
Showing Results in Community Organization

Haya Itzhaky and Alan S. York

This article describes a community organization program and its tangible results in a stigmatized neighborhood in the center of Israel. The program lasted six years; its central goal was the autonomy of the community, the empowerment of its residents, and collaboration among the human services workers and between them and the resident leaders. The results, measured objectively and quantitatively, included a large increase in the number of community activists; strong and statistically significant increases of self-esteem and mastery of surroundings; increase in family, service delivery, and community empowerment among the activists, and the participation of residents and outsiders in a project to build their own homes in the neighborhood.

Key words: *collaboration; community organization; community practice; empowerment; program evaluation*

Nearly 70 years ago, Dr. Richard Cabot, in his presidential address to the National Conference of Social Work, made an impassioned appeal to social workers to evaluate their work:

I appeal to you. . . Measure, evaluate, estimate, appraise your results, in some form, in any terms that rest on something beyond faith, assertion, and "illustrative case" (Cabot, cited in Bloom, Fischer, & Orme, 1999, p. xiii).

The appeal was made to caseworkers specifically, but its message is no less cogent to community organizers in this age of accountability.

This article presents a program of community organization carried out over six years, briefly describes the community and the professional staff, puts forward the original program objectives and goals, describes the community interventions used in the program, and then presents the results, outcomes, and outputs of the program in objective and mainly qualitative terms.

Although community organization cannot claim to be at its zenith today, the pendulum appears to be swinging again in the direction of a community/macro approach in social work and

other helping professions. In 1988 the president of the Community Psychology Division of the American Psychological Association called his colleagues to order and invited them to see the community as a major factor in the personal and social development of individuals, particularly their self-identity and self-efficacy (Heller, 1989). Former Vice President Al Gore (1998), in a speech "Building Liveable Communities," before a major policy institution, emphasized that personal growth toward democracy and vibrant civic life must happen at the local and community levels.

Social work has never abandoned a community approach to change (although occasionally it has seemed that social workers may have done so, compare Specht & Courtney, 1994). Adams and Nelson (1995), in the introduction to their book on community- and family-centered practice, stressed the need to bring community back into human services, although not necessarily as a specialized activity. But Smale (1995), writing in the same book, made a strong case for what he called "community social work" in the English "patch team," which is community practice by specialist community workers and by generic workers, using

a social systems or ecological approach. Weil (1996) made a strong case for community practice and community building as part of social workers' daily work, particularly in response to budget cuts. Johnson (1998) helped along the "revitalization" process by analyzing characteristics and competences from the community organization literature and detailing curricula for community-based practice methods courses.

What are the major foci of modern community practice? It seems to us that there are two main thrusts in the new literature: collaboration and empowerment. The idea of collaboration and cooperation among community services, formal and informal, professional and lay, is not new, but it has been emphasized as a focus of macro practice, both for community organizers and generic social workers. Schopler (1994) examined the performance of human services interorganizational groups and put forward four types, based on their origins and task structure. Her analysis should help workers in these groups and direct them on how to set them up.

Bailey and Koney (1996) extended the strategy of "interorganizational community-based collaboratives" to the whole social work agenda, particularly as part of the "devolution revolution," which has been put forward by scholars, legislators, and practitioners in the field. They proposed core components of interorganizational collaboratives and considered needed inputs for social work education and practice. Mulroy (1997) presented an example of how this policy can function in preventing child abuse and neglect.

Empowerment has been high on the agenda of social work, at least since Solomon's (1976) book, both as a process for workers, clients, and others and as a goal on its own. Social workers labor to modify personal and structural conditions to allow themselves, their clients, and others to achieve power, on the one hand, and, on the other, empowerment: feeling powerful, worthy of self-esteem, and competent (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995; Swift & Levin, 1987; Zimmerman, 1995). Indeed some scholars have seen empowerment as an application of Bandura's (1982) theory of "perceived self-efficacy" and other aspects of behavioral and learning theory (Mattaini, 1993; Pecukonis & Wenocur, 1994). Barker (1999) defined *authority* as "expertise or power" (p. 36), a view we would accept, and *empowerment* as "the process of helping individuals, families, groups,

and communities increase their personal, interpersonal, socioeconomic, and political strength and develop influence toward improving their circumstances" (p. 153).

