

## Building Community Development on The Will of The People: The Role of Community Organizing

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### Putting People and Power in the Plan

There is a popular saying that “the road to hell is paved with good intentions.” If community development was simply a matter of good intentions gone awry, then we would only have to pull up and realign some of the roads “paved to hell” by such intentions, and then be back on our way to a better life and stronger communities. Too often though the “good intentions” are little more than a matter of “spin” accompanied by multi-colored press releases from slick corporate and government communications departments which mask the true intentions of the projects with false claims frequently disguising private interests.

Reformers of all stripes often claim that transparency coupled with new, stronger, or clearer regulations would solve the problem of countervailing interests that dictate and dominate community development. There is no evidence of it. Despite the stir, we have to add people to the process to make it work.

Unless there is an ability to create a balance of real power between the contending forces in any developmental process, development will always be *done* to people rather than based on their interests and will. Community development that is not implemented with the full participation and voice of the people in the affected community will *always* turn out poorly, not that it matters to most planners since they usually are in service to the developer or the development in most cases.

The equalizer in this equation can be community organization, the process of organizing the community to allow democratic, full voiced participation by all of the people in the community in an organizational formation that they build and direct and is founded on their will and wishes. Such organizations seek to exercise not simply voice, but also power in order to ensure full participation in the process and effective self-determination in planning and implementation of community development. The goal of community organizations is not simply participation which often devolves into a rubber stamping of a preordained process in many developments, but the hard fisted and effective power that allows popular voices to rise and prevents them from being ignored until such rising demands are met with effective concessions.

The driving question in development is always, “development for whom?” The process of creating community organizations with strong mass based support and the ability to exercise power allows development to proceed not on the “backs of the people” but based on the will of the people. Unfortunately, all of this is easier to say, than it is to do. Organizing democratic and powerful community organizations is hard, unpopular work, despite the fact that it is necessary both to achieve democratic institutions, equitable interests, and even successful development.

### The Folly of Plans without People

I founded ACORN, the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN) in the United States in 1970 and directed its operations for 38 years until 2008 when it had nearly 500,000 members, more than 1000 full-time staff, 600 organizations in more than 100 cities, a housing program, several radio stations, and associated labor unions. None of this was easy to build, and such

organizations and social movements are inherently fragile, as ACORN itself turned out to be after I left and it was subjected to withering conservative and right wing political attack seeking to undermine its gains. I say this humbly and with heavy heart only to share both the hope that creating such organizations is possible in our countries and their communities, and the recognition that we all, myself foremost, still have much to learn about how to make them sustainable and enduring.

Nonetheless, building such mass-based, multi-issued membership driven, democratic community organizations is an even more critical and urgent project for our times given the rising dominance of corporate power and the private-public partnerships that are being driven by such economic interests in a time of tightened and difficult public budgets. As Chief Organizer and Founder of ACORN International ([www.acorninternational.org](http://www.acorninternational.org)), a federation of such community organizations working in 15 major cities and 8 countries in low and moderate income communities and mega-slums (Peru, Dominican Republic, Canada, Mexico, Argentina, India, Kenya, and Honduras) with partners in Korea, Indonesia, and the Philippines, we have found there is a huge demand for building such organizations in various cultures, climates, languages, and countries across the globe. The common denominator is the peoples' demand for power to shape their communities and build the organizations that allow their will be done.

We have seen huge victories won based on building strong community organizations in places like San Juan Laurigancho outside of Lima, *jovenos barrios* of squatters on the dry, dusty mountainside where now there is potable water, parks, paved roads, schools, and stairways, though still not decent and adequate housing. The participation and power of organized people also led to the construction of stone embankments and barriers to prevent mudslides from destroying the tenuous and makeshift housing, which had to be forced into the plan and construction programs.

