

Bringing people together to effect change is one of the most important—and misunderstood—elements of problem-solving. Here's how to do (or support) organizing that makes a difference.

Sections to guide you:

- *Ideas in brief*
- *Ideas at work*
- *Taking stock: applying the ideas in your community*

STRATEGY TOOL #4

Organizing Stakeholders, Building Movement, Setting the Agenda

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Ideas in Brief

Civic organizing—the process of bringing people and institutions together to effect change—is one of the most fundamental elements of problem-solving in a democratic society. Because change doesn't define or sell itself, organizing is crucial for motivating, building capacity for, and, perhaps most importantly, creating a *constituency* for change. More and more observers are documenting the contributions of organizing to community well-being, empowerment, and active citizenship.

But there are a number of myths about organizing. Some confuse it with the tactics of pressure politics, for example, or with mere program “outreach.” Or

they assume that organizing is only about connecting people at the grassroots.

What's more, it isn't always clear how a larger process of organizing can be tied to strategies for planning, negotiating, and implementing—all of which offer ways to engage stakeholders in meaningful collective work. This tool offers a straightforward way of understanding what organizing is and what it does. The tool highlights pitfalls and tensions, and it outlines how you can do or support organizing, help set the community agenda, and build movement for constructive change.

Ideas at Work

KEY ISSUE	OPPORTUNITIES	PITFALLS
Organizing is frequently misunderstood, overlooked, or constrained by myths about what organizing is and how it operates. It is treated as a synonym for advocacy and outreach, as code language for a particular political ideology, as a mechanism for generating conflict (not building consensus), as a set of protest tactics.	Re-framing organizing can itself be a mechanism of community learning and change, as stakeholders distinguish the process of change from particular ideology (to guide change) or tactics (to accomplish it), as they link organizing to key strategies, such as policy advocacy or planning.	There may be as many definitions of organizing as there are organizers, so not everyone <i>will</i> agree on what it is or whose interests it serves. Furthermore, opening up the civic process in a democracy necessarily involves sharing control, which often—and perhaps naturally—creates anxiety.
Organizing is (actually) a civic activity that brings people together to create change, in part by building their capacity to take action together. Organizing is motivational, and sometimes it involves building new institutions.	Organizing helps to create constituencies for action, which related civic tools—planning, for example—often do not ensure. Organizing is not simply about marketing an aim of ours that should belong to “them” or merely creating a “sense of community.”	Some organizing employs conflict to mobilize, and sharp us/them lines may be drawn. Without a sense of the bigger picture, organizing can create legitimate new claims but not the basis for addressing them.
Organizing can support the negotiation, planning, and implementing of solutions in crucial ways. And these specific tools give form to organizing, make it something more than building a constituency that “spins its wheels.”	By bringing new parties, issues, and a sharper sense of stakes into the process, organizing can lead to more democratic negotiation, planning that creates real and equitable results, and implementation that engages others as vital “co-producers” of change.	These skill areas often require flexible styles of thinking and agility in how stakeholders interact and adjust their goals over time. E.g., pressure politics can lead to costly stand-off in negotiation.
Because it is change-oriented, organizing necessarily raises issues of power or influence—but how should we think about power and learn to share it?	Power to do something (power that accomplishes) does not always require power over others, and there are multiple levels of power—to set the agenda, to make proposals, to influence decisions per se, etc.	Simple definitions of power make it a synonym for having resources, but resourcefulness—using what you have effectively—is a key to influencing outcomes that matter.

Organizing Stakeholders, Building Movement, Setting the Agenda

by Xavier de Souza Briggs

Convening to discuss shared concerns. Motivating people to change the world around them. Developing new leadership. Linking institutions in common cause. Getting important ideas “on screen” for public attention. Moving the ideas toward concrete programs of change. Organizing.

What does organizing mean in the public realm, beyond dictionary definitions of “making into a structured group” or “coordinating elements” and “making more effective”? In civic terms, organizing means bring people together to effect change. It includes those dictionary ingredients of forming groups and coordinating. But it’s also defined by its purpose: organizing helps makes collective action possible *and* effective—collective, civic action that is not limited to what government does.

From street-level block clubs to inter-faith alliances to globe-spanning networks of activists, from “suburban warriors” for tax reform to AIDS coalitions that mobilize health professionals, street workers (prostitutes), parents, and others for needed change—oftentimes for changes that include both the very personal (safer lifestyles) and the very public (expanded public budgets, new laws, new rights, new obligations). From rural self-help groups that monitor environ-

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In democratic countries, knowledge of how to combine is the mother of all other forms of knowledge; on its progress depends that of all the others.

mental pollution to associations of urban slum dwellers who create their own, low-cost, safe and sanitary housing, tapping domestic and international organizations for funding and technical assistance. From mayors who build cross-sector civic networks to accomplish what city government alone cannot do to charitable foundations that invest in building community capacity.

More and more observers are documenting the contributions of organizing to community well-being. For example, in an overview focused on locally-based community organizing that targets low-income people and their neighborhoods, the *Community Organizing Toolbox: A Funder’s Guide* cites these examples of the impact of community organizing in America:

- Leveraged billions of dollars in public

and private sector investment;

- Expanded and improved city services;
- Prevented industrial plant closings;
- Cleaned up toxic waste dumps in low-income communities;
- Improved the climate, operation, and performance of neighborhood schools; and
- Built or rehabilitated hundreds of thousands of affordable housing units.

Other civic initiatives engage the grassroots and “grasstops” to accomplish complex tasks, such as re-connecting distressed areas to the larger economy or strengthening families and communities in comprehensive ways. The Annie E. Casey’s Making Connections initiative emphasizes “building strong local move-

ments” to accomplish this, and likewise, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation’s Urban Health Initiative seeks broad, lasting civic commitment to improve the well-being of children—a job too large for any one actor or social group. Hundreds of civic initiatives, some initiated by government and others by business or non-profit groups, likewise mobilize varied stakeholder interests and wide capacity to effect important change.

In other parts of the world, the scale and organization of these efforts may differ, along with who participates, what language and symbols are used, and so on—all this may be very particular to a given setting, culture, and felt need.

Some of these efforts emphasize change in social conditions, while others stress moral renewal and changes in indi-

“Organizing has to be seen less a sacred priesthood and more as a set of skills that can be learned and practiced by all kinds of people, in a variety of organizational settings.”—William Traynor, “Community Building: Hope and Caution” (*Shelterforce Online*, 1995)

vidual behavior. But a core set of ideas about civic action ties together these varied efforts, from enhancing work and wages to promoting environmental sustainability, from expanding shelter to improving health, education, and more.

Particularly in the non-governmental sector, some of the most innovative players in social problem-solving around the world—such as Shack/Slum Dwellers International, a locally-based network of organizations spanning three continents—were born and continue to work through “grassroots” organizing.

Moreover, powerful social and economic development institutions, such as the World Bank, have invested increased time, funding, technical support, and research in recent years in organizing and related strategies. Many of these efforts aim to create the capable and representative, non-governmental community groups that make possible effective “community-driven” development, sometimes by partnering with government and businesses. Other efforts aim to build the capacity of government, particularly at the local level, to act as an organizer of change and not merely a provider of direct services. The World Bank and other large-scale aid agencies join a host of private, philanthropic funders that have long invested in local-level “community capacity,” variously defined.

Many other institutions, and a small mountain of scholarly tomes, emphasize the importance of civic participation and democratic renewal at a time of rapid and dramatic social, political, and economic change worldwide—change that has created new social problems, new cynicism about government effectiveness and accountability, and other challenges.

Civic infrastructure or civic capacity

is vitally important in such a world. As the National Civic League defines it, civic infrastructure includes a capacity to “consider problems and issues of common concern, reach agreements (formal and informal) about how to address those concerns, implement these agreements effectively, and learn and make necessary changes.”

Organizing is civic action that helps make it possible to do those things today—and also invest in the capacity that will be required tomorrow, as our problems and concerns evolve.

Organizing is not always about convincing government to do something different or something new. True, organizing very often emphasizes, or at least includes, an agenda for policy reform or other official action. But in a world of changing responsibilities for

“public” in the sense of being concerned with the common good, a collective future, shared rights and responsibilities—i.e., the civic realm. More and more of these organizing activities are led by non-profit, non-governmental organizations, but some are led by businesses or business groups—or by “cross-sector” initiatives that span the public, private, and non-governmental realms.

Whatever form it takes, though, and whatever propels it, observers acknowledge the fact that civic action has visible effects around the world, that it is grounded in something called “organizing,” and that it runs the gamut in terms of who participates and toward what ends.

Why this tool? There’s a great deal of commentary and guidance available on organizing, and there are more and more options for connecting to trained civic organizers—at conferences, through online networks, and even in university courses and privately-run training programs. But much of the available material advocates a particular approach to organizing or speaks to us in our role as individual citizens only. This strategy tool is a primer on organizing for citizen activ-

Civic action runs the gamut in terms of who participates and toward what ends.



public problem-solving, organizing often targets important activities that are outside of government but still

ists but also planners and program managers, public and private funders, trainers, and researchers. That is, it’s for those who might need to do, fund, or otherwise support organizing or work across the table with organizers.

Most of all, this tool is written for those looking to develop or support *whatever* approaches to organizing will make a difference in their community at a given point in time. Here, you can learn useful answers to three big questions:

(a) What does organizing contribute to social problem-solving in democratic societies, particularly at the local or “community” level?

(b) What key dilemmas arise in efforts to organize stakeholders and define and pursue a civic agenda? By this, I don’t

Conflict can mobilize people by sharpening their sense of what's at stake ... [but] conflict can be shrill and self-serving, too, more about venting grievances or placing blame.

simply mean, what's challenging? I mean, where are the puzzles or potential contradictions that are costly but easy to overlook?

(c) How does organizing relate to other core activities of collective problem-solving, such as planning, negotiating, and implementing? How does it challenge, support, or respond to them?

There's no one style of organizing advocated here, and no one policy or program agenda, just some good strategic sense and awareness of the pitfalls.

Myths about organizing

Whatever the context, timing, issues, players, and objectives, and whether the political values are conservative or progressive or something else, organizing is perhaps the most crucial element of community problem-solving. It may also be the most misunderstood. Here are some of the biggest myths about organizing:

Myth #1: Organizing is code language for a particular political ideology. On the contrary, organizers are more and more politically diverse. If organizing often

connotes a progressive, and in some places pro-poor, agenda, one reason is that many of the core strategies and practices of civic organizing were developed to help poor people effect political and social change. That is, many ideas about organizing were born to address the needs of the disenfranchised, for whom traditional forms of political action—voting, meeting with political officials, shaping media coverage—had proven insufficient or, in some cases unavailable (were closed off). A second reason is that poor or otherwise disadvantaged people around the globe have long had great reasons to organize.

But the demand for flexible civic action has become so apparent worldwide,



on so many issues, that organizing is clearly everyone's business and everyone's opportunity. What's more, some of the most politically significant activism in recent decades—in the U.S. and other countries—has successfully mobilized conservative citizens and groups to reshape the social safety net or "welfare state," tighten immigration policies, expand the role of religious institutions in addressing social needs, and more.

Organizing is always defined by values, as we'll see in a moment, but not by any one set of political or social values. Furthermore, the participants

Organizing is always defined by values—but not by any one set of political or social values.

and targets vary widely across types of organizing: labor (union) organizing, community organizing, electoral campaign organizing, or other types.

