

10 Basic Steps in Community Organizing*

Community organizing or CO refers to the framework and methodology used by social development workers in empowering people's organizations as a way of addressing poverty and social inequality. CO may be defined as a social development approach that aims to transform the powerless and voiceless poor into a dynamic, participatory and politically responsive community.

Another way of defining CO is that it is a participatory, systematic and sustained process of building people's organizations by enhancing the capabilities and resources of the people for the resolution of their issues and concerns

(1994 National Rural Community Organizing Conference, Philippines).

In 1985, a national workshop among urban and rural CO practitioners was held in Manila, Philippines to discuss an assessment of community organizing praxis over the past several years, and its prospect in the years to come. Though called by other names or sometimes not strictly followed, there was a consensus among participants that the following set of activities constitute the steps necessary in organizing communities for empowerment.

Organizing Indigenous Communities in Tharparkar

In Pakistan, indigenous peoples are severely disadvantaged. They are often forced to live on the least productive terrain, denied rights to land, forests and other natural resources that they have managed sustainably since time immemorial, and are marginalized by modern society.

The worsening condition of indigenous communities of Tharparkar led the Society for the Conservation and Protection of Environment (SCOPE) to organize efforts to secure the land rights of communities. SCOPE undertook different techniques to meet the actual objectives of land rights advocacy movement in Tharparkar:

- Face to face meetings: After identification of some leaders of the Kolhi community, SCOPE conducted meetings with them and interviewed in detail for the collection of ideas for the betterment of the community and discussed their right over the land.
- Organizing satsangs: It was difficult to gather the community in big public seminars, because they felt threatened and isolated. Using traditional knowledge by organizing their satsangs (i.e., celebrating religious days and songs at nighttime), SCOPE was able to mobilize males, females and children to gather at religious places. Different sessions on self esteem, rights, and alternative livelihood options such as cooperatives and natural resources management were arranged. Satsang was the only way to reach these people as they are religious.
- Organizing cooperatives: The Kolhi community was isolated by Muslims and other Hindus communities as untouchables. Members of the community were treated as slaves; their women and children had no social security. Therefore, SCOPE mobilized 2,000 like-minded community activists throughout

80 villages to organize cooperatives. All members enjoyed equal rights. During the meetings the land issues of Kolhis were discussed in detail.

- Capacity building: SCOPE also focused on the capacity building of the Kolhi community in social mobilization, livestock management and skills for alternative livelihoods. During the trainings, land and human rights case studies of different countries and land reforms movements were discussed with the Kolhi communities for their self development.
- Establish rapport with "powerful" people in the community. Previous land rights movements wherein farmers were mobilized against powerful landlords bred enmity between the poor and rich. If a single poor being crushed by any landlord, the others are threatened for years. It is important to maintain respectful relations even if you are adversaries. In this way, the Kolhi and landlords came to know better each others' issues.
- Organizing Kolhi conferences: To attract the attention of the government, media, intellectuals, donors, communities, and human rights activists and NGOs, SCOPE organized two Kolhi conferences at District level and one during the World Social Forum in Pakistan.

SCOPE interventions helped the Kolhi community to establish their own organizations for their social security and social welfare. The practice brought visible changes among the behavior of Kolhi community and they started to send their children to schools. The women in the community started to feel more empowered, in terms of interacting with Muslim and Hindu communities and have developed skills in embroidery and other technical skills. The Kolhi community has also begun to receive assistance in legal processes particularly for their land rights.

Source: Abdul Waheed Jamali, Coordinator, Monitoring and Evaluation, Society for Conservation and Protection of Environment (SCOPE)

* Excerpted from "Community Organizing for Empowerment: Practice and Theory from the Philippine Experience", by Meynardo Mendoza, in *TIPS: Tools, Insights and Practices on Strengthening RPOs in Asia*, published by ANGOC, CIRDAP and IFAD, 2007)

Step 1 – Integration

In this process the organizer immerses herself/himself with the local community and undergoes the same experiences of local people so as to build mutual respect, trust and cooperation. This can be done in many ways such as: participation in direct production activities, house visitations, congregating and conversing with the people in communal areas and attending social functions like birthdays, weddings, feasts, wakes, etc.

Step 2 – Social Investigation (SI) or Community Study

This is the process of systematically learning and analyzing the various structures and forces in the community as well as the problems and issues that need immediate or long-term solutions. The organizer determines the community's interests and attitudes to the issues, identifies potential leaders and comes up with a tentative approach to organizing. SI methods may include interviews or dialogues with people, personal observations of the organizer, examination and review of secondary data or a participatory approach such as focus group discussions (FGD) or participatory research. SI is a continuous, on-going process.