More often though we have seen what happens when people are left out of the process. The slum relocation projects built so far on the outskirts of Delhi that new slums have to be created to access work and offset the hours of uneven daily transportation living in the relocation areas demands, not to speak of the crime and gang control that arises in areas where people are powerless. In Mumbai the development exchange that allows high rise luxury housing to clear slums and built replacement housing at hardly 200 meters a unit, no access to livelihoods, and elevators quickly unmaintained that become festering garbage pits, are equally good examples of the “crisis of the commons” when nothing is held in common because people were left powerless and out of the process.

Librino, the giant, disastrous housing project in Catania, Sicily that I toured with my Simeto friends and associates is another stark example of a plan going one way and people the other, and then a government surprised when “people vote with their feet” and abandon whole buildings allowing them to dissolve into anarchy, crime, and chaos, seemingly as part of public policy in order to justify new developments without learning any of the old lessons. The primary lesson of course should have been to allow and encourage the development of strong community organizations of tenants and owners in the complex with real power to direct management and planning. No one I met seemed to be holding their breath in hopes that such a course would be chosen, and not far away I could see new towers being built to start the whole cycle anew.

Yet simple investments and support in community organization in similar massive high-rise buildings in places like Toronto are teaching a different lesson. Toronto ACORN created a “Live Green” partnership with full support and funding of the City of Toronto that over recent years has created community gardens, green space, and in some periods planted as many as 1000 trees in a single month to create not just a “green” development in the public housing for the poor, but one that

demonstrates regularly the power of the organization and its large membership (ACORN Canada now has more than 30,000 members after six years of organizing).

*The Peoples' Plan in the Lower 9<sup>th</sup> Ward of New Orleans*

One of the best examples of both a huge crisis and need for effective, people-based community development occurred in New Orleans in the wake of the disastrous Hurricane Katrina in 2005 which devastated huge portions of the city, particularly lower income and predominately African-American neighbors like the lower 9<sup>th</sup> Ward of the city. New Orleans ACORN (now called A Community Voice [www.acommunityvoice.org](http://www.acommunityvoice.org)) had 9000 dues paying members at the time of the hurricane. A mapping project done later by a consortium of university planning departments led by Cornell University and Dr. Ken Reardon found ACORN members on literally every block in the lower 9<sup>th</sup> Ward, which had been a New Orleans ACORN stronghold. In the “elite panic” after the hurricane many private developers and interests felt empowered to reshape the city in their own image and interest. A major plan developers and their allies commissioned from the Urban Institute proposed turning the entire lower 9<sup>th</sup> ward into green space and not allowing reoccupation by community residents and homeowners.

ACORN pulled together a conference in Baton Rouge, Louisiana out side of the disaster zone and enlisted progressive planners and professionals from private firms and universities all over the country who were willing to work in partnership to collectively develop a recovery and rebuilding plan for the 9<sup>th</sup> Ward. In the twists and turns, struggles and successes of fighting for recovery, ACORN and its partners were even awarded a contract at one point to officially serve as the planners for the 9<sup>th</sup> Ward and some other lower income areas before politics intervened and the developers managed to wrest the official legitimacy from these community organization based efforts. The people driven process managed to create real tools that were vital to rebuilding including a house-to-house survey which estimated rehabilitation versus replacement costs for area housing proving that the majority could be rebuilt. Scores of meetings of ACORN members and other community residents and hours of time spent in every level of the process provided the heart blood of inspiration and vision for what became the published “Peoples' Plan.”

But that was just a matter of participation, which everyone could claim, and many of the developers and other planners paid hundreds of thousands of dollars to fabricate. The real difference in creating equity for poor and black residents of the city was the fact that New Orleans ACORN had real power and were willing to use it. For all of the elite and business string pulling, the Mayor and City Council were elected officials and ACORN through its New Orleans branch and affiliated community organizations in neighboring cities and states holding the diaspora of New Orleans residents trying to get home, was willing to communicate what was really happening and being done, who was responsible, and get out the vote for the election forcing not only the Mayor but numerous Council candidates to have to commit to the rebuilding of *all* of the city and its neighborhoods. ACORN had the strength to get the full City Council to vote to approve the Peoples' Plan as a central and incorporated document in directing the recovery alongside of the contract consultants plans. When the Mayor and his recovery staff announced commitments to rebuilding to the city and the press, only ACORN community leaders were invited to the ceremony when the largest sum was announced for rebuilding the Lower 9<sup>th</sup> Ward, and Mayor Ray Nagin was pictured in the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* on one knee bending down and asking for support from Vanessa Gueringer, president of the ACORN Lower 9<sup>th</sup> Ward chapter.

