

# Essay 7

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## Civic Driven Change and Developmental Democracy

'Too often transformation has come to be seen as a way of compensating previously disadvantaged people rather than creating opportunities for all citizens to contribute their talents, experience, and skills to the process of developing our country. Development can't be done "to" people. People have to become the agents of their own development.'

*Mamphela Ramphela, 2008*

### Summary: The public work and workers of developmental democracy

Mamphela Ramphela, a former leader of the Black Consciousness Movement, recently a vice president of the World Bank, calls for what can be termed civic-driven change in her new book 'Laying Ghosts to Rest: Dilemmas of the Transformation in South Africa'. The book is rich with insights about what it will take to develop capacities of all South Africans to work together. While recognizing the importance of leadership and democratic institutions, it is mainly an argument for bottom-up development that taps the energy and develops the capacities of ordinary people to be 'agents of their own development'. When I worked as a field secretary for his organization in the 1960s, I often heard such views from Martin Luther King, describing 'the unlettered men and women' as 'the real heroes' of the freedom movement.

Though the implications of this perspective for understanding democracy and citizenship need to be drawn out, I am convinced that Ramphela's stress on people becoming the agents of their own development implies a radical shift of meanings from 'representative democracy' and 'participatory democracy' to 'developmental democracy'. This entails a shift from the citizen as a rights-bearing individual whose highest act is voting

and demanding government be held accountable, or a citizen who deliberates and participates in civil society, to the citizen as the co-creator of a democratic society and government as catalyst and enabler of civic action.

Representative democracy, which emphasises rights-based citizenship and free and fair elections, is an enormous achievement. Such democracy has been deepened through the struggle for 'the right to rights', in the excellent phrase that co-writers Evelina aDagnino borrows from Hannah Arendt as well as through international standards and codes of rights which Nilda Bullain describes. But with its focus on fair distribution of resources - 'who gets what', in the language of mainstream political science - representative democracy and the language of rights alone fuels a consumer culture in which the collaborative 'we' disappears and an omnivorous 'me' takes center stage. In response, participatory democracy has arisen in recent decades, with a stress on rebuilding community, providing venues for citizen voice, and regenerating concern for the common good. Jonathan Sacks, chief rabbi of Britain's United Hebrew Congregations, gives wise expression to this view in 'The Politics of Hope'. Sacks contrasts the hopeless circumstances of many poor today with his family's background, economically impoverished but rich in cultural and relational resources. He calls for renewal of community. 'Every age has its characteristic preoccupations', he writes. Since the Enlightenment, intellectuals have been concerned to create space for individuals 'to be themselves' against the weight of constricting tradition or totalitarian systems. '[Today] it would be fairer to say that we stand in the opposite situation. In today's liberal democracies, it is not that we are too much together but that we are too much alone and seek to learn again how to connect with others'.<sup>1</sup> Ramphela echoes such views in the South African context, calling for a 'neo-republican' conception of citizenship that involves sacrificing self-interests for the common good.<sup>2</sup>

In contrast, public work - work by the public, in public, for the public - harnesses self-interests to public ends. Representative democracy focuses on structures.

2 Participatory democracy focuses on processes. Developmental democracy focuses on the work of growing capacities for self-directed collective action across differences for problem solving and the creation of individual and common goods. It depends on citizen health workers, teachers, clergy, homemakers, cab drivers, trade unionists, business owners, civil servants, and others who recognise the civic potentials of their fellow citizens and are themselves liberated by work with larger meaning and the increase in civic energies such work generates. It conceives of democracy as a society, promoting action across 'state', 'civil society', and 'markets'. It points toward institutional and cultural change.

Understanding citizenship as public work illuminates collaborative work traditions in every society. It draws from religious and social thought, including Catholic social teachings, feminism, Jewish philosophy, and Marxism. For all their differences these traditions have asserted the dignity and social meaning of work. This lens also highlights how much the public dimensions of work are eroding in a world of invisible homemaking, undocumented workers, human trafficking, child labour, and dependency-creating expert systems which define people as deficient and needy. To turn this around requires 'organizing', civic action with a strong focus on popular education to develop skills and habits of civic agency. These ideas are expressed in a chart comparing three models of democracy, which build on each other and also produce hybrid forms.