Myth #2: Organizing is a synonym for "outreach" and "advocacy." No, advocating particular policy decisions, usually by government but sometimes by businesses and nonprofits as well, is a frequent strategy of organizers. Advocacy is an influence mechanism. But organizing is the broader process of bring people together to effect change. Advocacy is just a part of that, and outreach is an even more modest, tactical part. In the context of professionally managed planning or social programs, for example, outreach is often about getting

"them" into our mailing list, event, activity, or process. As veteran community development practitioner and adviser Bill Traynor observes in "Community Building: Hope and Caution" (*Shelterforce Online* 1995), in too many local change efforts, "the organizer becomes seen as a kind of outreach/event specialist whose job is to service the other 'line staff' in the organization."

In the context of organizing civic action, outreach is merely a first step—inviting participation in a larger effort to build relationships and shape programs of change. Outreach is also key when it's part of the operational aspect of change—the program outreach that may help determine how well an organizing initiative actually "delivers the goods." Organizing cannot happen *without* outreach, but outreach, like advocacy, is merely an element.

Myth #3: Organizing relies on political confrontation and sharpens conflict, not consensus. It's true that most civic organizers know the important role that conflict plays in human life, especially in democratic societies. Conflict can mobilize people by sharpening their

sense of what's at stake. It can engage key institutions for the same reason: they recognize

a role for themselves in a wider civic debate or change effort. Conflict can also force us all to think hard about rights and wrongs, about our core values and what it means to belong to a community together. Conflict can change the alternatives preferred by parties that are negotiating change, opening up new possibilities. It can even bring parties to the table if they've refused to in the past. Finally, conflict can also invite fresh new thinking that leads to major substantive innovation or break-through: better solutions, not just bigger or more popular ones. That is, conflict can be a source of creativity and social learning.

But conflict can be shrill and self-

Direct action by pressure groups is the “face” of organizing that often garners headlines. And it is meant to attract attention—that’s part of making an issue public—but organizing is not defined by any one set of tactics.

serving, too, *more* about venting grievances or placing blame than engaging stakeholders and building solutions. More about reducing *all* problems to their moral dimensions alone than placing appropriate responsibility for change. As we see around the world, conflict can also lead to extremes of impasse and violence, when positions harden and agreement among the parties in conflict seems all but impossible.

In the *National Civic Review*, Michael Eichler offers a definition of “consensus” organizing, distinguishing this approach from what he perceives to be a more conflict-oriented or adversarial tradition of political organizing in America. Organizing, says Eichler, can mean “sharing power in order to gain power [by] finding common, overlapping goals, teaching the value of new partners, and building power through relationships of trust and respect.” Eichler emphasizes that many traditional skills of organizing are vital to these changing strategic challenges—skills such as listening well and sorting out agendas or interests, building confidence and encouraging participation, and building trust—along with personal qualities, such as perseverance.

Clarence Stone and other political observers agree that multiple definitions of power can be useful when thinking about community change—being able to influence someone else’s behavior (“power over”), being capable of accomplishing something (“power to”)—*which may include accomplishing something together with other interest groups*—and more.

We’ll look more closely at concepts about power and influence below, but for

now, the point is this: Communities need to be *able* to use conflict for mobilization, but they also need to manage conflict and have tools for forging consensus—“getting to yes,” in the words of a classic text—as well. The key is having the capacity (and the plan) for all of those in every community, for use on a range of issues that may arise. This is not the job, not the exclusive responsibility, of any one leader or institution or political viewpoint. And the key to problem-solving is not forging just *any* consensus or the quickest consensus. The key is working over time to forge the best-possible consensus following an honest deliberation. This may involve quite a bit of conflict and contention along the way.

Myth #4: Organizing only applies to mobilizing the “grassroots.” No. See myth #1. It’s true that many of the best-known and most influential organizing ideas originated in grassroots movements, for example union organizing

The influential “grasstops” in a community—people who hold elected office, develop and report the news, control charitable dollars, make major business decisions—also need to be organized more effectively and more often for civic purposes.

efforts going back to 50 to 100 years, the community organizing methods developed by Saul Alinsky in the 1940s, the civil rights movement in America in the 1950s and 60s, the movements for national sovereignty and development that ended colonialism around the world at about the same time. True, many of the core ideas and practices that define organizing today originated

in those movements, but organizing is not only about large-scale political struggle or social change movements and, more to the point, it’s not only for those who lack authority or direct control of political, financial, or other resources.

The influential “grasstops” in a community—people who hold elected office, develop and report the news, control charitable dollars, make major business decisions that have social costs and benefits—also need to be organized more effectively and more often for civic purposes. And the grassroots and grasstops need to be *connected* more often in common cause. There is growing evidence, in fact, that bridges between the tops and the roots are particularly important where significant change is required on contentious public issues, where important objectives compete with each other, where there are many competing positions but no well-developed “programs of change” (options for action) that appear feasible and command wide support.

Myth #5. Organizing is fundamentally about protest. This is a cousin to Myth #3. Again, some of the most visible tactics of the best-known organizing efforts are “direct action” tactics by pressure groups, including street protests and other forms of public political action. This is the face of organizing that often garners headlines. And it is meant to attract attention.

That’s part of making an issue public. But organizing is not defined by any one set of tactics. It draws on many tactics—not just to exert

political pressure but also to convene, build relationships, create dialogue, mobilize self-help, and more. Organizing can encompass those varied “why’s” and a very wide variety of “how’s” (tactics) that may be useful for promoting them in a particular setting and situation.

What organizing (really) is

If those are the common myths about

Organizing develops and defines *collective* goals, turning what may be informal and varied private concerns into focused public issues on which people and institutions can act together.

organizing—if organizing relates to all of these players and ideas but is not necessarily defined by them or limited to those stereotypes—what is it then?

First, organizing is *civic* activity, i.e., focused on shared, public purposes. In principle, the wisdom of organizing can be applied to private purposes, but in this series on *community* problem-solving, I use the word “organizing” as shorthand *only* to mean civic organizing.

Second, organizing *brings people together to define and make change*. It is not simply about marketing an objective of ours that should enjoy support from “them” or about simply creating a sense of community (feelings of attachment or emotional connection). The bringing together shapes goals and strategies for action. Each set of activities that typically make up an organizing effort—convenings, gathering information, managing a process of dialogue and collective learning, advocacy actions of many kinds, and more—is a step along the way.

As a caveat, though, organizing may not bring *all* of the parties together on a given issue. Unlike formal consensus building or conflict resolution strategies, organizing may focus on expanding the access and influence of *particular* stakeholders. As we’ll see below, organizing can complement those other strategies, e.g., negotiation, which defines the process of coming to agreement once there are issues, organized parties, and a place to negotiate.

Third, implied in that second idea is the fact that organizing is *goal-oriented*. It aims to accomplish something, and that something involves changing whatever social condition some group of stakeholders defines as a problem. Change, in turn, often requires action by a variety of

players.

Fourth, and closely related to that point, because it brings people together and aims to sustain action over time, organizing is fundamentally *motivational*. It compels people and institutions to make choices about what really matters and then motivates them to act on those choices.

Fifth and finally, organizing aims to create *new capacity for change*, sometimes with an emphasis on what we can do for ourselves and sometimes with an emphasis on what others should do—a company, a public agency, a nonprofit, or some other player—to help us. That is, organizing typically creates both a new capacity for self-help within some group and makes claims of—aims to secure new resources or action from—others outside the group.

But the more basic point is that because change in the world depends on having and using capacity to accomplish things, the motivational aspect of organizing is not merely about moral fervor or inspiring talk. It’s focused on the concrete, deeply concerned with results.

Furthermore, as the other tools in this series emphasize, the most im-



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portant social problem-solving that lies ahead for communities worldwide involves creating two things that can be very challenging to create in today’s world—a legitimate mandate to act (“the will”) and the tangible capacity (“the way”) needed to take action that will produce real results. Organizing

can usefully be defined as contributing to both, though the early steps typically invest more energy in the first one—developing attention and support for ideas.

Beyond those core ideas, there are as many definitions of organizing as there are organizers. Most definitions stress the core elements of *bringing together* (organizing as a process that convenes and links players), *solving problems* (organizing targets tangible concerns, not just socializing, social ties, or sense of community), and *collective goals* (organizing develops and defines those, turning what may be informal and varied private concerns into focused public issues on which people and institutions can act together).

Other definitions, such as that offered by veteran organizer, educator, and political researcher Marshall Ganz, emphasize what organizers do—and include notions of leadership, understanding, and capacity. In “What is organizing?” Ganz writes:

Organizers challenge people to act on behalf of their shared values and interests. They *lead* by developing the relationships, *understanding*, and actions that enable people to gain new understanding of their interests, *new resources*, and *new capacity* to use these resources on behalf of their interests. (emphasis added)

Other definitions emphasize *building institutions*, such as member-based non-governmental associations that take po-

litical action. Many of the best-known progressive and conservative organizing networks in America take this form. They nurture institutions as a means of sustaining relationships and capacity to act, beyond pursuing time-limited, issue-focused campaigns that have advocacy aims in the near term. They define what

TAKING STOCK (Part One): WHAT ORGANIZING REALLY IS

1. **It's civic, focused on public purposes and issues with collective stakes.** It's not advocacy by a private interest group, for example.
2. **It brings people together to define and make change.** It's not simply about marketing our aims to "them" or creating feelings of connection.
3. **It's goal-oriented, aims to accomplish something.** That something is usually change in whatever social condition the stakeholders themselves define as a problem.
4. **It's motivational, aiming to sustain action over time.** It compels people to make choices and act on those choices.
5. **It creates new capacity for change,** often through what we can do for ourselves (self-help) and what we can rightfully claim of others. Again, it can create a broadly shared sense of responsibility to act.

they do as building institutions and growing leaders.

Some organizers also emphasize political pressure for policy change as *the* core civic activity. Their organizing is defined by mobilization and advocacy. Some of these efforts become famous, or infamous, for protests or other direct action, confrontational politics. These range from the large-scale, internationally televised protests at the World Trade Organization talks in Seattle in 1999 to small busloads of upset tenants picketing in front of their landlord's home—or a few hundred young people demonstrating for an expanded education budget on the steps of the legislature.

But the key point is that organizing should never be confused with a particu-

lar set of tactics or a single political ideology or agenda.

What organizing targets

The genius of barn raisings—and the need for organizing that produces them—goes far beyond neighbor-to-neighbor projects. More and more social problems call for the active involvement of communities as “co-producers” of change.

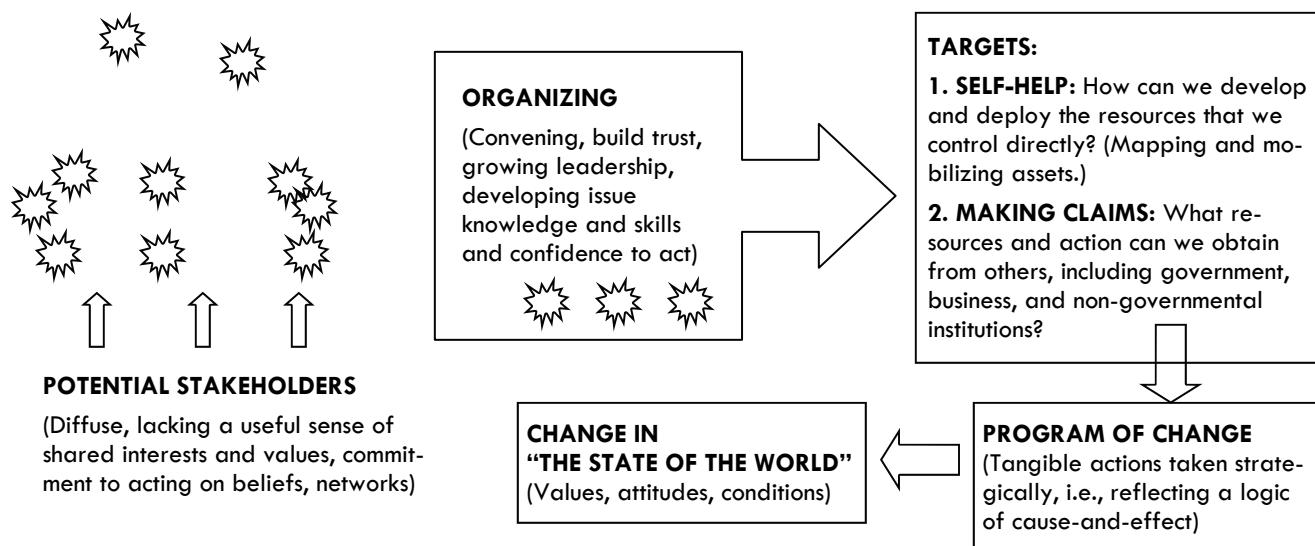
Self-help. Above, I noted that organizing often has two targets: building capacity for self-help and securing resources or making claims of others (see Figure 1). In America, our figurative

expression for the first is “barn raisings,” a reference to the frontier era and the mutual aid so important in small-town life. Helping a member of the community to raise a barn—a project which required many skilled hands and considerable coordination—was part of being neighborly. It was a tangible expression of the power of trust and reciprocity to enhance community life and individual well-being.