Step 3 – Issue Identification and Analysis

This is the process of defining, analyzing and ranking community problems according to their importance, the urgency of solving them, the number of people affected and the probability of resolving them through community mobilization. It aims to identify the common felt needs (not perceived needs of the community). These issues or needs are often addressed through self-help or externally-assisted socio-economic projects either because people tend to shun confrontation with authorities through negotiations and/or pressure tactics, or people's traditional concept of community action is through socio-economic projects.

Step 4 – Core Group Formation

This means involving the more advanced local leaders who have been spotted by the organizer during the integration process. They are then constituted as the core group. They may be informal or temporary leaders, i.e., until a formal set of leaders are elected or chosen by a community. This process is necessary for the next stages of organizing – mobilization and organization building. Good community leaders are usually those who belong to the poorer sections of the community; are well-respected and influential members of the community; possess a critical perspective; are desirous of change and are willing to work for change; value collective leadership and democratic participation;

can communicate effectively and can find time to perform the necessary tasks.

Step 5 – Ground Work and Community Meeting

Groundwork means to motivate people on a one-on-one basis or through informal group discussions towards collective action, sometimes with the aid of a core group.

Legal Empowerment of Communities from the Grassroots Level Upwards

The Sarvodaya Legal Services Movement (SLSM) is the legal arm of the Sarvodaya Movement in Sri Lanka. Sarvodaya operates in more than 15,000 villages, offering a holistic approach to grassroots communities; the SLSM offers a legal empowerment process through awareness building, social support, legal advice, representation and counselling, mediation of conflicts at the village level, and nationwide advocacy for legal reforms. Targeted populations are those disadvantaged by poverty, lack of legal knowledge, prejudice and inequities.

At the community level, many do not have access to justice, nor a proper forum to reach consensus on community problems and disputes. But given that litigation costs, consumes time and affects the poor adversely, there is real need for legal empowerment. To address these, the SLSM has established paralegal groups at the village level, which also act as lobby advocacy groups, mediators and watchdogs to resolve village conflicts through consensus. Commonly known as Village Legal Services Committees (VLSC), they operate in all parts of Sri Lanka.

SLSM uses three main tools to promote legal services in the villages and make villagers aware of the program, which complement each other: through the composition of the VLSC, with leaders of the village societies and the head man being the members, informing their respective groups; through the initial legal clinics where legal advice is provided on the spot to the villagers; and through awareness trainings offered for the whole village.

- By Shevon Goooneratne, Director, Sarvodaya Legal Services Movement

It aims to bring about the emotional, mental and physical energies of the people and raise them to the level that they are willing to take collective action. After this is achieved, a community meeting is held to arrive at an agreement on the necessary actions and to delineate tasks to be undertaken to resolve the issue or problem. In some cases, it is the core group who handles the meeting, with the organizer staying in the background.

Step 6 – Role Playing

This is a simulation practice for the community members who are tasked to negotiate with persons or authority or even the adversary. In this session, the organizer envisions every scenario that may take place during “confrontation” or “dialogue” between the community and the “target”. It aims to prepare the leaders for the actual process of negotiation and anticipates possible outcomes to ensure victory for the community. This process is usually done in issue-based organizing.

Step 7 – Mobilization or Action

This is the high point of the organizing process. Action may mean engaging in a dialogue or protest under issue-based organizing, starting a livelihood project or a cooperative under project-based organizing. Mobilization or action is the community’s expression of power while confronting the powerful.

Step 8 – Evaluation and/or Reflection

This is an activity conducted after every action or mobilization to extract lessons learned on how to improve future mobilizations, and constitutes a vital part in the training of the core group and the community. The people take note of what has been and what has not been accomplished, and what remains to be done. It is also an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the community’s mobilization. It can also be a self-assessment of all the participants.

Step 9 – Formalization of the Community-Based Organization

Lessons from the Philippine experience shows that forming the people’s organization is best done after the community undergoes a mobilization or action phase and has gone through an evaluation or reflection process. Some principles in setting up the organization are: ensure the maximum number of membership; practice a collective or shared leadership; and emphasize simplicity of structure.

Step 10 – Phase Out

Because CO is an enabling process, there comes a time when the organizer becomes dispensable and the People’s Organizations (POs) take over. When the indicators for success set by the NGO have been significantly met, e.g. high levels of socio-political awareness, sustained membership participation, a vibrant pool of trained community leaders, clear plans and goals set by the community, etc., the organizing process may be turned over. The turn over includes the transfer of community organizing roles and responsibilities as well as documents. However, this does not necessarily mean a complete pull out from the community as the NGO may be able to assist the PO in a new role, such as helping community organizations form groups or federations or engage in national advocacies. ■