Dodd and Gutierrez (1990), arguing strongly that power and empowerment are not sufficiently stressed in the training of social workers, put forward contents and skills that practitioners and social work students need to learn and to practice in modern conditions. The social work and community psychology sources cited so far (and many others) make clear that empowerment is not only a macro task for communities and a mezzo task for groups of community leaders and activists, but also very much a micro task and objective for individual clients, even those who have not engaged in major community activity. We think that our case makes this conclusion clear in an empirical way.

The Community

This study was of a small, deprived community, part of, yet geographically isolated from, a small, generally prosperous town in the center of Israel (see Itzhaky, 1997, for more details). The neighborhood was included in the national Project Renewal for urban rehabilitation. This innovative program allocated major resources to a number of urban neighborhoods, emphasized physical and social rehabilitation, and mandated citizen involvement in the use of resources. (See Churchman, 1987; Itzhaky & York, 1998; Wandersman, Florin, Friedmann, & Meier, 1987, for descriptions and analyses of the project.) The population of the community consisted mainly of second- and third-generation Israelis whose parents came from Asia and Africa; they were joined, in almost equal numbers, in the late 1980s and the early 1990s by immigrants from the former Soviet Union.

The neighborhood was still below the socioeconomic level of the town, but the budgets that were channeled into it through the 1980s and most of the 1990s seem to have made a difference: Physically there were new public and private buildings; socially and economically the residents seemed to be more involved in their neighborhood and its development (this contention will be examined later); and the services offered (mainly welfare, education, and health) were more varied and better equipped (Itzhaky, 1997).

From 1990 until 1996, one senior community worker and two other community workers were

employed, the former part-time and the latter full-time. In addition, a number of social work students (mostly specializing in community organization) worked in the neighborhood as a year-long methods practicum. The community workers' objective, with the full agreement of resident activists and human services professionals in the community, was to foster planned, systematic, institutional, and social change to increase the neighborhood's autonomy, reduce its dependence on external services, and improve and enhance existing services. Three tangible goals were chosen as indicators of the achievement of the objective:

1. increase in the number of local residents who devoted time to community activities from five (the number in 1990) to at least one hundred
2. increase in activists' feeling of mastery, self-esteem, and empowerment, under the assumption that these measures will rise together with their participation in decision making and general neighborhood activity (see Itzhaky & Schwartz, 1998)
3. improvement of the neighborhood's image in the eyes of its residents and the other residents of the town, measured by objective indicators.

The Program

After an initial assessment of the community, its leadership, its strengths and weaknesses, and the services offered to the residents, a steering committee was set up, comprising representatives of City Hall, the local director of Project Renewal, senior community work practitioners, and representatives of the community residents. Workshops were organized for human services workers in interorganizational collaboration and resident participation. These workshops stressed collaboration among service workers and with community residents and emphasized the importance and effectiveness of resident participation. Extensive workshops were set up for resident activists and would-be activists, providing them with the knowledge, information, and skills appropriate to the projects in which they were to be involved. Subjects in the workshops included communication, group and committee dynamics, community organization, national and local government, budgeting, planning, and activist responsibility (see York & Havassy, 1993, 1997). From 1990 to 1996 many committees and task forces were set

up to deal with issues raised by residents, thus giving residents the opportunity for "hands on" communal activities: setting goals, planning strategies, and taking part in implementation. Any resident interested in any particular topic was invited to join in and begin to work. Because the community was relatively young, one of the first topics that came up was preschool education. A committee of interested parents, together with community human services workers, set up a parent-operated afternoon program for preschool children. A harder assignment, completed successfully, was to lobby for a prekindergarten (ages 0 to 3) center and to take part, with professionals, in planning the center's setup and eventual operation. Parents, mainly young mothers who had never before taken any role in community or public activity, made policy and decisions in concert with professional service workers.