Figuratively speaking, barn raisings happen all the time, and they happen in cities of all sizes, not just in small towns. Barn raisings happen when people pitch in to make any kind of collective project of service possible—sometimes as organized volunteers and as strangers but sometimes as friends and neighbors.

Parents in a community organize informal child care networks. Elders organize a pool of tutors to offer young people a reliable source of mentoring and training. Community clean-ups ensure that a

Figure 1. Stages and Targets of Organizing (Basic model)



One easily overlooked moral to this story is that many of the most important self-help successes are not about self-help alone.

popular park stays clean and accessible. A neighborhood crime watch keeps eyes on the street to enhance public safety. It takes organizing to create the sense of purpose, the coordination, and the motivation that make collective, tangible projects like these possible and successful.

As we'll see below, though, the genius of barn raisings—and the need for organizing that produces them—goes far beyond neighbor-to-neighbor projects. More and more social problems call for the active involvement of communities as “co-producers” of change—co-producers, that is, with trained nurses, planners, educators, and others who deliver public services. It's not just time and physical skills that are called for now but insider knowledge of a group's culture and social conditions, informal networks of information and influence, and informal endorsement or “blessing” to proceed with a course of action.

Informal, grassroots-based barn raisings produce some of the most powerful impacts where alternative resources and strategies are scarcest. For example, some of the most innovative housing on earth is low-cost, self-help housing produced by low-income folks with limited formal education. They do it through well-organized groups that develop and test new housing models, import technical assistance and modest funding, and connect people neighbor-to-neighbor to build and maintain the housing and related infrastructure.

Likewise, peer-based rotating credit associations—engines of “community capitalism” such as the world-famous

Grameen Bank of Bangladesh—have brought vital capital to many households and communities that conventional banks and other financial institutions do not reach. These efforts hinge on well-organized relationships, clear mechanisms of accountability, and effective routines for everyday operations.

Self-help isn't just self-help. One easily overlooked moral to this story is that many of the most important self-help successes are not about self-help alone. Rather, they blend the capacity of a target group or community with outside expertise, influence, and financial and other resources. Rural cooperatives, urban community development corporations, and many other important non-governmental institutions reflect that blend—and the tensions that insider and outsider expectations can create.

So many contemporary efforts to build community capacity grapple with those tensions and how to do that blending. It takes one well beyond neighbor-to-neighbor volunteerism and raises tough questions:

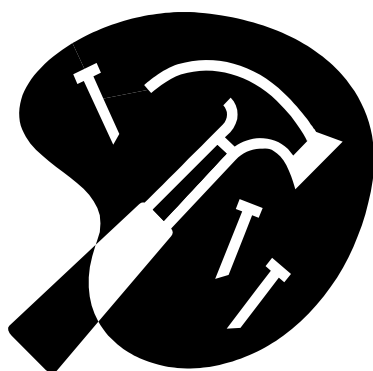
- How should external expectations of accountability for resources be balanced with the autonomy of key stakeholders to shape the use of those resources?
- How should the unique know-how of business or non-governmental stakeholders be integrated with the useful expertise of government or other parties? Of an organization's customers and staff?
- Are “community-based” organizations genuinely representative of the community groups served? On what basis? Who is building the base, building a constituency? Are member-based elections or other mechanisms used to ensure accountability?

- When does an emphasis on community self-help become a means of rationalizing the abdication of public responsibility to provide all citizens with equal opportunity and a “fair share” of public resources?
- When does an insistence on “community control” become a clever disguise for manipulation by a few special interests within the community? Or for refusal to accept important safeguards mandated from above, such as protections of human rights and open access?

Initiatives and organizations that mobilize community self-help but also draw down outside resources are becoming more and more important as governments downsize around the world and privatize—or “nonprofitize”—formerly government-delivered services, as expectations of stakeholder participation in decision-making expand, and as failed examples of expert-led “solutions” to public problems pile up. Community-based services, community-driven plans, and more are all around us. But remember that self-help is rarely just that—and not always simple even when it is.

Making claims and “pressuring.” A great many organizing efforts are not limited to self-help or focused primarily on barn raising (service) projects. In fact, the most visible civic organizing efforts are those that emphasize advocacy of policy change, which, in organizing terms, begins with building a base that will pressure for that change. This is the organizing defined in part by citizen activism. The desired change may be getting a new drunk driving law passed, changing a voting requirement, expanding the education budget (all public policy decisions) or getting a company or university to the bargaining table on wages, stopping dangerous industrial pollution that threatens children and families, or changing some other private decision with important public consequences.

These efforts are often visible because they work hard at visibility—it's part of creating public awareness, shifting public opinion, making it impossible for decision-makers to ignore the effort, all a part of the strategy of influencing major decisions.



The Two Targets Illustrated. There are many examples of organizing's success at both making claims on outside resources and developing and deploying extraordinary capacity for self-help (see "Further Reading and Resources" at the end of this tool).

In one case, a coalition of churches in East Brooklyn—a long-devastated section of New York City—pooled contributions from its congregations to create a multi-million dollar, no-interest revolving loan fund for housing construction. Together with a socially responsible real estate developer who had innovative ideas about low-cost housing, and no-cost land and additional capital made available by local and state government, the East Brooklyn Congregations sponsored the Nehemiah Homes. This nationally known homeownership program has benefited hundreds of low-income families and helped to bring back entire neighborhoods.

Connected to that New York City effort by the national organizing network known as the Industrial Areas Foundation, the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization (GBIO) is now hard at work to expand affordable housing, improve education, and more. As GBIO's statement of purpose indicates:

Our primary goal is to develop local leadership. This will allow us to develop the power of organized numbers to hold other holders of power accountable for their public responsibilities, as well as *initiate action of our own* to solve community and economic problems. (emphasis added)

The same aims are found in organiz-

ing projects in Asia, Africa, Latin America, Europe, and other corners of the globe. For example, the well-documented Orangi Pilot Project in Karachi, Pakistan—Orangi is the largest urban slum in Asia—leveraged the capacity and creativity of slumdwellers and outside financial and technical resources. The Project made dramatic improvements in access by the poorest of the urban poor to water and sewers and other basic, life-sustaining infrastructure. In financial terms, each dollar of outside capital "leveraged" \$17 worth of resident-provided labor, basic materials, and other resources—while creating vital community-based institutions for managing the infrastructure, ensuring the use of technology appropriate to the setting, and tackling new social problems over time.

Dilemmas. For community problem-solving efforts that aim to change a social condition, whether in massive or modest ways, pursuing the twin targets—self-help and making claims—can create real dilemmas. I'll pose these too as questions:



Not only are both targets of organizing valuable to the world [but] both involve building a constituency for ideas *and* the capacity to act on them.

1. *Which comes first, raising barns or making claims, for example changing policy?* Some problems present with very obvious candidates for policy reform—and windows of opportunity to pursue that reform, as we will see below. But other problems can and should be addressed with the resources directly available to the stakeholders. And sometimes, the small victories reflected in barn raising are key to building a base for larger changes in policy and

public attitudes. Also, there's enough room in most communities for some groups to pressure for policy change and others to raise barns at the same time.

2. *Who should we target?* Organizing focused on policy reform objectives requires a target on which pressure can be exerted. Actually, there are several targets: a *decision(s)* to be made, an *institution* to issue it and give it authority (government, business, or nonprofit), and, typically, a key person or persons (*decision-makers*) who will render or directly influence the decision. But when a social problem exists because of many decisions and actions by a wide variety of institutions, the targeting isn't so simple. Meaningful change may require shifts in attitude and action by a wide cast of characters, from police departments to philanthropies, from colleges to employers to parents.

3. *When should the target be "us" rather than "them"?* Pressure-group strategies draw battle lines, not in the literal sense of warmaking but in the sense that people are asked to take sides, to define what they stand *for* and then actually stand *up* and be heard on it. This is a crucial part of life in a democracy, of course, and it's perfectly appropriate where a competitive strategy is needed to win a decision. But for reasons just stated, many long-run efforts to create community change must find ways to pivot from outwardly-focused pressure on "them" to mobilizing changes among us—how we think about a controversial issue, such as AIDS or youth violence, how we act

(or fail to act) to help resolve the issue. This is a variation on the first dilemma, but whereas the "which first?" question is largely about the nature of the problem as it presents *right now* and about the need to build momentum as part of getting organized, this dilemma suggests the need to take the long-run view and orchestrate real shifts in targeting over time. (See more under "Organizing and Implementing" below.)

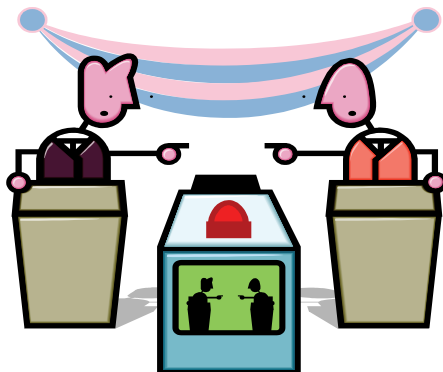
4. *Should the same institutions raise*

Community and democracy both require an effort to discuss stake *holders* when we discuss stakes.

barns and make claims? Should the same ones be funded to do both? Not every institution that advocates regularly can or should produce services. The skills and other capacity required are not identical, though there's clearly some overlap: both barn raisings and making claims require building relationships and motivating others, for example. But beyond the different-capacity-required issue, there's the problem of "self-dealing."

Decision-makers often think quite differently about advocates with a material interest in the public decisions at hand versus those that have no such discernible interest. A child advocate is one thing when he is simply an advocate for a policy decision on principle but sometimes quite another if his organization is eligible to receive significant new funding through the decision.

There's nothing wrong with arguing for more resources for oneself or one's organization, of course. The point is simply that some organizing efforts are tainted by perceptions that their leadership is mainly looking to grow an organizational empire, to build turf, to "keep



themselves in business." It's important not to pursue, and not to create the appearance of, *mere* self-interest.

Not only are both targets of organizing valuable to the world and increasingly important to community problem-solving but both make important use of the core insight of organizing—that bringing people together—"combining," in de Tocqueville's famous words—is fundamental to effecting change, to creating progress. And more specifically, both involve building a constituency for ideas *and* building the capacity to act on them. But there are some puzzles and tensions, as out-

lined above.