## The re-emergence of agency

Civic-driven change points to a shift to a bottom-up development paradigm in which people are agents of their own development, contrasted with top-down development in which people are 'helped' or 'saved' by others, often with the best of progressive and redistributive intentions. The idea is elaborated in the collection of essays, 'Culture and Public Action', by scholars of development, drawing on UN Development Programme and World Bank experiences. As the editors, Vijayendra Rao and Michael Walton, put it:

'Although there are disagreements stemming from different paradigms (...) there is broad agreement that [we need] a shift from equality of opportunity to 'equality of agency' (...) creating an enabling environment to provide the poor with the tools, and the voice, to navigate their way out of poverty.'<sup>3</sup>

Agency can be defined as the navigational capacities to negotiate and transform the world around us, which is understood to be fluid and open. As Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mishe have observed in their detailed treatment, 'What Is Agency?', through most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, attention to agency 'has been overshadowed by an emphasis upon clear and explicit rules of conduct, concepts that permit relatively little scope for the exercise of situationally based judgment'.<sup>4</sup>

Table 1. Models of Democracy

	Representative democracy	Participatory democracy	Developmental democracy
Who is the citizen?	Voter, consumer, rights-bearing individual	Community member	Co-creator - solving problems, co-creating public goods
What are the main tasks?	Fairly distributing rights and services	Strengthening social capital, communicating	Developing civic agency
What is the method?	Mobilizing	Deliberating	Organizing
What is government's role? Tag line	Delivering the goods 'for the people'	Promoting community and participation 'of the people'	Catalyst, resource, convener 'by the people'
Who is the government worker?	Service provider	Facilitator	Civic partner, organizer, catalyst
How is self-interest understood?	In consumer terms	Put aside for the common good	Integrated and expanded with civic purposes through work
What is power?	Power over	Power with	Power to

Though it goes against the trends of modern institutions, agency can be understood as a basic ‘driver’ of human behaviour. Richard M. Ryan and Edward L. Deci, writing in the *American Psychologist*, summarized a considerable body of research which showed that while social-contextual conditions dramatically facilitate or forestall the natural tendencies toward self-motivation, such self-direction is a basic tendency across cultures. ‘Whether people stand behind a behavior out of their interests and values or do it for reasons external to the self, is a matter of significance in every culture and represents a basic dimension by which people make sense of their own and others’ behavior’.<sup>5</sup>

Civic agency adds a collective action dimension. It is the capacity not only to direct one’s life and shape one’s environment but also to collaborate with others across differences to address common challenges and to make a common world. Circumscribed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, civic agency was kept alive in community-organizing and popular education movements in the Third World, as well as in parts of Europe and the United States.

In the early years of the new century, civic agency is re-emerging in many settings, the results of the spread of popular education methods and organizing, and also new structural changes like the global telecommunications revolution. For instance, it has surfaced in the U.S. presidential election in the campaign of Barack Obama, who has translated the civic agency themes that he learned as a community organizer in Chicago into larger political terms. ‘I’m asking you not only to believe in my ability to make change; I’m asking you to believe in yours’, reads his web site. The concept is expressed in campaign slogans such as ‘yes we can’, and ‘we are the ones we’ve been waiting for’, drawn from a song of the freedom movement of the 1960s. The organizing mindset which promotes agency has found expression in parts of the campaign organization. As Tim Dickinson, a reporter for *Rolling Stone* magazine, put it in a review of the field operation, ‘[The] goal is not to put supporters to work but to enable them to put themselves to work, without having to depend on the campaign for constant guidance’. ‘We decided that we didn’t want to train volunteers’, said [campaign field director Temo] Figueros. ‘We wanted to train *organizers* - folks who can fend for themselves’. In the Obama campaign local participants have far more freedom to innovate and organize than is usual in election efforts, in which messages and action scripts are typically handed down from on high. Obama has also started to articulate what a focus on civic agency might mean in policy terms. Thus, his speech on 23 May 2008 in Miami challenged the Bush foreign policy doctrine toward the Americas. Obama said that ‘It is not enough to come to the defense of freedom with epic and intermittent efforts when it is threatened at moments that appear critical. Every moment is critical for the defense of freedom’. He sketched a vision for a new paradigm which resembles that of Ramphel. ‘After decades pressing for top-down reform, we need an agenda that advances democracy,

security, and opportunity from the bottom up’ An organizing perspective also helps to illuminate ‘what’s gone wrong’ in civic life.

