

Community Organising

*This short paper, which dates from the early 1990s, distils the thinking and experience of the **Philippine Partnership for the Development of Human Resources in Rural Areas** in the sphere of **Community Organising**. An important feature of the paper is its definitions and methodologies. These are conveyed so as to assist those committed to this style of working with their daily actions.*

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Definition

Community Organising is a systematisation of experiences in labour and other forms of organising. At the same time, it continuously evolves and is and is constantly enriched in the process of practice. While Community Organising shares many aspects with other forms of organising, it is distinctive, not because it is defined by the limited boundaries of communities, but because it is characterised by a package of features. Some of these are present in other forms of organising but they are only present as a package in Community Organising.

Process/methods

Community Organising has 4 distinguishing process or methodological characteristics. These are:

- *A **progressive cycle of action-reflection*** begins with small, local and concrete issues identified by the people and the evaluation of and reflection on the action taken by them.
- ***Consciousness-raising through experimental learning*** is central to the Community Organising process because it places emphasis on the learning that emerges from concrete action and which enriches succeeding action. This dialectic relation between theory and practice progressively raises people's consciousness.
- ***Community Organising is participatory and mass-based*** because it is primarily directed towards, and biased in favour of the poor, the powerless and the

oppressed. Through a participatory process, the whole community (as much as possible) must be involved in the organising experience.

- ***Community Organising is group-centred and not leader-orientated.*** Leaders are identified, emerge and are tested through action rather than appointed or selected by some external force or entity. Thus Community Organising seeks democratic leadership where power resides in the people.

Aims/goals

The goal of community Organising is People's empowerment. Through Community Organising people learn to overcome their powerlessness and develop their capacity to maximise their control over their lives. They must be able to influence the course of history and erode the dehumanising effects of powerlessness. And through the process of confronting oppressive structures and institutions, people are transformed from dehumanised objects into human beings with dignity, who can assert their rights and can control their destiny.

Consequently, Community Organising aims to establish relatively permanent structures of people's organisations, which will serve the needs and aspirations of the people and thereby ensure maximum people's participation. It is through these structures that people learn to internalise a new system of values so that localised experiences become the building blocks upon which the blueprint of a more desirable future is based.

To effectively influence the course of history towards building a more equitable and social just nation, people's organisations and community organisers should join organisations and alliances that will promote the interests of the people without any a priori exclusion. This refers to sectoral alliances, other people's organisations and federations, multi-sectoral coalitions, regional and national apex bodies, political parties and international social movements.

However, one must be able to see the difference between tactical alliances, which are short-term, on the level of issues, and strategic alliances, which are long-term, and subject to a more comprehensive basis of unity and solidarity with friends and like minded groups. Such alliances must ensure genuine people's participation and the proper observation of genuine respect for the integrity of each group.

Orientation/vision

Since Community Organising takes a partisan stand on the side of the people, the issue of one's ideology, political line or orientation is crucial. Every Community Organiser must possess all three. The only difference is in the degree to which a Community Organiser is conscious of these.

A Community Organiser may not have a systematised ideology but may develop one in the process of struggle. Because they are a social agent of change, they must possess an orientation and political line that specifies:

- the analysis of the situation;

- an assessment of the forces and classes that are for and against change; and
- the limits of the current system

The Community Organiser also serves as a model of the people. Every organiser then must be clear on their political line and orientation to the people. The general rule that governs the Community Organiser must be:

If there is a conflict between the authority (whatever authority may be) and the people, go with the people.

An ideal vision of society must have the following features:

- ***Democratic*** – because it is premised on the foundation of a strong, popular and autonomous people’s organisation in contrast to an over-centralised state which exercises too much control and where an oppressive bureaucracy necessarily develops.
- ***Nationalistic*** – because its focus is on development of the Philippines and not its subservience to the promotion and perpetuation of the interest of larger and more powerful nations.
- ***Self-reliant and self-governing*** – in order for us to retrieve our sovereignty and chart our own destiny.
- ***Equitable distribution of wealth*** – which allots to each according to his/her own needs.
- ***Collective ownership of the vital means of production*** – which refers to the collectivisation of those people who are exploited and deprived of other means of survival.
- ***Pluralistic and mass-based*** – because it allows freedom of different political forces to pursue their own political line on the presumption that, in the final analysis, a political line can be validated only by the people.

A Community Organiser should exhaust all open and legal means to the attainment of this vision. They must be open to use other means especially the right to self-defence when the people decide that existing systems can no longer be altered.

Finally, behind every political ideology and orientation is an act of faith, a belief in an option or stand. The correctness of a position can only be judged by the passage of time and events. Thus, differences in position must be viewed with mutual respect. What is important is an openness to dialogue and an ethical relationship between those who have different perspectives. After all, only time can tell which position is correct.

Some crucial issues

A number of issues may appear as dilemmas in the Community Organising experience. A good Community Organiser must learn to anticipate and face these issues.

For instance, a Community Organiser must know how to find the balance between local and national issues. Because in the ultimate analysis, such a balancing of local and national issues comes from the realisation that a Community Organiser is a crucial part of national transformation - *the handmaiden of national liberation*.

Another issue is the use of economic projects as entry points. Economic projects like appropriate technology, health and the like must be clearly undertaken within the context of supporting and sustaining the struggle towards the people's goals, elevating the awareness and consciousness of the people, inculcating values, as a concrete expression of the alternative system we are working towards. As such, Community Organisers must guard against the tendency of such projects to subvert the whole community organising process because these interventions unwittingly reinforce the old value system. Hence, it is advisable to introduce economic projects as a sustaining complimentary activity after the people have been organised. However, under abnormal conditions, economic projects can be used as an entry-point.

Finally, a Community Organiser must make it a point that a vibrant and stable organisation is not only maintained but rather, viewed by the people as a necessary pre-requisite for development. How to sustain people's organisations is a challenge both to the community and to the Community Organiser. The following are essential elements in sustaining people's organisations:

- In-depth and continuing education and training
- On-going activities and projects
- Clear organisational structures and policies
- A core of highly motivated, politically conscious leaders with a deep pro-people commitment
- Stable alliances with other groups and people's organisations
- A well defined vision for the future

Phase-out/pull-out

In the strict sense, the relationship between the Community Organiser and the demand community must be temporary. This is so because the aim of organisers is to help create communities, which can determine their own future, helping them to become self-sufficient and self-reliant. Nevertheless, a Community Organiser after the phase-out must shift to a supportive role like monitoring, consultation, evaluation, follow-up, etc. Although, it is true that the Community Organiser – people relationship must come to an end, the Community Organiser may remain part of the people's organisation as a comrade.

Further Information

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