What organizing addresses

If we have some sense of what organizing is and where it "points" (the targets), let's think about what it does concretely, and let's begin to tie organizing to planning, negotiating, and implementing. Without these other activities, organizing is little more than discussion and relationship building—it goes nowhere. On the other hand, without civic organizing, we turn problem-solving into little more than a technical, exclusive process of planning, dealmaking, allocating, and administering by powers that be, often within narrow political limits, uninformed by information from the people affected by the decisions, and responding to narrowly defined social and political agendas.

A great deal of civic organizing in communities around the world was born precisely to overcome those limitations, many of which center around "givens"—taking the problems worthy of public attention and investment, the options for action, the core values that should guide decisions on those options, and the best approaches to implementing *all* as givens, taking them for granted, closing off discussion of them.

Conversely, organizing *can* help to answer key questions that shape a more democratic problem-solving—the who, what, and how of problem-solving—and help determine its outcomes. For example:

What's really at issue in our community? What is it all about? Tackling problems well together usually begins with some honest inquiry into which conditions may qualify as problems to be solved, which as opportunities to be pursued, and which merely as "concerns" to be tracked and revisited. As we'll see in a moment, this is part of democratic agenda-setting, and organizing, in its many styles and forms, emphasizes having these conversations in the context of building relationships—building community—and not just exchanging gripes.

Who is affected and how? Community and democracy both require an effort

TAKING STOCK (Part Two): DILEMMAS OF TARGETING

1. **Which comes first, raising barns or making claims?** In effect, should we focus on mobilizing the resources at hand or pressure for policy change to win new resources to address the problem? *Considerations:* Do we need the momentum that small, tangible progress through self-help could create? Do we have viable policy proposals and an advocacy strategy for promoting them?
2. **Who should we target?** (Decisions, institutions, decision-makers, influentials) Should we press for a specific decision in a target institution or try to build broader awareness and change mindsets? *Considerations:* Is the change we want really in the behavior of 1-2 institutions, or do we need a wide set of players to think and act in new ways? Change the policy or change the culture?
3. **When should we target "us" rather than "them"?** Long-run efforts on tough social issues may need to pivot from outwardly-focused pressure on "them" to mobilizing changes among us—how we think about a controversial issue, such as AIDS or youth violence, how we act (or fail to act) to help resolve the issue. *Considerations:* Where is the leverage for changing the underlying condition—in policy, institutional behavior, individual behavior? Which can we most affect now and how?
4. **Should the same players raise barns and promote policy change?** That is, should the same ones receive funding to deliver services and lead self-help as well as advocate political change? *Considerations:* Can separate entities be set up? Does the appearance of self-interest taint our credibility or otherwise compromise our role as advocates of change?

TAKING STOCK (Part Three): WHAT ORGANIZING DOES

It helps answer fundamental questions that should shape problem-solving in a democracy:

1. **What's really at issue in our community—what is it all about?** What are the conditions that should concern us?
2. **Who is affected and how? What are the stakes, and who are the stakeholders?**
3. **Are the stakeholders prepared to understand and promote their interests?** Democracy requires that citizens understand what affects their lives, be able to articulate their interests, and have access to decision-making.
4. **What key community interests and values should guide action?** Problems are never disembodied, technical abstractions, even when they present with important technical dimensions that must be analyzed.
5. **Is there a constituency to support the action needed?** Ideas about action—what the law should be, how a social problem should be tackled—are not meaningful, let alone powerful, without constituencies.
6. **Is anyone else paying attention?** Organizing is a key tool for agenda-setting—for getting issues on screen so that decision-makers and others will invest time, money, reputation, and other precious resources to address those issues.

to discuss *stakeholders* when we discuss stakes—to be willing to identify specific people, groups, and organizations that may have something at stake, whether a piece of land, a way of life, a moral principle, a source of income, or something else. Organizing often helps to make this a more inclusive, broad-based discussion, wherein those with stakes can speak to them directly or have their legitimate representatives do so.

What interests and values should inform action? Organizing enables a discussion of stakes, interests, values, and obligations. Social problems are never technical abstractions even when they clearly present with important technical dimensions that cannot be ignored.

Are the stakeholders prepared to advance their interests? Many traditional ideas about democracy *assume* that stakeholders are able to recognize decisions that will affect them, understand their interests and the nature of the stakes, and also act to advance their interests by influencing the decisions. From there, the officials we elect are supposed to work out our differences and “steer” government in ways that address the varied interests of their constituents.

Organizing reflects the hard-won wisdom that in some situations, none of these assumptions holds, that ensuring each of these ideal conditions requires civic action and, more specifically, active inclusion in the civic process. This is es-

pecially true if someone is working to obscure the decisions, hide the stakes, and block the fair and appropriate influence that helps define democratic life. But there need not be such a force at work. The sheer number of responsibilities that most of us face means that distraction, apathy, fear of reprisal, or simply misreading the issues can all contribute to a civic process that is too exclusive and too limited.

Is there a constituency to support needed action? Beyond the issue of fair, democratic voice, are there visible constituencies with capacity to act or influence action?

Organizing recognizes that ideas about action—what the law *should* be, how a social problem *should* be tackled—are not meaningful, let alone powerful, without constituencies. Taking that a step further, some change requires that sustained pressure be exerted, for example on stubborn bureaucratic institutions or on a policy process in which decisions are controversial and hard-fought. Sometimes, there is resistance because the prospect of

change creates anxiety, fear of loss, or a sense of threat to someone's turf.

Is anyone paying attention to these issues? If not, what *are* they paying attention to and why? As we'll see below, organizing is key to effective agenda-setting. In any community, citizens, private groups, and decision-makers have finite time, energy, money, political influence, and other resources to invest in problem-solving. The agenda that defines what actors in a community *will* work on is never a given, and so a key source of power is influencing what is or is not up for discussion, what is or is not on the agenda. This agenda is shaped by choices that real people make—to get involved, to use particular language, to tell persuasive stories that engage others.

Because getting others to pay attention is often a prerequisite for meaningful action, let's start with this below before turning to planning, negotiating, and more.

Setting the Agenda

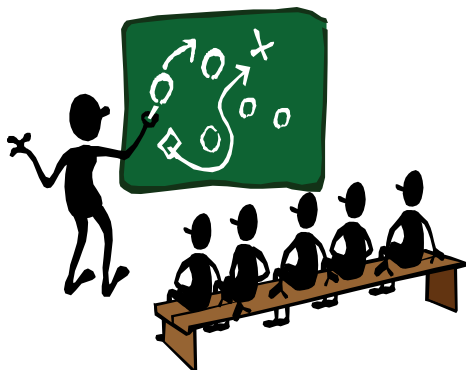
In John Kingdon's useful definition, the agenda is the small set of issues on which decision-makers and others are willing and able to focus at a given time. Agenda *setting*, in turn, describes the events and strategies through which issues are transformed from mere *conditions*—that may or may not get noticed—into *problems* that key people and institutions notice and wish to solve by investing resources.

As Kingdon notes in *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies*, if there is indeed nothing so powerful as “an idea whose time has come,” then understanding and influencing how and why it “comes” is an important part of civic action to solve problems.

Sometimes, and particularly when organizing focuses on making claims of outside parties (goes beyond self-help),

If there is indeed nothing so powerful as “an idea whose time has come,” then understanding and influencing how and why it “comes” is an important part of civic action to solve problems.

That few people can control what defines the community agenda—thankfully—does not mean that all strategies for shaping the agenda are equally promising.



agenda-setting is very much about getting on the government or public policy agenda. In his study of active policy agendas in the U.S. Congress in the late 70s, Kingdon found that ...

People in and around government define conditions as problems in several ways. First, conditions that violate important values are transformed into problems. Second, conditions become problems by comparison with other countries or relevant units. Third, classifying a condition into one category rather than another may classify it as one kind of problem or another. The lack of public transportation for handicapped people, for example, may be classified as a transportation problem or a civil rights problem, and the treatment of the subject is dramatically affected by the category.

Kingdon found that these factors tended to be important and also that key “policy entrepreneurs” coupled ideas about problems with ideas about solutions and larger trends in politics. But he noticed that no indicator or advocacy strategy could *guarantee* attention for an idea. The larger “stream” of politics—what elected officials and other opinion leaders talk about and how, what public opinion favors—together with ideas that

are in play about what policies or programs can viably respond to public concerns—these come together from time to time to create a political “window of opportunity.” If the window is large enough and the entrepreneurs effective enough, major change is possible.

Beyond government policy agendas, around the world, non-governmental players and policies are increasingly important as well. That is, community problem-solving is rarely limited to what government does or what official policy declares or provides in the way of public resources. I will use “community agenda,” then, to mean the collective, public agenda, *including* government but not limited to government decision-makers or formal public policies.

In small settings, such as in our families or workplaces, agenda setting happens constantly and often informally in the way we raise issues or get them “on the screen” for others’ consid-

A core tenet of persuasion is that in and of themselves, arguments or claims of truth have little impact on opinions or behavior until some “frame” is arranged to give them meaning.

eration. But in the larger settings of neighborhood, region, and nation, agenda setting is tricky—tricky enough to warrant some closer attention to how it does or does not get done effectively.

This is especially true since a growing variety of local efforts to tackle social problems include the hope of expanding public attention at a time when much of the public is cynical and disengaged, for building movement in the form of constituencies that take action, and for framing solutions in more effective and creative ways—all three are a

part of agenda-setting, broadly defined.

That few people can control what defines the community agenda—thankfully—does not mean that all strategies for shaping the agenda are equally promising. How can we be more effective at winning attention to public issues around which we need to build momentum? Framing is a key part.

Framing Issues to Win Attention. A core tenet of persuasion is that in and of themselves, arguments or claims of truth have little impact on opinions or behavior until some “frame” is arranged to give them meaning. As Donald Schon and Martin Rein define them in *Frame Reflection*, frames are taken-for-granted sets of assumptions that direct thought and action. They affect what we see and how we interpret what we see. Shaped by frames, key reference terms, such as “housing blight” and “fragmented services” for example, begin to guide decisions.

In recent years, a number of observers and activists, including the nonprofit *Frameworks Institute* (www.frameworksinstitute.org), have offered helpful advice on how to frame or re-frame “the public discourse on social problems.” These experts find that “the way an issue is framed explains who is responsible and suggests potential solutions conveyed by images, stereotypes,

messengers, and metaphors.”

Frequent negative stereotypes of young people—for example, of the “no good” out-of-school 16-year olds—and positive associations with small children—the “innocent” and defenseless 3 year-old, say—often operate at this unspoken level. Infant=innocent, precious, deserving of protection. Teenager=delinquent, threat, in need of control. As Robert Cialdini notes in *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion*, the images are powerful because the messages need not be stated—they are clear, understood,

Storytelling and framing have their limits, however ... [they don't] guarantee that a window of political opportunity will open or that compelling options for action (programs of change) have been developed.

taken for granted.

Here's an example. A measurable shortfall in child care services in a particular community may be, in Kingdon's terms, merely a condition, against which an advocate may press for public and private investments in creating new child care capacity. But use a set of key indicators—in the form of numbers, words, and images—to highlight this condition. Do that in the context of other important conditions, such as school achievement or health outcomes. Provide evidence on programs or initiatives that can effectively change the child care condition (or the links between child care and those other conditions). Use all these to tell a story about investments foregone, health bills mounting, a workforce short-changed, and the public values of equal opportunity, strong families, and fiscal common sense unrealized. Keep the message simple, but hint at these multiple foundations for public action—to make families stronger by relieving the burden on struggling parents, to strengthen labor markets, to save taxpayer money spent unwisely on problems that might have been prevented. Now we have the makings of an urgent problem for public action, perhaps a crisis, as well as the hint of solutions that we cannot long afford to forego.

Fail to make these links, or leave it to someone else's persuasion strategy to



frame them for us, and the same political objective, far from seeming constructive and urgent, can come to represent nothing less than big government intruding on the sacred obligations of the family—as nonprofit bureaucrats eagerly seek to expand their fiscal empires.