### Technocratic creep

Intellectuals from different traditions have described how humans develop and express agency through ‘work’, understood as the activity of transforming the world around us and ourselves in the process. They have also detailed obstacles. Karl Marx denounced modern factory life in which ‘the individual characteristics of workers are obliterated’ and machines themselves ‘appear as a world for themselves quite independent of and divorced from the individuals’. The modern women’s movement helped to bring out of the shadows the hidden labour, injustices, and generative qualities of women’s work.

In a similar vein, in his major statement ‘On Human Labor’, which impacted workers from Poland to Latin America, the late Pope John Paul II argued that work most importantly is ‘subjective’; that is, work’s most important outcome is not ‘objective’ products but rather how well work serves human development. John Paul described this development as three-dimensional: how much work develops human capacities; how much work helps people forge social solidarity with others; and how much work provides opportunities for people to add through co-creative effort to the common store of their societies and humanity as a whole. John Paul also detailed many obstacles to such development.

Recent studies, such as Robert Putnam’s ‘Bowling Alone’, have shown the erosion of many forms of civic life in the U.S., and critics have proposed a variety of explanations, from the influence of television to the rise of consumer culture and growing inequalities. All have merit. But a work-centred civic-agency view adds other dimensions. It shows how technocracy, control by outside experts, has eroded people’s civic development as professionals have lost respect for local knowledge and people’s capacities.

Technocracy is widespread in a ‘service economy’. To use the analysis of the Asset Based Community Development Institute (where Michelle Obama has long been a faculty member), the dominant service economy trains professionals to look at people and poor communities in terms of their deficiencies, not their capacities. This generates a culture of rescue. As a result, institutions that once were civic meeting grounds became providers of services. Even such deeply rooted popular institutions as religious congregations have suffered from this pattern. As community organizers often quip, ministers are taught to see everyone as ‘walking wounded’ in need of pastoral care. The South African public intellectual, Xolela Mangcu, writing out of the Black Consciousness Movement tradition, calls all this ‘technocratic creep’.

In the U.S., technocratic creep has been at work for many decades and higher education bears a significant share of the responsibility. Higher education educates pro-

professionals to be mobile individualists, detached from the communities in which they work and the cultures from which they come, who see people in terms of their deficiencies. The historian Thomas Bender calls this shift over the last fifty years in the U.S. the change from 'civic professionalism' to 'disciplinary professionalism'. Technocracy also dominates in African, Latin American, or Asian universities with global aspirations.

Technocratic creep has refashioned professional education to be narrowly disciplinary. For instance, in seminaries and divinity schools, according to Mary Fulkerson (a professor at Duke Divinity School who studies theological education in the U.S. and Europe), the 'practice courses' typically pertain to matters internal to the life of the congregation, such as preaching, counseling, and church organization. Teaching skills and habits, needed to engage with places where congregations are located, is slighted. Philomena Mwaura tells me that the pattern is similar across Africa.

Similarly, the pattern that Joe Nathan (director of the Center for School Change at the Humphrey Institute) observes about U.S. teacher education applies to South Africa. Teacher education curricula typically include little or nothing on learning to work collaboratively with parents and other stakeholders, who have often far different backgrounds and interests. When such learning is absent, graduates come to understand themselves as detached experts providing service for people, not as citizens working with fellow citizens on public problems.

