

IFAS Community Development: Identifying Local Power Structures, The Reputational Approach ¹

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

Introduction

In the process of community development, it is important to identify positions, organizations, and individuals of power. All types of power can serve as a source of empowerment for local collective action or in more negative settings as a significant obstacle to the emergence of community agency, or the capacity for local of communities to act (Hyman, et al., 2001; Brennan, 2006). There are several ways that extension and other change agents can identify these power structures. One useful method is the *reputational approach*.

The Reputational Approach

Another widely used method for identifying community power structures is the reputational approach. As opposed to other methods that use publicly accessible data (e.g., directories, listings),

this approach is based on the selection of knowledgeable community citizens who provide lists of people holding power. These power holders are then ranked according to their reputation for holding power and influencing local decision-making.

Assumptions of the Reputational Approach

This method for identifying power is based on several assumptions. Included are the belief that:

1. Power is present and involved in all social relationships;
2. A person's reputation is an indicator of their potential to influence community issues or the resources they control;
3. Local citizens know who has power as a result of their reputations; and
4. We cannot identify power holders simply by knowing who participates in meetings or holds offices. Those who hold power are sometimes concealed.

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Procedures for Identifying Reputational Power

To identify leaders and power holders through this method, a series of steps can be taken. Included are:

1. Identify community residents who are knowledgeable of local life, history, and major events that have taken place. These can include a variety of people from the media, local government, business community, and nonprofit sectors;
2. Ask these people in the know to list all people they believe hold power in the community;
3. Compile a list of all people listed as power holders by local residents. This can also be further broken up to specify different areas, such as people holding power in the business sector, religious community, and other areas;
4. Give the lists of power holders back to each local residents who provided input and ask them to select the most powerful person;
5. Summarize the names of the reputed power holders for each area studied. The list of people is the community power pool. This pool of power holders is made up of those mentioned "several" times—those with the votes are the top actors.
6. Check the reliability of the list. Go to the top identified people and ask them about their role in the community and their ability to shape local decision-making. You can also ask them who they think holds power locally. Their responses should more or less replicate the existing list; if not, they will add new names to the pool.

Types of leaders identified

This method generally identifies both visible leaders and those operating behind the scenes. It also identifies people with economic sway, elected officials, professionals at a variety of levels, and political leaders.

Advantages and Disadvantages of this Method

As with all methods for assessing local power, this method has distinct advantages and disadvantages. Among the advantages to consider when using this method are:

1. This method identifies a wide scope of visible and concealed power holders;
2. Has the potential to determine power holders who influence local life in multiple areas at the same time (influencing both business and government issues); and
3. Is a relatively easy to conduct and a fairly inexpensive method to use.

Correspondingly some of the disadvantages of this method are:

1. Reputational leaders may or may not actually exercise power. While they may have social status and power in the community, they may not directly influence any local decision making;
2. This method tends to identify elitist structure of the community, but sometimes fails to identify specialized power holders. In many cases, there are people on the margins of community life who arise only for specific issues.
3. This method assumes local citizens who identify and rank power holders are indeed knowledgeable of local life and influences over decision-making.

References And Suggested Reading

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