Problem-solving thus includes an important non-technical element of building persuasive “stories” that can help people make sense of complex ideas and influence diverse interests to act in common cause.

Storytelling and framing have their limits, however, as Kingdon's insightful analysis of agenda setting showed. Effective communication doesn't guarantee that a window of political opportunity will open or that compelling options for action (programs of change) have been developed. For these reasons, doing politics always involves

more than strategic communication or savvy marketing. The key is communicating about an issue in ways that *make it more likely* that a problem will appear on the public agenda—or stay there or become more prominent—and that *shape action* on the issue in ways that a given advocate favors. This entails making choices about:

- The *indicators*—numbers, words, and images—that will grab and hold attention for the social condition about which the advocate cares, emphasizing connections to important values or comparisons to legitimate benchmarks or targets, where possible;
- The *frames* that will place the issue in a category of worthy and solvable problems, and link it to deep values and emotional associations in ways that encourage action; and
- The suggested *program of change* itself (what should be done), the development of which hinges on good planning, as we'll see in a moment.

Here we have a key dilemma, though. Imagine that you and I are actively organizing stakeholders in our community, perhaps around the issue of jobs or health or housing. Communication is central to every feature of organizing that we reviewed above—bringing people together per se, eliciting concerns, building relationships, defining core values and targets for action, developing policy proposals, motivating action. But should we use the *same* communication strategy to mobilize our core constituents and engage the wider public or a wider set of potential allies?

The ways in which a particular stakeholder group may prefer to talk about its concerns may or may not resonate well with a larger public. Our organizing efforts may need to develop language that works for the immediate stakeholders and a somewhat different language to which a wider community of players or lead decision-makers will respond. Also, we will need to consciously distinguish our agenda as an organized group of stakeholders (what we see as the needed program of change) from the notion of a public or community agenda—what decision-makers are actually paying attention

TAKING STOCK (Part Four): KEYS TO AGENDA SETTING

Make careful, creative, informed choices about these (and be persistent):

- The **indicators**—numbers, words, and images—that will grab and hold attention for the social condition about which the advocate cares, emphasizing connections to important values or comparisons to relevant benchmarks or targets.
- The **frames** that will place the issue in a category of worthy and solvable problems and link it to deep values and emotions in ways that encourage favorable action.
- The suggested **program of change** itself (what should be done), the development of which hinges on good planning (analyzing problems, generating options for response, defining useful criteria for evaluating the options, etc.).

to, which we need to influence. There's our agenda and then *the* agenda.

Beyond agenda-setting, how do we ensure that organizing is more than "voice for the sake of voice"—that is, does more than add volume, but not necessarily impact, to the world? Since defining a community agenda is one critical step, but only one, we need to turn our attention to what happens next. How does organizing define, support, or challenge other aspects of problem-solving, such as planning, negotiating, and implementing ("producing") change? Read on—and see the other tools in this series that focus on these important action topics and skills.

Organizing and Planning

Part of problem-solving or creating positive change together is planning effectively—creating some shared understanding of problems and their causes (by analyzing, reporting back, and discussing), generating options for response, deciding on criteria for choosing among those options, and more.

See the linked strategy tool in this series: "Planning Together: How (and How Not) to Engage Stakeholders in Charting a Course"

All too often, organizing is thought of, erroneously, as something that simply precedes planning. Again, this limits organizing to recruitment or to the (admittedly important) function of setting an agenda democratically so that focused planning can happen. Both functions are important, but it may be more helpful to think about organizing as punctuated by varied planning needs—and about planning as depending on organized stakeholders who shape ideas *and* create the constituency and capacity needed to act on ideas.

Howie Baum, a planning educator and researcher, has aptly described planning as "organizing hope about the future." In that phrase, he uses the word "organizing" dictionary-like to mean "bringing structure and strategy to," not civic organizing as we are exploring it in

TAKING STOCK (Part Five): PITFALLS OF PARTICIPATORY PLANNING

PITFALLS

1. **Dumbing down plans to please everyone.**
2. **Promoting "ritual participation" that rubber-stamps decisions already**
3. **Making technical experts mere validators of a process that affirms citizens.**
4. **Calling for shared decision-making when what you really want is more**
5. **Over-emphasizing participation per se relative to progress and results, falling into "every-decision-by-committee."**

SAFEGUARDS

- Build in "devil's advocate" roles, bring in outside resource-people to enrich ideas, make it safe to disagree, set "stretch targets" for what plans must accomplish.
- Clarify what will be done with input, who advises and who decides—and
- (See #1) Let specialists be *gadflies* who challenge the group, not just *allies* who support it.
- Consider an advocacy strategy if the aim is really to promote a particular
- Agree on which decisions are routine vs. non-routine, who is empowered to act on broad directions set by the group, what timeframes for decision are appropriate.

this tool. But there's no inherent contradiction. Baum and others have long emphasized that smart planning is very much about bringing people together to

plan change, ideally as part of the larger project of *effecting* change through collective commitment and effort.

Unfortunately, many traditional ideas about planning—and many of the courses and training sessions still taught on how and why to plan systematically—presume that stakeholders are already organized, that pre-defined values are clear and accepted to guide decision-making, that mechanisms of accountability are in place to manage implementation of plans and to "feed back" into the next cycle of planning.

This is part of the rational, bureaucratic conception of how public problems should be addressed. In many cases, it had led to planning that serves a few dominant interest groups rather than wider public interests.

Much planning by government and foreign aid agencies in developing coun-



Well-organized stakeholder participation in planning can help generate a more legitimate and democratic mandate, create feelings of ownership—because consultation is appreciated—and create better substantive ideas, too.

The principal rationale for expanding the role of stakeholders in key decisions is that the decisions be just that—key, as in strategic, non-routine, bigger-than-everyday.

tries, and much redevelopment in America in the decades of “urban renewal,” came under harsh criticism on these grounds. The human costs were huge, benefits belonged to the few, key ideas promoted by over-eager experts turned out to be deeply flawed, and top-down (imposed) plans without constituencies went nowhere with those the plans were supposed to help.

Such planning disasters of the past helped to spur a revolution in the thinking and practice of planning, launching new non-governmental organizations that create plans, spurring healthy and overdue conversations about alternative ways to accomplish difficult goals, spurring innovation in group process—how meetings are held, how information technology supports decision-making, how decisions themselves can be made more effectively in civic processes—and much more.

It’s not that technical expertise isn’t crucial to planning, of course, or that core values and other civic

be a powerful source of learning in democratic societies. Plus, well-organized participation in planning can help generate a more legitimate and democratic mandate, create feelings of ownership—because consultation is appreciated, as psychological research confirms again and again—and create better substantive ideas, because two heads are often better than one. The citizens at large don’t know everything, but neither do the professional planners or those who represent private interest groups.

Some veterans of participatory planning routinely refer to the 5 P’s: “People Power Produces Proper Planning.” If we take “people power” to cover *individuals* in their roles as citizens in a democracy, *representatives* of organized

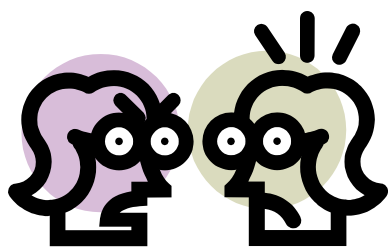
and engaging people in defining their core values (rather than treating them as givens);

- Sharpen a community’s awareness of what is really at stake and for whom;
- Prepare stakeholders who have been disenfranchised in the past, or who do not trust the civic process, to participate in planning in a meaningful way—both in developing a vision of the future and shaping decisions about it; and
- Compel a serious conversation about capacity to act on plans, beyond planning for the sake of having a plan.

Here are some examples of planning and organizing at work *together*:

A grassroots coalition of parents built up through small-group discussions and open-ended community meetings decides to contest local education policy but needs to decide on which aspects of current policy are most problematic, what alternatives may exist, and how new plans—negotiated with local school staff—might be implemented to create useful roles for parents. Beyond being a community-based “counter-plan” for educating young people, this planning could lead to a more effective commu-

Sometimes, wider participation creates this lowest-common-denominator effect. No one is to be offended, and nothing bold or controversial can be discussed.



elements of planning should be constantly and *endlessly* deliberated. That’s a recipe for process paralysis or for what government innovation expert Gail Christopher refers to as “an exercise in togetherness.” The point, rather, is that planning can shape major choices about the future and, as such, should engage those with a stake in that future.

As John Friedmann puts it in *Planning in the Public Domain*, planning that engages can create “citizen encounters” and

interest groups (whether business or nonprofit), and *people in public office* (government) too—because the latter have important roles to play in managing public resources, protecting basic rights, and resolving conflicts that arise in planning—then people power is indeed key to good planning.

Effective organizing—in the broad civic sense that I have defined it here—is therefore crucial to effective planning, and the exercise of structuring and giving form to our hopes about the future (planning) is crucial to effective organizing. In the context of participatory planning, an organizing process, as we saw above, can:

- Make agenda-setting more open and democratic by inviting wide participation

nity-school partnership with useful roles for the key stakeholders involved, including “parents as educators.”

A mayor wants to launch and support neighborhood planning projects throughout her city—as a way of generating new ideas and wider civic commitment. Organizing helps connect the mayor’s office to civic leaders, both well-known and up-and-coming, and planning offers a mechanism for shaping choices together.

An alliance of faith institutions, born through grassroots organizing, wants to create more affordable housing in a high-cost city but needs to understand the range of design and finance options that shape housing policy and housing production—and begin to offer proposals to government, banks, and others that re-

flect that understanding. Systematic planning helps define the next stage of the alliance's organizing effort.

A local nonprofit grantmaker wants to invest in grassroots community capacity but ensure that investments lead to strategic action with measurable results in time, not just more relationships or a few one-off projects favored by a few influential members of the community. Planning offers a way to move ahead with these multiple objectives.

Under new laws providing for community-driven environmental management, a local partnership of informal citizen groups, government regulators, and businesses needs to develop plans for managing a common resource—the fish stock, a regional water supply, etc. Planning, if it is to do more than simply produce plans, must apply the wisdom of organizing to *motivate* shared commitment to “managing the commons” and *create the capacity* that shared resource management will require.

Are there challenges and pitfalls in planning with a commitment to the values and practices of organizing? Absolutely. Here are some of the most important, below. The text box on the next page offers some ideas for overcoming these pitfalls or limiting their costs.

1. *Dumbing down plans to please everyone.* Sometimes, wider participation creates this lowest-common-denominator effect. No one is to be offended, and nothing bold or controversial can be discussed.

2. *Turning technical experts into mere validators a process that affirms stakeholders.* It's key to strike a balance between technical carefulness and formal evidence (on one hand) and encouragement of stakeholder involvement.

3. *Treating “communities” as monoliths with simple, collective interests*—being oblivious to conflicts within a stakeholder group or the presence of multiple stakeholder groups in a given sector or spatial area.

4. *Over-emphasizing participation per se at the expense of results, creating confusing expectations.* Results of effective planning include *better* ideas about the future (not

just more popular ones), wider and deeper commitment to help create that future together, and greater capacity to act toward that end. Sometimes, boundless participation takes the form of “making every decision by committee,” a recipe in which even routine decisions are opened up to long discussion and debate. The principal rationale for expanding the role of stakeholders in key decisions is that the decisions be just that—key, as in strategic, non-routine, bigger-than-everyday.

5. *Conversely, saying you want wider civic engagement without really meaning it.* Organize “ritual participation” to get decisions—that have already been made but not made official—validated by stakeholder approval (“rubber stamped”). This can happen in non-

than others. A thousand steps in good planning are anything but neutral. Plus, sometimes facilitators work for interested parties. They can be useful to a civic process, but the nature of those interests should be disclosed.

