



Rural Virginia Prosperity Commission

Briefing Paper

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Mobilizing People in Communities

Although rural communities face problems that seem overwhelming, things can change if people work together on solutions. The first step to working together for change is to realize that the future of a community is under the control of people. This briefing paper discusses what social scientists and community developers have learned about mobilizing people to work together to solve problems and improve the quality of community life.

Community development has been formally practiced and critiqued for about 40 years. During that time, dependable *general* answers about how communities solve their problems have emerged. Specific answers vary from each situation to the next.

What We Know

Community development scholars see two dimensions to development: *process* and *task*. *Process* refers to strengthening community members' interactions and helping them find positive ways to work together. The task dimension helps community members to work through a particular, definable problem so that they can see tangible results and achieve a particular goal. These two dimensions are interrelated because good process makes a task easier to complete, while success in completing a task tends to make people feel that others are trustworthy and helpful.

Both dimensions can be incorporated into a five-step plan that community members can initiate themselves, but often an outside facilitator or community development professional is helpful.

These steps are

1. Community members come together to identify the needs of the community systematically.
2. This group identifies prominent elements of community structure, such as community norms, power structures, divisions, resources, and potential leaders.
3. Specific tasks or projects are described and the group begins to mobilize community-wide cooperation for change.
4. The roles of and contributions from community organizations are re-enforced. Only if absolutely necessary, a new organization or formal group is created to work on the problems identified.
5. The task is accomplished, and often better community organization and stronger community relationships result.

While each step is integral to strengthening community relationships, steps one and two enable the residents and the community developer to lay the groundwork for successfully accomplishing any task. A community developer's most critical initial contribution is to help the community understand and prioritize basic needs. If this step is not completed, projects generally do not succeed because the wrong work is done in the wrong way. A community that needs better physical or economic infrastructure needs very different plans and resources than a community that wants to improve educational services.

After priorities are set, a developer can then bring expertise in developing realistic goals and time-lines,

coordinating outside technical assistance, and ensuring that all local stakeholders are involved. Most importantly, a community developer works to make sure that the skills of community members such as grant writing, cost-benefit accounting, or project planning, are nurtured so that continuing dependence on outside intervention is avoided. In other words, a community developer's job is to work himself or herself out of a job in that community.

Community development projects from the onset must incorporate substantial community involvement. Without step three, relationships within the community tend to degenerate. Local residents start to rely on outside experts (or the federal or state government) instead of one another for solutions to community problems. Even in cases where an outside agency prompted the development activity (for example, state guidelines for increasing school standards), local residents must support the activity for long-term success to be realized.

Mobilization of community-wide support requires that community members not only decide how to implement the task but they also participate in actually accomplishing the task. Progress on step three leads to step four in which existing community groups are utilized as much as possible. Often, before these groups are effective, they may need training or increased resources. The increased sense of community from training together strengthens community relationships and the capacity of the community to solve future problems.

What Is Being Done?

In most successful programs, community development professionals live and work within a

community. They have formal employment ties to the community and to some organization external to the community, like cooperative extension. The external tie provides them with authority and a mandate, helps keep them focused, and provides access to technical assistance resources. Success in such programs is as much the result of relationships between the developer, the community, and the larger support organization, as it is the unique talents of the development professional.

Examples include the very successful University of Wisconsin Extension, Community, Natural Resource and Economic Development (CNRED) program. Extension agents in CNRED have backgrounds in business administration, economic development, natural resource management, economics, sociology, and public administration, among others. All have at least a Masters degree in their field. They have university faculty status—including tenure. They can be removed from a county where conflict occurs, but they are protected from dismissal from the system if they have acted professionally. Thus, they can tackle contentious or unpopular issues.

A Virginia example is the initiative of Carroll County School Division with Virginia Cooperative Extension. At the expense of Carroll County, an Extension agent was hired whose responsibility is to develop community projects that will involve the schools more with the community. The goal of this project is to provide better, more relevant education. Carroll County leadership has expressed an interest in making a similar arrangement for another position whose explicit responsibility is economic development.

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