

IFAS Community Development: Empowering Your Community, Stage 1, Initiation¹

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This paper is part of a series of discussions on community development. This series includes specialized papers on civic engagement, community action, and other topics important to the development of community.

Introduction

Local residents are increasingly being asked to take on greater roles in providing community services and planning for future needs. In response to the pressures and changes facing our communities, activists, grassroots social change organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and coalitions of concerned community groups have emerged to shape and guide the development process. Similarly, organized residents continue to play instrumental roles in identifying new development opportunities in localities that historically were presented with few such options.

Community-based action, in these and other settings, is seen as essential to the development of community and local well-being. In its most basic form, this action refers to the process of building

social relationships in pursuit of common community interests and maintaining local life (Wilkinson, 1970; Wilkinson, 1991; Luloff and Bridger, 2003). Such action is the foundation of the community development process because it represents deliberate and positive efforts designed to meet the general needs of all local residents.

While central to the emergence of community, the organizing of local residents into community actions does not take place by itself. It is a process that needs to be cultivated and systematically approached. Through this process, the interactions of local residents develop through a series of steps that focus on solving specific problems, establishing channels of communication, and establishing a framework for long-term social change (Wilkinson, 1991). The first stage focuses on initiating community interest and promoting awareness of issues as well as establishing opportunities for participation in action (Wilkinson, 1970; Wilkinson, 1991).

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Initiation of Community Action

While interaction among residents facilitates many of the basic human needs, the development of purposive community action requires more focused links between members to foster change. The first phase of community action is *initiation* (Wilkinson, 1991; Luloff and Bridger, 2003). Initiation and the spread of interest occurs when residents from across the community identify common needs and begin to discuss these as a potential focus for group action (Luloff and Swanson, 1995; Wilkinson, 1991). This process facilitates the spread of awareness across diverse groups and reflects the process of acknowledging common needs/problems and the recognition that solutions exist (Korsching and Allen, 2004). By addressing these commonalities and planning possible solutions, the community action process begins.

For example, a local school board and a real estate broker can have widely different priorities that they feel are essential to meeting the needs of their particular social group. However, through interaction in a variety of settings, both agree that they and other groups have mutual community needs, such as community safety. Instead of the school board asking for increased security guards and the real estate sector pushing for more police coverage, the groups realize that a partnership such as a neighborhood crime watch program and a homeowners association would achieve a greater impact. Such efforts would not only help the school protect their students, but increase property values and the preservation of neighborhood security. Bringing in even more groups such as religious, business, civic organizations, and others within the community would further expand the representation of local voices in the decision making process.

The identification of common needs and initiation of efforts to meet these needs can take many forms. Often the active choice of diverse residents to organize results from some immediate threat or overarching need. Such conditions often make the organization of active individuals more simple and direct. However, action often focuses solely on the success or failure of efforts to address these needs (task accomplishment). While such

conditions are of course beneficial to bringing people together, they can serve only short-term action efforts. Considering such factors, it is useful for Extension and other change agents to consider more long term plans and to frame action as part of a greater effort to address the lasting viability of the community. Bringing together residents in such settings is not based around a single contentious issue, but rather in response to the need to contribute to the general local well-being of residents.

Including *Initiation* in Extension Work

When issues are identified and discussed in the initiation stage, they are often in the context of accomplishing one or more specific goals. Herein lies the importance of interaction: when diverse residents communicate about issues facing their shared locality they are building relationships between members that would otherwise not interact. As a product of such interaction *within* community, the development of community emerges.

Fostering Initiation

Change does not come only from those formally named as community organizers, but from people who live and interact within a community. Recognizing these people as important assets and direct agents of change is imperative to shaping the emergence of community. The initiation stage of community action is therefore essential to increasing individual awareness and providing a venue for people to become active. Initiation can include the following actions:

- *Start with a small number of people who represent the diversity of the community.*

Identifying stakeholders, leaders from various groups throughout the community, and other important partners will help frame initial efforts. This includes members of the business community, social service sector, local government, school board, Parent-Teacher Associations, local newspapers and media, as well as religious leaders. These individuals are the primary connection to the diverse groups that comprise the community and can serve to bring a wider audience into development efforts.

- *Identify social fields not represented.*

Based on the initial grouping of individuals identified it will be possible to identify individuals/groups missing from the decision making process. To better identify these groups, a listing or map of all of the social fields within the community (e.g. religious, social, business, government) and the organizations or groups that comprise these fields (e.g. churches or synagogues, chamber of commerce, city commission, Kiwanis club) can be developed. This process helps identify those voices that might be missing from local decision-making. To be successful, community action efforts must be inclusive of the many different groups and perspectives within the community. By fostering diverse interactions and relationships across the locality that would otherwise not occur, an entity stronger than the sum of its parts develops.

- *Develop a framework for linking fields and bringing in new people.*

Once the organizations existing within the community are identified, innovative, creative, and unique strategies for addressing issues that build on the strengths of the locality can be developed. Building on the diverse skills and background present within the community, this approach involves meeting local needs through methods unique to the locality instead of concentrating on traditional courses of action. This framework involves innovation and allows us to link a variety of organizations and institutions within the locality towards its given needs.

- *Spread awareness through all channels available.*

With groups and partners identified, it is important then to begin a course of action for spreading awareness. By identifying various groups and establishing channels of communication, these groups can in turn disseminate the information about local issues to their respective members. For example, efforts to raise awareness and call residents to

action can be presented at civic events, festivals, sports events, religious gatherings, and town meetings.

Summary

Initiation and creation of awareness is a vital first step in the community action process. From this stage, strong relationships are established that represent the entire community. These relationships cut across the various divides and social barriers that exist within our communities. More importantly the initiation and creation of awareness provides a strong foundation for stage two of the action process, *organization of sponsorship*. Initiation is the first step in the process that allows local residents to take on a more direct and active role in local decision making. Thereby taking on an increased say in the decisions that shape their lives.

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Suggested Reading

Community Development Institute East.
<http://www.ext.wvu.edu/cdi-east/>

The Community Development Society.
<http://www.comm-dev.org/>

Community Resource Group. <http://www.crg.org/>

Civic Practices Network. <http://www.cpn.org/>

Grass-roots.org. <http://www.grass-roots.org/>

International Association for Community
Development. <http://www.iacdglobal.org/>

Southern Rural Development Center.
<http://srdc.msstate.edu>

Sustainable Development Communication
Network. <http://www.sdgateway.net>

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