7. *Calling for shared decision-making when what you (or your group) really wants is more control.* Planning with stakeholders, particularly where it means actively bringing people into the process, usually depends on sharing power, not simply transferring it from one party to another. But this can create anxiety about who is losing or gaining control.

Next, we'll turn to negotiating agreement, a key civic behavior that relates to organizing *and* planning in a variety of important ways.

See the linked strategy tool in this series:

“We are all negotiators now: An introduction to negotiation in community problem-solving”



profit institutions, including membership organizations, not just government planning and policy development processes.

6. *Pretending that facilitators are fully neutral.* Facilitators are those who support a process, often by helping to design and manage, collective processes of planning and decision-making. It is one thing for a facilitator to be *impartial*—as in not consciously favoring any one side of a disagreement—but quite another for their actions to be *neutral* across the board. As John Forrester notes in *Planning in the Face of Power*, those who shape collective work make choices that have non-neutral effects: some ideas get more attention than others; some arguments are validated more

Organizing and Negotiating

For many civic-minded people, negotiation seems to conjure up negative images of horse trading—hard-ball, purely self-interested transacting in which power games, threats, and deception predominate. More generously, some think of negotiation as what happens at the formal negotiating “table” to settle contracts between unions and management or create peace accords that resolve costly conflicts around the world.

Negotiation includes all of those things, of course. It is important for completing many economic transactions—not just wage agreements but business deals of many kinds, contracts between government and non-governmental organizations, grant agreements between philanthropies and nonprofit service providers and advocates, and more. International negotiations are important mechanisms for resolving differences within and across nations. And negotiation can include complex power games and, some-

times, deception. More generally, negotiating parties often use information *strategically* to advance their interests. Parties emphasize certain ideas and not others, and they may omit information without actually lying to other parties.

But the popular images of where negotiation happens and how it gets done blind us to a great deal of value that negotiation adds to community problem-solving and to the many settings in which it takes place in our civic lives—very often more informally than in those stock images of diplomats and businesspeople cutting deals.

By pushing more critical decisions down to the local level, privatizing many public functions, and looking to cross-sector partnerships and other joint arrangements to address key social problems, we have, in the past few decades dramatically expanded the opportunity and the need for effective negotiation.

Negotiation experts Roger Fisher and Bill Ury, in their bestselling *Getting to Yes*, define negotiation as “back-and-forth



communication when you and the other side have some interests that are shared and others that are opposed.” It’s a way of getting what we want while others also try to get what they want. It involves persuasion, and it aims at coming to agreement between two or more parties. Period. The popular images that suggest something much narrower than this convey a picture of particular kinds of negotiation—and also, to be sure, of particular negotiators and how they behave.

In the context of organizing, also of planning as I defined it above, a few

more distinctions may help:

- Consulting others before deciding may be appreciated—it may be socially just as well as pragmatic—but unless a decision is *jointly* made (or implies the possibility of “veto” by more than one party), consultation is not negotiation.
- Negotiation often involves some element of *competition*, as when we each want part of a limited resource, but can also involve important and creative *cooperation*, as when parties invent new options to create more value for both sides. Sometimes, parties value different things, not the same thing, and this provides a way to make valuable “win-win” trades. Negotiation is not synonymous with either competition or cooperation alone.
- Negotiations are defined by parties, issues, interests, alternatives (choices of terms that together would make up an agreement), and the size of the bargaining range (in which agreement is actually possible). But specific negotiations—episodes in time when agreement may be developed—are often embedded in larger processes of *organizing* civic action, *planning*, and *building partnerships* to implement jointly created plans.
- Many impasses and inefficient agree-

that in negotiations over an economic development project, a nonprofit group insists on a specific number of new jobs for neighborhood residents instead of exploring multiple ways of satisfying the group’s underlying interests, which are to (a) enhance economic security in the neighborhood, in part by (b) maximizing the positive spillovers of the project. By engaging the parties in learning and a process of considering different ways to satisfy the underlying interests, “interested-based bargaining” enhances the likelihood of a valuable agreement—as well as a relationship to draw on another day.

- Negotiation can be quite *formal*, as when a process of seeking agreement is announced and agreements made are recorded and given legal status, perhaps in a contract or treaty. But negotiation can also be quite *informal*, part of the give-and-take of everyday civic life.
- Negotiation can take place between just two parties or *multiple parties*. In the latter case, agreement may require the assent of all parties (unanimity) or some critical number of the parties—say 5 out of 6 or 7 out of 10. Building support for decisions, especially if they are controversial and parties are initially divided, includes a

Organizing can add new parties and put new issues on the table, re-shape interests and bring new interests to light, generate new alternatives for consideration and—in all these ways—change the balance of power in negotiating agreement.

ments result when parties refuse to negotiate their *interests* and instead focus on particular *positions*. Say, for example,

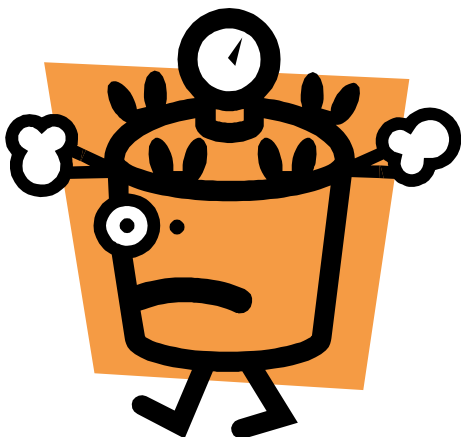
process of creating and sustaining a favorable coalition (and sometimes blocking the formation of adverse ones).

TAKING STOCK (Part Six): ORGANIZING AND NEGOTIATION

Each enriches, even depends on, the other—but tensions arise too:

- **Organizing can “change the game” of negotiated agreement**, adding parties, issues, interests, alternatives, and frames for thinking and talking about ideas. But pressure group strategies can also lead to positional bargaining and a sharpening of differences.
- **Organizing can change the balance of power or influence**, changing the content and consequences of negotiated agreement or blocking agreement.
- **Negotiation helps organizing efforts “deliver the goods”** (secure agreement that propels tangible change). But in order to problem-solve together, parties that enter into principled negotiation must be concerned about the other party’s outcomes, not just their own.

Pressure tactics can lead to negotiation that is highly positional, not focused on the parties' true interests or finding multiple ways to address them.



- Negotiation may be assisted by third parties, whether neutral or “interested” facilitators. The most well-known type of third-party facilitator is the mediator, whose job it is to help parties come to useful, sustainable agreements.

Given these defining traits, organizing can make important contributions to negotiation in a community, and conversely, negotiation is an invaluable tool and skill to apply in larger organizing projects.

Let’s look at these links in principle before considering a brief case or two to illustrate them. First, since negotiations are defined by parties, issues, interests, and alternatives, organizing can ...

- Make a negotiation possible where one or more parties had previously refused to negotiate.
- Add new parties to a negotiation (by literally “organizing” them to represent themselves and become a part of a decision-making process);
- Put new issues on the table, shuffle the order in which issues are considered and given priority, and change (re-frame) the way issues are thought and talked about;
- Re-shape interests and bring to light new interests that parties have in the issues at hand;
- Generate new alternatives for consideration, and change the way the parties evaluate the alternatives in front of them;
- Build powerful coalitions by creating con-

stituencies to support key ideas;

- In all of these ways, change the balance of power or influence that parties have to shape the final outcome—whether it is agreement or impasse. A coalition can favor a particular agreement, for example, or work to block an unfavorable agreement; and
- As a general matter, organizing can change the outcome of a given negotiating “game,” but it can also change the game itself, because new possibilities become important, new values are articulated, a given agreement no longer seems useful at a particular point in time. Organizing reminds us why negotiation can be so much more than transacting given fixed parties, issues, and interests.
- Negotiation provides a crucial way to realize the benefits of organizing. No matter how much stakeholders in a democracy deliberate, learn, and invent, progress depends on making concrete choices. The choices always involve limits, and some interests are bound to be in conflict.

These contributions are not negative or positive, by the way, except in the eye of the beholder. As a case in point, adding new parties and issues could serve the interest of one party or stakeholder group quite well but represent a significant setback for another party.

The larger issue, though, is that organizing can also impose certain risks or burdens on a negotiation process, for example:

Pressure tactics can lead to negotiation that is highly positional, not focused on the parties’ true interests and finding multiple ways to address them.

One reason for positional stand-off

may be that the process of building a motivated constituency—in part to create clout at the negotiating table—can lead organizers and their constituents to devalue the interests of other parties. A key tenet of “principled” negotiation is that solving the other party’s problem is part of our problem. This is not a moral statement but a pragmatic one, and it is appropriate *once the parties agree to enter into negotiation*. Students of social conflict call this the “dual concerns” principle—joint problem-solving requires concerns for our own outcomes *and* those of the other party. This is particularly true when parties enter into what is sometimes called “principled negotiation”—i.e., bargaining with rules that support fair play.

A focus on building up the capacity and influence of a *particular* stakeholder group can blind organizers to the need to learn about *other* stakeholders’ interests and alternatives. Doing that learning is important not only because of the “concern for” issue outlined above but because it’s a crucial part of understanding your own leverage and effectively advancing your interests. Particular approaches to stakeholder organizing can even lead to caricaturing the other side (which narrows the information available to make better decisions) and strict “us” versus “them” thinking (that obscures shared interests).

Consider two brief examples of organizing and negotiation at work together. In the first, organizing made a negotiation possible, bringing a powerful corporation to the table to negotiate with its workers for the very first time. By the late 1970s, only one major corporation in the U.S. still refused to set wages with its workers through collective bargaining: J.P. Stevens & Company, a textile manufacturer. The union representing Stevens’ workers tried organizing consumer boycotts of J.P. Stevens products and suing

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Few of the Campaign's initial demands (positions) were met, but a number of its interests were *significantly* advanced.

the company in court, to no avail. The company preferred to pay high-priced lawyers than pay higher wages or even set the precedent of negotiating, rather than dictating, its wage rates. What could the workers do?

Enter an organizer named Ray Rogers, who created an innovative corporate campaign, taking advantage of J.P. Stevens' important connections to prestigious financial institutions, such as major banks and insurance companies. These connections took the form of interlocking board memberships and large lines of credit.

In one instance, the union demonstrated at a bank board meeting and threatened to cancel its multi-million dollar account at the bank. In another instance, the union, which held shares in a major insurance company tied to J.P. Stevens, threatened a rare challenge to the vote approving the powerful company's board of directors.

When the conservative directors of these prestigious financial institutions asked what they could do to end the negative publicity and avoid these (for the time) unprecedented threats, the union's reply was simple: "Sever your ties to J.P. Stevens." In each case, the targeted institutions agreed, and with concerted pressure over two years, Rogers and his colleagues were able to create a kind of domino effect, leveraging each victory to further isolate J.P. Stevens—in a way that consumer boycotts and direct litigation never had. The company ultimately agreed to come to the bargaining table, and there the union secured significant wage increases at last.

The case of the corporate campaign is one of the most important examples of organizing making it possible to advance a group's interests through negotiated

agreement—first by making negotiation possible in the first place. But there are many examples of this dynamic in social problem-solving: the most important agreements are initially out of reach until the appropriate parties see it as being in their interests to come to the table.

The second case is likewise about creating a negotiation where there was



Negotiations can happen at multiple levels, presenting tough but important work within a constituency group and across groups at the same time.

none, but it is also about the importance of shifting the strategy of an organizing campaign from building movement (and articulating positional demands) to securing agreement by negotiating interests. This is the case of the Living Wage Campaign at Harvard University, and like the J.P. Stevens case, the events took shape over several years. (For more, see the in-depth Living Wage cases, parts A and B, available on our website.)