In a recent issue of *Change* magazine, Parker Palmer described the weak sense of civic agency and the posture of 'value-free' practice that result from student experiences in U.S. higher education. 'The hidden curriculum of our culture portrays institutions as powers other than us, over which we have marginal control at best'. Palmer continues,

'We turn our graduates loose on the world as people who know but do not recognize that our justice system often fails the poor... that practical politics is more about manipulating public opinion than discerning the will of the people... that science and technology are not neutral.'<sup>6</sup>

The power dynamics of technocracy are disguised by the fact that dominating experts are full of egalitarian and inclusive intentions to 'help'. A 1989 lecture at the University of Illinois by Donna Shalala (then chancellor of the University of Wisconsin, soon to be Secretary of Health and Human Services in the Clinton administration) illustrated this point. Shalala made an impassioned plea for public service and social justice, for struggles against racism and sexism, for environmentalism and peace. She called for public universities to engage the world. Her good intentions were palpable - and tied explicitly to technocracy. For her, 'the ideal [is] a disinterested technocratic elite' fired by the moral mission of 'society's best and brightest in service to its most needy'. The imperative was 'delivering the miracles of social sci-

ence' to fix society's problems 'just as doctors cured juvenile rickets in the past'.

However suffused with good intentions, the rescue approach is the opposite of an agency approach - for both professionals and nonprofessionals. Most people have little to do except to give thanks - or to complain if they don't like the cure - while professionals are burdened with the total responsibility. Technocratic professionalism undermines the confidence of people without credentials, degrees and university training, while devaluing their talents and capacities. It shapes a citizenry who are needy clients, in Rajesh Tandon's terms, not co-producers. Technocracy calcifies settings which once served as sources of civic learning, turning not only schools, but also congregations, unions, nonprofits, and government agencies into service delivery operations. This dynamic renders civic life as off-hours activities in 'civil society' like 'volunteering' or 'community service', seen as oases of civic ideals and decency in a degraded world.

As civic muscle weakened, progressive politics became 'mass politics' that emphasized redistributive justice, rights, and a consumer view of the citizen. Mass politics is based on what Steve Fraser in 'Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order' called the concept of 'a new man - existentially mobile, more oriented to consumption than production, familiar with the impersonal rights and responsibilities of industrial due process'. This politics 'was inconceivable apart from a political elite in command of the state, committed to a program of enlarged government spending, financial reform, and redistributive taxation, presiding over a reconstituted coalition in the realm of mass politics'.<sup>7</sup>

Mass politics crystallized in the mobilizing approaches to citizen action and elections that emerged in the U.S. in the 1970s. Mobilizing includes the door-to-door canvassing (going from house to house to raise money and get petition signatures for an issue), direct mail fundraising and, recently, internet and other electronic mobilizations. All are based on a formula: find an enemy to demonize, stir up emotion with inflammatory language, create a 'script' that defines the issue as good versus evil and shuts down critical thought. Mobilizing, implicitly or explicitly, conveys the idea that elites will save the victims. Mobilizing approaches more subtly shape professional practices and identities in many ways. This is because higher education generally prepares students to be mobile individualists, detached from the communities in which they work and the cultures from which they come. They see people in terms of their deficiencies, not capacities and they learn few skills of collaborative work in which experts are 'on tap not on top'. Professionals characteristically learn to 'mobilize'. They seek to activate groups around goals and objectives they have determined in advance.

Such approaches fail to address complex problems that require work across lines of difference, public judgment, and imaginative collective action. These problems especially plague the Third World, from organized crime

syndicates to sectarian violence and global warming, from trafficking in women to pandemics and poverty. Mobilizing approaches leave governance and economic systems unchanged - or, even worse, they foster cultures of guilt and rescue among professionals. They do not develop agency.

A great challenge of our time is to develop a civic agency politics as an alternative to technocratic politics, a politics in which people are not empowered by leaders but rather empower themselves, developing skills and habits of collaborative action, changing institutions and systems to make them more supportive of civic agency.

Stories of such politics are beginning to appear in many settings. These stories illustrate how professionals' self-interests are not inevitably narrow or static. Contrary to the arguments of some critics, professionals have multiple interests, not simply increasing their 'market share' of social life. Organizing liberates both professionals and amateurs.