Five years after Katrina and for many more years, A Community Voice, as it is now known, will still be fighting to realize the full implementation of the plan made in the wake of Katrina, but they

have a plan – and the power to fight for its implementation – because they built and maintain a strong, democratic and vibrant community organization. In New Orleans both friends and foes now recognize that without the strength of the ACORN community organization the recovery would be vastly different and even more inequitable than the best hopes of the self-interested developers had wished.

There are many lessons to be learned about planning, disasters, and, most importantly, the role of community organization after Katrina, and these lessons are not restricted to New Orleans. The role of the Urban Poor Consortium, a strong community organization, headed by Wardah Hafiz in Indonesia rebuilt thousands of fishermen's homes after the terrible Christmas tsunami of 2004 providing a similar lesson from the global south. Recovery and donor guidelines and NGO arrogance tried to dictate to UPC members that they rebuild several kilometers from the coastline even though their entire livelihood was based on their boats and fishing. Through strong and determined organizing with the UPC, they called the question and built the homes stronger and more secure next to the water and their livelihood arguing that other protections be put in place for people but that there was no substitute for their community or their livelihoods on the water. There are always plans, but only people can make them work, if they have the voice and the organized power to force their will over either selfish or the best of intentions.

### *An Uneasy Alliance and Uncertain Future but Worth the Work*

The history of community based organization is long and controversial in North America and more recently in other countries. Social movements and organized, political voices of poor and working families are frankly not ever naturally popular with the “powers that be.” The organizational relationship with institutional and public governance is uneasy because the *full and equal* participation of all of the people in a community is unusual and difficult to accommodate when reality forces the rhetoric of participation to recognize a different exercise and balance of power.

Community organizations are advocates in the process of community development, rather than passive observers, which means that they will have their own interests and agendas, rather than simply being bottoms sitting in the chairs listening to public presentations of what is presumed to be in their best interests. Effective community organizations like those build by ACORN International are oriented to actions, including demonstrations, marches, and the entire tactical arsenal of protest, within the context of issue-based campaigns which move relentlessly and persistently over long years to achieve community objectives and empowerment.

Community organizations are an “equity” partner with perhaps the most important and long term investment in the future success and outcomes of any community development. Composed of community residents they live for better or worse with the consequences of any plan and any development, even while fortunes are made and lost by developers, governments rise and fall, and careers are made and broken by the planners and bureaucrats themselves. When it is all over and done, they still live and work in the community as many have for generations in the past and will for generations in the future, yet it is amazingly difficult for institutional power to concede an equal, or perhaps more justly, louder voice to the majority of the community in its own future.

It is hard to build effective community organizations and to sustain them. The history of community organizations around the world has as often been their fall as it has been their rise, yet that does not alter the fact that without effective people-based organizations community development will not be built on the will of the people, but instead will stand in the way of the people. Successful organizing requires long term commitment, dedicated organizers and leaders arising in the community,

real resources to enable full participation and empowerment, and the patience and persistence to continue the process until success is achieved and power built. With the necessary ingredients there are wonderful stories to be told and dramatic achievements to be seen that permanently shape and direct communities and without such efforts the fiasco of plans without people and developments built like mirages out of the dreams of some, but benefiting none, will continue to proliferate.

Organizing it is hard but as people are finding out daily in the Simeto valley, it is worth the work. Strong, powerful community organizations guarantee a democratic people and community development which expresses their will and offers a way forward, rather than a way around, for all of the people in a community.

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