A second committee was set up to deal with elementary school education (the neighborhood had its own elementary school), and, in full cooperation with the principal and teachers, the committee decided to turn the school into a "community school" (part of a national program). In effect this decision formalized the participation of parents in policy and decision making in the school, as well as in day-to-day activities, mainly after school.

A major achievement of the resident representative committee was to lobby for and to supervise the setting up of a program for "Build Your Home," a Ministry of Housing project through which land is set aside and the infrastructure prepared for individuals or groups to build their own homes. An interdisciplinary team was set up by the Ministry to examine the justification for the project and then to supervise its execution. Although most of the people building homes were residents of the neighborhood, a significant number of outsiders, from the town and beyond, joined them. The project added much prestige to the community and increased its demographic and socioeconomic heterogeneity.

Results

The number of resident activists increased by leaps and bounds. In 1990 only five residents were willing to represent the community on a steering committee. The number of activists increased with the new workshops, and by 1993 had reached 130. By the end of the program in 1996, as the

community workers phased themselves out, there were 190 resident activists. This instrumental goal was clearly achieved.

In 1990 the activists who completed the first series of resident workshops filled out questionnaires examining their self-esteem and feeling of mastery of their surroundings. In 1993 the residents who were active (most of the 1990 group and many new ones) filled out the questionnaires. The means for self-esteem and mastery increased between the two tests by a statistically significant margin (Table 1).

In 1992 the resident activists were asked to fill out questionnaires of three types of empowerment: (1) empowerment they felt personally in their family vis-a-vis their spouse and children, (2) empowerment they felt in contacts with service delivery personnel, and (3) general community empowerment. In 1997, a year after the program had ended, the activists filled out the questionnaires for a second time. Clear, statistically significant increases were evident, becoming larger as the empowerment became more personal and immediate (Table 2).

Finally, the success of "Build Your Home" project speaks most eloquently about the improved image of the community. Neither residents nor people from outside the community would have invested their own money (not to mention time and trouble) to build a new home in the neighborhood if they had no confidence in it or felt that its image was tarnished. The people building homes included the strongest residents socioeconomically (those who would traditionally flee the neighborhood first if they felt that it was stigmatized) and outsiders who had many alterna-

tives for their money. There also was evidence that family violence and unemployment declined in the community.

Discussion

Not all the changes mentioned earlier are necessarily direct results of the community organization program, but most of them seem to be related in some way to what the community organizers did over six years and what the other human service providers continue, to some extent, to do. The number of activists is obviously a direct result of the program. Whatever the motivation of the activists—egoistic, altruistic, or affiliational (Cnaan & Goldberg-Glen, 1991)—and whatever the results of their activism for themselves and others, the residents had not volunteered to be active in their community and its institutions in the past, but they did so in the framework of the program.

The significant increase in empowerment, self-esteem, and mastery measured among the activists over time need not stem directly from their community activism. As Rich, Edelstein, Hallman, and Wandersman (1995) showed, "intrapersonal empowerment" may be a prerequisite to participation—that is, the empowered individuals come forward to be active in their communities, or empowerment may be a product of their participation. We do not know if the newly recruited activists came from the already empowered residents or if their activity caused their empowerment (the comparisons in Tables 1 and 2 are by means, and not individual scores, because many of the people who took the second test were not available for the first test). In either case, we maintain that the program caused a favorable result. Either unempowered individuals increased their self-esteem, self-efficacy, and so forth, clearly a direct benefit of the program, or capable, competent residents came forward to give their services to the community, another direct benefit. We expect that both results occurred.