Organizing, popular education and liberation through public work

'The world is deluged with panaceas, formulas, proposed laws, machineries, ways out, and myriads of solutions. It is significant and tragic that almost every one of these proposed plans and alleged solutions deals with the structure of society, but none concerns the substance - the people. This, despite the eternal truth of the democratic faith that the solution always lies with the people.'<sup>8</sup>

In his 1946 book, 'Reveille for Radicals', Saul Alinsky - sometimes called the father of modern community organizing - was passionately restating the basic organizing and popular education tradition and its animating faith. Alinsky's ideas were rooted in the great organizing and civic efforts of the Great Depression and the Second World War, especially those activists and public intellectuals who liked 'popular front' organizing but didn't like Soviet-style Marxism. Though his experiences were in the U.S., they were also part of the global 'people's fronts' that gave birth to national liberation and independence movements across the Third World, like the Freedom Charter movement in South Africa.

Organizing is tied to popular education, democratic learning methods with an emphasis on civic agency. In the U.S., popular education in the 1930s included labour schools, study circles, and folk schools like the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee, a popular education center founded by Myles Horton who had traveled through Scandinavia to study the schools. Highlander trained many civil rights leaders including Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King. Rajesh Tandon reports that he also spent time at Highlander before founding PRIA. Highlander initiated the Citizenship Education Program (CEP), taken over by SCLC in 1961 that I worked for as a young man.

In Scandinavia, folk schools generated cultures rich in adaptive and innovative resources, norms and behaviours with implications for civic-driven change. Marie Ström of

Idasa, in her study of folk schools, popular libraries, and study circles in Sweden, has shown how they played a powerful role in the transformation of the nation from a very poor society into a society of abundance. Folk schools, originating in the nineteenth century, were closely associated with communities in which they were located, and communities had a strong sense of ownership in the schools. Today 147 folk schools are owned by a wide variety of groups, including municipalities and organizations like the Red Cross.

They have a particular focus on educating marginalized and vulnerable groups such as new immigrants, ex-offenders, unemployed, disabled people, older people with little schooling, and youth who have dropped out of state schools. 'Far from offering a second-rate education, they tend to serve as a kind of avant-garde. Innovations in methodology and curriculum from the folk schools have often been adopted over time by the formal educational system'. Folk schools form the grounding for associated study circles, self-directed learning groups that operate on an enormous scale in Sweden (one quarter of the adult population participate each year). In both folk schools and study circles people 'develop high levels of accountability both in terms of taking responsibility for realizing their personal learning objectives and participating in a broader learning community'. Popular education emphasizes 'developing citizen competence and building a culture of democracy' and translates to encouragement of learners 'to develop a public orientation to their learning, nurturing a sense of public purpose whatever the topic of study may be and building commitment and confidence to shape a public world'. Popular education takes participants 'beyond the role of consumers and spectators' to unlock creative energies, deepen members' sense of who they are, develop intellectual life, and foster skills of dealing with diversity'.<sup>9</sup>

One can see all these elements today in the Abahlali movement and the 'University of Abahlali', a remarkable organizing and self-directed popular education movement in South Africa created by tens of thousands of shack dwellers in 34 townships in Kwa Zulu Natal. Fighting for land and housing, for an end to forced removals, and for access to education, water, electricity, sanitation, health care and refuse removal, the Abahlali movement has also been at the forefront of fighting xenophobic violence. Sympathetic professionals and intellectuals play a variety of roles, but 'on tap, not on top', in the organizing phrase. In its mode of organizing, Abahlali has impacted civic life, gender relations and governance, as well as creating a cosmopolitan culture that asserts the humanity of immigrants.<sup>10</sup> It has also developed the concept of 'living politics' contrasted with 'party politics'. 'Abahlali has been an intellectually serious project from the beginning', reads the web site. 'Our struggle is thought in action', says S'bu Zikode, one of Abahlali's leaders. 'We define ourselves and our struggle'.

