

Community Organizing for Empowerment: Practice and Theory from the Philippine Experience

BRIEF HISTORY OF CO IN THE PHILIPPINES

Community organizing or CO refers to the framework and methodology used by social development workers in the Philippines in empowering peoples 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).

CO had its roots in the radicalism and turmoil of the late 1960's and 1970's in the Philippines. While there was a genuine desire especially among young people to immerse in and to serve the poor communities, there was a dearth of systematic approaches to working

with poor communities other than traditional dole-outs and charity on the one hand, and political agitation and radical action on the other. CO traces its roots to the arrival of Rev. Herb White, an American Protestant pastor, who introduced Alinsky's methodology and organized the Philippine Ecumenical Center for Community Organizing (or PECCO). Its initial efforts were devoted to organizing the urban poor in Manila's slums. Its success was replicated in many urban and rural areas and in the birth of many NGOs doing CO work. An important element in CO came with the entry of the radical and innovative ideas of Paolo Freire (*see box on next page*). Freire's approach was an ideal complement to that of Alinsky's.

However, PECCO was soon to be divided between two tendencies – those who believed that organizing people's organizations was an end in itself, and those who believed that organizing work in communities should be coupled with ideology and should lead to political action at the national level. It was reflective of the dilemma that social

development workers faced during the Martial Law era. CO as an approach was used by many NGOs until the late 1980s and early 1990s when social development work underwent a paradigm shift and its thrust turned towards advocacy and collaboration vis-a-vis the state and with more technical expertise expected from NGOs.

WHAT DOES CO HOPE TO ACHIEVE?

1. Build organizations of the poor
2. Raise critical, creative and collective consciousness
3. Prepare people's organizations for coalition advocacy work
4. Overcome gender, class and race biases
5. Work for the attainment of basic services and infrastructure
6. Improve resource tenure
7. Build and strengthen economic self-reliance
8. Develop agriculture and protect the environment
9. Build and strengthen democratic participation and governance

DIFFERENT ENTRY POINTS FOR ORGANIZING POOR COMMUNITIES

1. *Issue-based approach* – This approach revolves around issues and problems that are felt by a significant number of people in the community, such as the lack of basic services like health or infrastructure,

Two streams of CO praxis

Saul Alinsky – American community and labor organizer in the Chicago area. His long experience and methodology in organizing the marginalized led to what became known as the “conflict-confrontation” type of organizing or the “issue-based” approach. Alinsky stresses community or participative action towards social transformation.

Paulo Freire – Brazilian educator and social activist who worked with illiterate peasants in Recife and urban poor dwellers in Rio de Janeiro. His seminal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, inspired a generation of social activists in the 1970s and 1980s. For Freire, traditional education perpetuates oppression. Instead, Freire proposes a process of dialogue which focuses attention to the student and in the process empowers the people. Liberating education serves to empower people through the process of dialogue which leads to what is called conscientization. Education has a political purpose and that is to liberate the masses from oppressive structures.

The synthesis of both schools led to two important features of community organizing. One is the “action-reflection-action” cycle which stresses the importance of reflection after every action and action as a result of serious reflection. The second is to educate or conscientize the people on the root causes of local or community problems. □

tenurial rights or impending threats to the environment and livelihoods. Many organizers believe that the issue selected should have a high probability of success. This is the “conflict confrontation approach” or the Alinsky approach to community organizing. This approach is seen as effective in helping the poor

overcome their feeling of inferiority and helplessness, as it easily agitates/motivates people towards community action. However, there is a tendency that the community becomes lax once the issue is resolved.

2. *Project-based approach* – This approach centers around the introduction of socio-economic projects – income generating projects, enterprise development, cooperative formation, health care, etc. – that were identified either by the organizer after a study of the felt needs of the community or pre-packaged by the funding source based on its perceived needs of the community. While much of the funds may come from external sources, organizers using this approach recommend that as much as possible, internal resources are also mobilized in order to develop among the people a sense of pride and ownership. This approach appears to be easier than the issue-based approach because it is not adversarial and the people easily see the benefits that will accrue them. However, communities organized using this approach tends to be averse towards more radical forms of collective action.

THE ROLES OF THE COMMUNITY ORGANIZER (CO)

1. *Facilitator* – provides a process that will help the community discuss their situation, identify issues or problems,

solutions or plans of action and implement them.

2. *Animator* – assists the community to discover and use its innate potentials for creative and constructive team work; stimulates people to think critically and motivate them for action.
3. *Enabler* – initiates or helps release the creative initiatives of the people; must ensure that CO principles are observed i.e., that decisions are not imposed on them and that dependency is reduced through collective action and social education.

10 BASIC STEPS IN COMMUNITY ORGANIZING

In 1985, a national workshop among urban and rural CO practitioners was held in Manila 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 consensus among the participants that the following set of activities constitute the steps necessary in organizing communities for empowerment.

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. In Asia, kinship is based not only on blood but also by ritual relations. By being a sponsor or witness to an occasion or ritual like marriage and baptism, the organizer gains acceptance by the community. Through integration, the organizer unlearns some of his/her own class biases, overcomes his/her limitations, and becomes more understanding and tolerant of others.

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 (or 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 the 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 the core group. 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 of 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; 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 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.

CRITICAL ISSUES / DILEMMAS IN CO

1. *The balance between local and national issues.* While CO revolves around concrete local issues, they are also rooted in larger national structures or problems. While the national issues provide the perspective, local issues provide the concrete example. The organizer should be able to distinguish the balance between the need for local action with that of consciousness-raising to address larger national issues.
2. *Economic projects as entry point for CO.* Ideally, socio-economic projects should be done only after the people's organization has been established. Some, however, argue that socio-economic projects could serve as an entry point. Whatever the case may be, economic projects must be undertaken within the context of supporting or sustaining the community's goals, elevating the awareness and consciousness of the people and inculcating the values that the organizing process wishes to achieve.

3. *Sustaining Peoples Organizations (POs).* Although POs undergo highs and lows, what is important is that the PO is viewed by the people as integral to their development. Other prerequisites would be continuing education and training programs, clear organizational structure and rules, and alliances with other people's organizations.
4. *Phase Out / Pull Out.* Even after the organizing process, the relationship between the NGO and the PO should not end but should shift to other roles, such as on monitoring, consultation and other follow-up activities. □

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