Beginning in 1998, students at Harvard, working with the University's major service unions, created a campaign to focus on janitors, food service employees, and other low-paid workers who had seen the buying power of their wages decline steadily in the 1990s. The campaign included meetings with workers, faculty, administrators, labor experts, and others. It included rallies and other direct-action tactics to raise

awareness and convince Harvard, America's oldest and wealthiest university and one of its most prestigious, to implement a \$10.25 per hour minimum wage—a "living wage"—for these workers.

But the culmination of these efforts was a pivotal act of civil disobedience, the first at Harvard in many years: in April 2001, student members of the Living Wage Campaign decided to occupy and close down Massachusetts Hall, the historic building in which Harvard's president and other senior officers work every day. The occupation involved over two dozen protesters inside and hundreds that gathered outside. In fine twenty-first century fashion, the Campaign created its own website to communicate the purposes of the occupation and respond to official messages from Harvard's president.

The occupation lasted 21 days, created international attention for the Campaign, and brought celebrity speakers to campus to support their cause. It ended

in an utterly unprecedented decision by Harvard: to re-open negotiations with key unions and create a new task force with a comprehensive charge to examine the wage issue, the living wage proposal specifically, and related issues and alternatives.

The Living Wage Campaign was widely considered a victory for progressive organizers, but if so, the victory hinged on effective negotiation—the negotiations that took place in the final days of the occupation and those that happened later, when the new task force issued recommendations to a new Harvard president—and not just the movement building and pressure politics that grabbed headlines.

Few of the Campaign's initial demands (positions) were met, but a number of its interests were *significantly* advanced. Some of these interests were tan-

gible (e.g., wages increased), while others were intangible but also very important (the new task force used a vastly more informed and deliberative process than Harvard had ever employed in the past, and principles of wage fairness were strongly affirmed by the University).

In the final few days of the occupation, the campaigners did not negotiate directly with the University—it had consistently refused such talks—but did so through an *agent* (representative), who was an experienced negotiator for a nationally known union and happened to be an alumnus of Harvard.

The very process of negotiating gave student protesters a crucial mechanism for advancing their cause, but it also placed their credibility at risk. Public opinion began to favor a negotiated settlement rather than continued holdout in the occupation, and observers looked closely for signs that the determined students were willing to make concessions to come to that settlement.

In time, the new task force recommended large wage increases and other labor protections for workers at Harvard, though it stopped short of recommending a specific wage floor. And Harvard's new president accepted and implemented the key recommendations. The student-led campaign didn't get everything it wanted, but it used organizing, in classic pressure-group fashion, to raise awareness, change the workers' level of influence, and make a negotiation possible. The negotiation that ended the occupation in turn made it possible to advance the interests of the campaign and open up a new chapter in the University's labor relations.

There's much more on these ideas, in particular the key concepts of negotiation that I have merely summarized here, in the strategy tool on negotiation in this series. For instance, negotiations can happen at multiple levels, presenting tough but important work within a constituency group and across groups at the same time. In addition, one "deal" can be linked to another, so parties can appear to trade away something valuable to them now but really expect to be compensated later. Next, as it happened in the Living

Wage case, representatives (agents) are often required to negotiate on behalf of stakeholder groups, and this creates tricky questions about when the agents can decide (on a proposal) on the spot and when they need ratification from the group represented, about when agents should come to the table with strong demands and when they should begin by learning about the other side and getting a better sense of the bargaining range.

All of these facets of negotiation are worth learning about. And again, the main point is this: negotiation is much more than horse trading and "learning to play hardball." It's a core civic skill in changing democratic societies worldwide.

Organizing and Implementing: How to "Co-Produce" Change:

Getting things done in the world requires two things: getting a mandate (permission and direction) and then actually doing the work, i.e., *producing* on the mandate. What does organizing have to do with producing? While many discussions of organizing as civic action focus on the first aspect of winning or changing the mandate—and in particular on making claims, advocating, pressuring, influencing the decisions of others, as we saw above—

Organizing is increasingly important as a mechanism for engaging citizen stakeholders as "co-producers" of community change, supplementing or even substituting for professional staff.

organizing also makes important contributions to getting productive work accomplished to change social attitudes and conditions: get young people prepared for school and work, get a friend or neighbor vaccinated, conduct safe-sex education, monitor environmental pollution or enforcement of environmental protections, take back crime-ridden streets and parks, and more.

Beyond being a *political* or civic

skill, organizing is therefore a *management* skill in the broadest sense of the word "manage": organizing can help multiple actors to create and put to use capacity for productive work, for anything that requires operational capability (skills and the resources to use them).

This key function of organizing skill showed up in the self-help examples we reviewed above. Barn raisings take a variety of operational capabilities—having the way, not just the will. The worldwide tradition of community development is particularly rich in self-help barn raisings, which include important management challenges.

But let's be more specific about the effective implementation of change and about organizing's role as part of it. As the inventors of the modern industrial assembly line—and their ancient forbears who built the Pyramids and other monuments—recognized, there are, in the end, but two challenges to *producing* things well: dividing labor and then coordinating it effectively. Teams and partnerships (operational alliances) are basic structures for doing both, and organizations are often structured into functional departments in ways that reflect this division of labor—with managers and chief executives as coordinators of the parts.

In these terms, organizing is increasingly important: (a) as a way of engaging citizen stakeholders as "co-producers" of community change (part of the division



See the linked strategy tool in this series: **“Perfect Fit or Shotgun Marriage?: The Power and Pitfalls in Partnerships”**

of labor), supplementing or even substituting for professional planners and program staff—this is true when the professionals are based in nonprofits or non-governmental organizations, not just government agencies or businesses—and (b) as a way of generating effective partnerships in which specialized groups or organizations work together to accomplish what none can accomplish alone—sometimes with citizen-stakeholders or “customers” as a part.

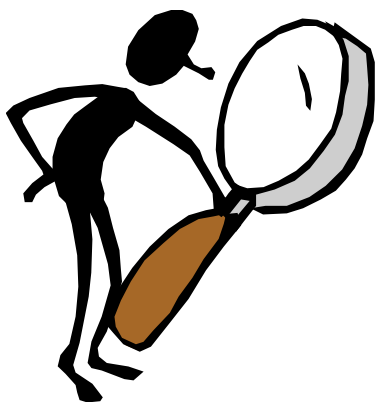
For example, neighbors in a low-income housing complex in Los Angeles are helping to implement Jobs-Plus, an ambitious, place-based workforce program. The residents use their informal socializing time and insider networks to create a positive “buzz” about the program in a frequently skeptical, disengaged, and dispirited community. Several service-provider agencies, both government and nonprofit, coordinate with each other and with these residents through an on-site team leader.

Or say an AIDS prevention and treatment program in Bangkok engages residents of a squatter settlement to design the program’s “social marketing” strategy. Resident representatives bring vital insider cultural knowledge, as well as knowledge about the day-to-day routines of the target district or social group. Once they decide—and only because they decide—that the AIDS issue is important and that the overall approach makes sense, the residents advise on marketing messages and outreach, program hours, where to locate informal outreach sta-

tions, and other design issues. This is a valuable exercise in *participatory design*, but it goes further than that. Some residents are hired as “natural helpers.” Meanwhile, the project team also includes highly trained specialists from a local university, a public health clinic, and a business group—experts of another kind—concerned about the high social and economic costs of AIDS. (For more examples in this field, see *Community Organizing and Community Building for Health*, edited by Meredith Winkler, and the Healthy Communities network on-line.)

An interfaith alliance of congrega-

Organizing can help multiple actors to create and put to use capacity for productive work, for anything that requires operational capability—skills and the resources to use them.



tions in El Paso launches Alliance Schools, a program to improve public education through joint work with school administrators and teachers. Beyond advocating policy change, parents are engaged as implementers of needed changes in the messages kids hear, the monitoring and mentoring they receive from caring adults, and the styles of instruction from which the greatest number of young people can benefit.

In a more ambitious example, a social investment fund in India allocates funding to a community group for construction and management of a small-scale energy system along a river. The funder outlines some broad expectations about use of the funds, arranges some training (in needed group process skills as well as technical aspects of the energy system), and agrees to help

monitor performance of these community-managed systems. But implementation is otherwise in the hands of community experts. The effort relies heavily on how organized the community group is—and how it organizes: Are representatives considered legitimate by and accountable to their stakeholders? Does information travel well? Is labor divided and coordinated appropriately? These are not political or managerial questions. They are both, run together.

In a rare assessment of the implementation contributions of organizing, *Community Organizing: Social Capital as a Development Strategy* by Ross Gitell and Avis Vidal offers an in-depth analysis of a national demonstration program in three cities with little history of effective community-based development. The demonstration tested the organizing approach developed by Michael Eichler of the Con-

sensus Organizing Institute. As the authors of this study show in detail, careful, flexible organizing of a wide variety of stakeholders was crucial for ensuring the three “Big C’s” of sustainable community development: shared commitment, capacity, and control. These, in turn, depended on a variety of “little C’s,” such as *congruence* among what various players most wanted to achieve, *comprehension* of the program’s real aims, and constructive *critiques* of the effort’s progress—an important source of learning and building trust.

Beyond the lessons about joint work that you’ll find in our strategy tool on partnerships, here are a few straightforward principles to help communities “organize” the implementation of change efforts better and more fairly:

1. *Design tasks and assign roles carefully.* Dividing labor is not—or not usually—about allocating the same work to every worker. It implies creating differentiated roles: you will do this, and I will do that,

and we will coordinate the two tasks to accomplish some outcome that depends on getting both done well. There are many valid bases for defining and assigning roles: Who has the needed competencies now, i.e., who has a kind of comparative advantage for doing a particular task

standards. This can lead to a downward spiral in which performance suffers and everyone disengages.

3. *Develop clear expectations about what performance entails, and create consequences.* Effectively co-producing something calls for much more than good-

Are representatives considered legitimate by and accountable to their stakeholders? Does information travel well? Is labor divided and coordinated appropriately? These are not political or managerial questions. They are both, run together.

well? Who can and should learn those competencies? Who is seen as the most legitimate performer of this role or that one? Who can be held accountable? Who is willing to try something new? Organizing brings an inclusive, deliberative energy to these discussions and helps ensure that everyone's commitment to do the job is real.

2. *Be realistic about the work needed, and build capacity for it.* Many arguments for engaging co-producers, especially citizen co-producers, in the work of community change make big assumptions about the capacity it takes to do a job well, but too often...

- The number of hours and types of skills needed are under-estimated or misunderstood;
- Those skills are very unevenly held in the relevant population or organization;
- The skills available are of little value without critical, missing tools, for example machinery or information and communication technology;
- A monitoring organization has no experience and no dedicated time allotted to actually monitor; and
- Because everyone is focused on how great it is to be working together, the new tasks entailed in coordinating teamwork itself—hooking up the separate implementers and their tasks at the right times and places—has not been thought through.

Unless capacity is developed where needed, and the earlier the better, efforts to team up proceed only by lowering

will or we-feeling. It requires sustained and careful work, particularly if resources are scarce and many tasks compete for everyone's attention. Organizing provides the basis for an honest, inclusive deliberation about what operational success should include. Organizing can motivate stakeholders to make the changes in attitudes and behavior that effective teamwork may require. Organizing can also focus the conversation about equipping all of the players with capacity to support change somehow. But in and of itself, a participatory organizing approach doesn't ensure that *smart* choices will be made about programs of change (what should be implemented), performance measures and targets, or mechanisms of accountability (for measuring performance, making the results known, applying rewards or penalties).

