- real reductions in violent crime within Camden, and a reduced proportion of violent crime in the City of Camden, relative to the County of Camden.

I assert that CCOP was as successful as it was because it was an organization that understood how to build power and how to exercise it. This knowledge stems from its model of organizing and its experience in community organizing.

CASE STUDY: INDIVIDUAL CHANGE PRODUCED BY THE PICO CALIFORNIA PROJECT

The PICO California Project is a coalition of PICO's 17 organizing groups from throughout the State of California. Like CCOP, the efforts of the PICO California Project have made substantial impacts on their communities and, in this case, the State. The PICO California Project has altered policies and leveraged money in State support of education and health care, including:

- \$15 million in funding of parent/teacher home visits
- \$9.2 billion in school repair bonds;
- \$50 million in after school learning programs;
- \$25 million in programs to encourage school-to-career training;
- a federal waiver allowing 300,000 parents to be included in "Healthy Families";
- \$10 million in funding to health clinics;
- \$50 million in primary care clinics; and
- modifying bureaucratic mechanisms requiring quarterly enrollments into health plans, thus increasing the insured by 500,000

What of the thousands of PICO members that worked for years to produce these changes? Have they been impacted? Do they understand power? Or policy-making? To answer such questions, most stringent research and evaluation utilizes surveys. Survey research can be extremely useful in understanding processes and impacts of community organizing. In a study of the PICO California Project, I found that by comparing four groups, each selected at random:

- leaders in the statewide – PICO California Project;
- leaders in local PICO projects;
- residents from within PICO communities who are members of churches/faith communities but not PICO; and
- residents from within PICO communities who are NOT members of churches/faith communities nor of PICO

the impacts to individuals participating in PICO organizing were significantly greater than randomly selected community residents. Moreover, the magnitude of these impacts was substantial.

Research on the PICO California Project, an effort making remarkable impacts on California, confirms that individuals involved in these organizing processes are deeply impacted through their participation.

If PICO's organizing produces substantial changes and impacts in the communities and states they are organizing in, and it has significant impacts on individuals participating in its organizing processes, how then does PICO work? What are the underlying mechanisms that make PICO's community organizing 'work'?

MEASURING THE PROCESS OF BUILDING SOCIAL CAPITAL

The underlying process of PICO's work may be considered that of developing 'social capital'. That is, PICO works to engage and expand networks of individuals within faith communities and throughout neighborhoods.

Rather than measuring this process with just surveys, I have been working with PICO groups and other community organizations to gather data on participatory processes. This type of data – often called administrative data – is difficult to access and often very time-consuming to analyze. Nevertheless, I believe this form of data is the best way to really understand the process of social capital development. This type of data is behavioral, disaggregated and longitudinal; it allows for the study of how social capital changes in individuals and groups.

In Rochester, we see the expansion of participation within individual congregations as well as across all congregations. These data demonstrate that the numbers of participants increase over time, as does the average level of participation. In Colorado, we see the same organizing process applied to a mobile home park (as opposed to a faith community) yielding the same increase in number of participants as well as average level of involvement over time. It is notable that the level of participation in faith communities is generally greater than the level in a mobile home park.

In contrast to surveys, behavioral data provides much richer about the phenomena of social capital. Although surveys are excellent tools for understanding some types of phenomena, the intensely behavioral nature of this form of data collection contributes to a robustness in the knowledge we have of the organizing process and our confidence in the ways organizing is working to create changes at both individual levels, through perceptions, attitudes, and knowledge, as well as at the community level, by altering policies, funding streams and quality of life impacts. My work is continuing to collect data – both survey and behavioral participation data – on the PICO organizing process, as well as the impacts those processes yield.