In any case, we wish to draw attention to the strength of the increased empowerment in the family and local service delivery, as well as self-esteem and feeling of mastery over their surroundings. Almost half (46 percent) of the 190 activists who completed the two final questionnaires were women. Moreover, few of them had had much schooling: 20 percent had not completed elementary school (eight classes), 58 percent had eight to 10 years of schooling, and only

Table 1

Community Activists (N = 128), Measures of Self-Esteem and Mastery of Their Surroundings: Means and Standard Deviations, 1990 and 1993

Year	Self-Esteem		Mastery	
	M	SD	M	SD
1990	2.04	.72	2.52	.65
1993	2.40	.79	3.00	.66
<i>F</i> (1, 190)	12.16**		28.10**	

***p* < .01.

Table 2

Community Activists (N = 128), Measures of Family, Service Delivery, and Community Empowerment: Means and Standard Deviations, 1992 and 1997

Year	Family Empowerment		Service Delivery Empowerment		Community Empowerment	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
1992	2.24	.71	3.49	.67	3.73	.49
1997	2.84	.66	3.78	.49	3.91	.43
<i>F</i> (1, 190)	47.78**		14.69**		9.96*	

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

22 percent had more than 10 years' schooling. Education was of special importance to the participants, because it would allow their children to achieve what they had been unable to achieve, and preschool education brought opportunities for the women to leave the house and go to work or resume their careers. Whether as an effect of community participation or as a trigger for the ablest to stand up and be active in their communities, community activists feel empowered, particularly in the intimate framework of their families and their immediate environment. Activism benefits the individual, even the most unempowered; consider the low self-esteem, mastery, and family empowerment scores at the first test of these mainly low-income people living in a stigmatized neighborhood. Macro social work is capable of achieving micro objectives.

External forces undoubtedly contributed to the successes of the program. The national Project Renewal, on which succeeding governments staked their reputations, brought human and financial resources and ensured support for the program by all the municipal hierarchy. The mass immigration from the former Soviet Union from 1989 onward brought new faces and new approaches to the neighborhood and contributed positively to an awakening among the veteran residents. It must be pointed out, however, that Project Renewal and large-scale Russian immigration happened throughout Israel at that time, but the results in this community were exceptional. We believe that the community work allowed the potential of the national initiative and the demographic changes to be realized fully.

Are these results generalizable to other communities? We believe that they are. The principles,

strategies, and methods have been used in community organization and community development for several years, usually with success. We used workshops more widely than usual, both for the human services workers and the activists, and we aimed for a more multidimensional empowerment than is normally targeted. We believe that personal and family development are no less important than group and community development. Thus, our measures of empowerment included scales that examine personal as well as communal skills and ability. Finally, we included objective ways of measuring that success. These are not innovations that depended specifically on the type of community, its cultural and social context, or the residents. We believe that these things can be done anywhere.

The effects that we have interpreted as signs of improvement in the image and self-image of the community—people building their homes there and a reduction in family violence and unemployment—may result from national or local trends and be unrelated to the program, although we doubt it. All of these subjects were on the agenda of the social workers, and the building project was strongly contended for by the residents, with the advocacy, direction, and help of the community workers. In any case, we detected no signs of a deepening of the community's stigmatized image.

Conclusion

Community organization and participation in community building programs and projects can show clear, measurable, and demonstrable results, both at the macro level of the community ("substantive community empowerment" as defined by Rich et al., 1995) and at the micro level of individual

activists. These results can be felt by all residents, the active and the inactive alike, by service workers in the community and beyond, and by the political leadership in City Hall. They should make community action sustainable after the termination of intensive professional community organization and allow the "improved" community to continue to develop.

This means that community organization (or development or building or whatever name or form is preferred) is still a viable and important means for social workers and other human services providers to achieve short- and long-term concrete results at macro, mezzo, and micro levels, at a comparatively low cost. We believe that Weil (1996) and Johnson (1998) are right in detecting a "revitalization" of community practice. However, we have to present clearly measurable results and publish them in our professional journals. ■

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