4. *Build the special capacities needed to "produce" with and through others.* Producing jointly or collaboratively is a strategy for what management gurus call "indirect production," as in: we don't do a given job ourselves or at least not entirely on our own. Some of what we are expected to accomplish for the world hinges on what others do.

But indirect production almost always involves some loss of control and a new set of risks if the work requirements are not adequately understood or other parties do not perform as expected. Over-eager government agen-

cies learned this lesson the hard way in the early days of the privatization craze. Sizing up partners well, monitoring indirect arrangements, being capable of joint implementation planning, coordinating disparate activities, and other distinct skills become uniquely important when organizing creates *shared* implementation possibilities.

Before we wrap up, let's review, in the next section, some basic hopes of organizing by applying new insights to the concept of power—what it means to have influence over key decisions and actions that affect our lives and organizations.

Organizing and Influence: The Six Levels of Power

At the outset, I noted that organizing, broadly defined, makes collective, civic action possible and more effective. As we've seen, organizing can do that in a variety of ways and confront a variety of dilemmas. Many of these dilemmas have to do with getting more adept at sharing influence or power—not just winning more if you don't have it (or don't think you do) but sharing it effectively with others who also have a stake in the project of change.

All too often, "power" is treated as a synonym for "having resources"—money, political authority, lawyers to argue for you, loyal and influential backers, land under your direct control, etc. Resources are important, no question, but—as every strategist knows—so is *resourcefulness*, i.e., the effective use of resources to accomplish an objective (and often get more resources). Resources are important primarily because they give us more to work with and therefore expand our options, but having resources is not a very reliable indicator of power.

"Power," like "community," has been defined in countless ways. Most people agree that it means influence, as in being able to make something more *likely* to happen even if you don't have complete control over it. But influence of what kind, when, to do what, *for* what?

Arguably, power is not only about political influence (i.e., influence over the important decisions of others or a collective decision). Power is also about pro-

All too often, “power” is treated as a synonym for “having resources”—money, political authority, lawyers to argue for you, land you control, etc. Resources are important, no question, but—as every strategist knows—so is resourcefulness.

ductive capability to do work, in ways outlined above. Still, many of the most insightful commentaries on what power is, and what it allows, have been offered as political commentaries.

In one particularly important commentary, John Gaventa, in *Power and Powerlessness*, argues that power has several hidden faces. That is, we tend to focus on the most overt and visible acts of power, for example where a legislative vote is influenced by a “powerful” lobbying group or where a nation with military power compels another nation to choose a particular course of action, such as surrender or retreat. In focusing on these faces of power, we ignore influence over the agenda (what is up for discussion at all) and the frames of reference (how issues are talked and thought about).

In the context of community problem-solving, I find it helpful to distinguish six (6) levels of power or influence, some more visible and some less so:

1. **(Frames and symbols)** Being able to shape the way things are thought and talked about, shaping deeply held community values and assumptions.
2. **(Agenda-setting)** Being able to raise an issue for collective or public attention, turning a mere “condition” into a “problem” to be solved.
3. **(Options)** Being able to generate options for consideration on a given problem.
4. **(Judgment)** Being able to shape how the options are evaluated.
5. **(Decision-making)** Being able to influence the choice(s) made.
6. **(Productive outputs and outcomes)** Being able to influence implementation of the choices, i.e., productive work to change social conditions.

Influence on decision-making is often the most visible face of power, as Gaventa pointed out, while the

“upstream” levels are more hidden. Power to produce—capacity to implement or arrange implementation—is also useful power and quite visible, though it’s not what we typically think of as power.



In a changing world, in an age of “empowerment,” there are many tough questions in this picture, for example:

- Is power to do something always distinct from power over someone else? Does it depend on how much they cooperate freely toward our objectives? What forms of influence over their choices are appropriate?
- What are the best ways to organize and share power? How should the power of any one group or institution be held in check?
- When is it most appropriate to seek influence, or challenge someone else’s influence, at one of those levels versus another? What’s fairest in this regard, and is this the same as what’s most expedient?

In the end, the civic process known as organizing offers no simple answers to these questions, but asking them from time to time is important. And it can be very constructive—a real source of collective learning about issues, stakes, and access to the process of

change.

As a core civic activity and a key to collective problem-solving in democratic societies, organizing addresses power as central to the process of effecting change. There is no meaningful change without accountability, and power—its multiple faces, the multiple levels—is clearly part of that equation.

Final Thoughts

The myths aside, “organizing” connotes opportunity to some and threat to others, and that may always be the case. Opening up the process of change *does* challenge control. It’s the nature of civic action in a democracy to do that, and most important change requires some amount of pressure and some disagreement or conflict. But this need not lead to process paralysis, endless impasse, or watered-down, nothing-ventured nothing-gained responses to hard problems.

But organizing is so much more than pressure and conflict and holding big meetings to give everyone a voice. As we’ve seen, organizing stakeholders, setting the agenda, and building movement toward change are key aspects of problem-solving, never to be taken for granted or treated as technical steps to be scripted on a process diagram.

What’s more, organizing links in powerful ways to negotiation, planning, implementing, and other very visible work of changing the world around us. You can learn more about those by practicing organizing, and likewise, become a better organizer by learning those key civic skills.

On the next few pages, you’ll find resources for doing more learning, not just about the art and practice of civic organizing but a host of related topics in community problem-solving. □

Further Reading and Other Resources

Here is a list, both general and more specific, for learning more about skills, strategies, dilemmas, and impacts of organizing civic action, wider participation in problem-solving, and building will for change.

Opening up the process of change does challenge control. It's the nature of civic action in a democracy to do that ... But this need not lead to process paralysis, endless impasse, or watered-down, nothing-ventured nothing-gained responses to hard problems.



There is no single “organizing literature”—and certainly not one that encompasses agenda-setting in depth—but rather a host of related bodies of work with useful insights and advice.

1. Background

A host of useful **overviews** of civic organizing are available, free, at key institutional websites, including the National Civic League, the Building Collaborative Communities project, CIVICUS (international), Civnet, the Civic Practices Network, the Harvard Peer Learning Network (Marshall Ganz), and the resource and exchange lists on our website (under Strategy Tools/Organizing).

On **emerging trends** in collaborative civic problem-solving (broadly defined) in the U.S., see Bill Potapchuk, *Moving from Collaborative Processes to Collaborative Communities* (Washington, DC: Community Building Institute and National Civic League, 2002) and Clarence Stone, “Civic Capacity and Urban Education,” *Urban Affairs Review* (2001).

For a look at **organizing low-income communities** in the U.S., see progressive

organizing network sites, such as those of the Industrial Areas Foundation, Gamaliel Foundation, and ACORN, or research and advocacy organizations, such as Applied Research Center (which offers helpful assessments of the changing role of race and ethnic diversity in effective organizing), the Highlander Research and Education Center, and the Center for Community Change.

Also see Larry Pachini and Sally Covington, *Community Organizing Toolbox: A Funder's Guide* (Neighborhood Funders Group, on-line), which includes brief case examples and a resource list; and Robert Fisher, *Let the People Decide: Neighborhood Organizing in America* (New York: Twayne, 1994). All have additional reference lists.

A host of **international references** and resource guides are at the World Bank's Community Empowerment and Social Inclusion Project website, plus its Library of Learning Objects.

For a discussion of the **history** and importance of organizing as contentious politics, see Robert Fisher, “Grassroots Organizing Worldwide: Common Ground, Historical Roots, and the Tension Between Democracy and the State,” In *Mobilizing the Community: Local Politics in the Era of the Global City*, edited by Fisher and Kling (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1993); Joseph Kling and Prudence Posner, editors, *Dilemmas of Activism* (Philadelphia: Temple, 1994); and Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward, *Poor People's Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail* (New York: Vintage, 1979).

For a discussion of grassroots organizing's contributions to community building and democracy—including the importance of building viable community institutions that span race, class, and other divides, see Mark Warren, *Dry Bones Rattling: Community Building to Revitalize American Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001.)

LEARNING MORE

To learn about topics that relate to effective organizing, check out these strategy tools in our series, all available at www.community-problem-solving.net:

Planning Together: How (and How Not) to Engage Stakeholders in Charting a Course. Many organizing efforts aim to develop and pursue new ideas, programs of change that are smart, not just popular. Stakeholder participation in planning is important for practical reasons of wanting more and better ideas and for legitimacy reasons as well—wanting a meaningful community mandate. Learn more about the often unspoken expectations and competing objectives that drive participatory planning and decision-making (and sometimes undermine it). Learn more about the strategies and tactics needed to “participate” a variety of stakeholders more effectively.

Perfect Fit or Shotgun Marriage?: The Power and Pitfalls in Partnerships. The concept of “partnership” as a mechanism for pooling resources to get things done is almost as old as recorded history. Useful partners may bring money, materials, expertise, reputation, relationships, and more to help us achieve things that matter to us—and, ideally, to them as well. Unfortunately, much available guidance on partnering either celebrates more than it clarifies or focuses on just a small part of the landscape. Learn more about the strategies and tactics needed to determine whether partnering is an appropriate strategy and, if so, how to build partnerships that work.

“We are All Negotiators Now”: An Introduction to Negotiation for Community Problem-Solvers. In problem-solving work, negotiating effectively is particularly important where: key decisions must be jointly made in order to be legitimate and useful; you will be dealing with “the other side” in the future, not just in a “one-off” agreement; a number of seemingly distinct bargains are actually linked (help me on this, I'll help you on that other matter); and because of likely spillover effects, the parties affected are not simply those “at the table”.

2. Styles and Models

The classic on **building grassroots pressure groups** is Saul Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals: A Practical Primer for Realistic Radicals* (New York: Random House, 1971). Many books cover union organizing, including biographies of Cesar Chavez, organizer of the United Farm Workers in California, and histories of the AFL-CIO and other unions. Organized lists under these headings are available at the resource lists mentioned above.

On the **consensus organizing** model, see Michael Eichler, "Consensus Organizing: Sharing Power to Gain Power," National Civic Review (Summer-Fall 1995) or visit the Consensus Organizing Institute on-line; and for a rare study of organizing effects on community development program implementation (focused on the consensus organizing model), see Ross Gitell and Avis Vidal, *Community Organizing: Social Capital as a Development Strategy* (Newbury Park: Sage, 1998).

3. Guides and Manuals

For a look at **grassroots organizing tactics**, see *Organizing for Social Change: A Manual for Activists in the 1990s* (Santa Ana, CA: Seven Locks, 1996); on the grassroots *and* tops, see the National Civic League's guide to community visioning (available at their website); *Rules for Radicals* (above); the Consensus Organizing Institute; and Community Toolbox (on-line).

4. Networks and Peer Learning

See the updated lists on our website, including training opportunities, on-line communities, and main resource lists.

5. Agenda Setting and Strategic Communication (Framing)

On framing and other key concepts of **strategic communication**, see The Frameworks Institute's website for helpful tools (basic concepts) and case examples, plus the global Communication Initiative (www.comminit.com).

And for background and in-depth discussion of varied examples, on **agenda-setting** see John Kingdon, *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies* (New

York: HarperCollins, 1984). Robert Cialdini, *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion* (New York: Quill, 1984); on **framing**, see Donald Schon and Martin Rein, *Frame Reflection* (New York: Basic Books, 1994).

6. Community Development, Health, and Other Applications

See Meredith Winkler, editor, *Community Organizing and Community Building for Health* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers, 1999); Gitell and Vidal, *Community Organizing* (above); and Robert Chaskin et al., *Building Community Capacity* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 2001).

7. Negotiation, Planning, and Implementing Together

See the linked tools in this series (including resource lists) and links on our website.

Got ideas?

Send us your feedback on the content of this tool—or any and all ideas you would like to share on taking action to make a difference in local communities:

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