In the last generation, community organizing with popular education has developed in networks like the

6 Industrial Areas Foundation, PICO, the Gamaliel Foundation, and DART in the US. These have counterparts in developing nations in groups like PRIA, Church Based Community Organization, and the grassroots training efforts of Idasa in South Africa and other African countries, and HakiElimu in Tanzania. Organizing groups focus on developing people's public skills and capacities.

Organizing and popular education have normative dimensions, infused with values such as inclusion, equality, cooperation, work, dignity, and freedom. But they begin 'where people are at', not where organizers think they should be. Organizing and popular education develop concepts, methods, and learning environments ('free spaces') in which people shape for themselves a more inclusive understanding of themselves and 'the people' as they develop confidence, skills, and public life. Organizing is always grounded in the cultural life of communities.

In organizing people learn the skills of engaging others' self-interests, understood not as selfishness but rather as each person's unique stories, passions, and relationships rooted in everyday life. People learn to map power in different situations. They become attentive to the dangers that Shirin Rai describes, which come from an idealized sense of possibility. Organizing stresses the necessity of holding in tension 'the world as it is' and 'the world as it should be', and living on the border between the two poles, the pre-figurative Gandhian challenge of 'being the change you want to see in the world' observed by Teivo Teivainen.

In organizing, people learn to understand human complexity and human potential, the immensely rich stories and motivations of others of different income, religious, cultural or partisan backgrounds. They refrain from quick ideological or categorical judgments, and learn to negotiate diverse institutional interests. They do not put aside anger and disagreement. Citizen politics often surfaces conflicts that were previously submerged. But they learn to contain quarrels and discipline anger, to avoid violence, and to produce public outcomes of general benefit. People learning organizing skills and habits become adept at creating what are called 'public relationships' across differences for the sake of public action, even with those they once saw as enemies. They learn to think in long term and strategic ways. They pay close attention to local cultures and networks. Finally, at its broadest, organizing changes institutions and also cultures, returning them to earlier insights.

Through diverse partnerships, the Center for Democracy and Citizenship has found it useful to conceptualize organizing and popular education as 'public work'. Public work is sustained effort by a mix of ordinary people who develop capacities to work across differences to create things of lasting civic value. Public work is work 'in public', visible, open to inspection, whose significance is widely recognized. It is cooperative effort of 'a public', a group whose interests, backgrounds, views, and resources may be quite different. Public work is at the heart of organizing, both requiring and developing civic agency. It

also revives older concepts of 'citizen professionals' who see themselves as on tap, not on top. Citizen professionals take pride in their knowledge and craft, but they shift from the deficiency mindset that erodes civic muscle to an appreciation of the abundant potentials of ordinary people.<sup>11</sup>

The following two stories illustrate public work and the civic agency it develops. They also point toward a systems approach, attentive to the potential role(s) of culture shaping institutions such as the media and higher education in developing citizen professionals.

### **Nehemiah Homes<sup>12</sup>**

The Nehemiah Homes organizing effort was undertaken by East Brooklyn Churches, an affiliate of the Industrial Areas Foundation, or IAF. The IAF is a network of large-scale citizen organizations made up of poor, lower and middle class groups. IAF is much like Obama's former network, the Gamaliel Foundation.

IAF organizing went through two stages of development after the death of its founder, Saul Alinsky, in 1972. Organizers and local leaders sought to ground the organizing process more deeply in community institutions and value traditions, preeminently those of local religious congregations of mainstream Catholic, Protestant, Jewish and more recently Muslim orientation. Such a development gave rise to 'value based organizing'. Value-based organizing weds the struggle for agency to communal values and communal fabric. It was accompanied by a shift in the theory of leadership from positional leaders to 'relational leaders', enlisting groups of community sustainers, most often women, who maintain the networks and relationships of community life, who are almost never central in mobilizing politics. In my observations, the public confidence and skills which women gain through organizing and public work often significantly lessens 'private' injustices, such as domestic violence.

As these groups experienced growing successes and began to think about larger rationale, they added a second dimension to their self-awareness, coming to understand themselves as 'schools for public life'. Schools of public life are settings where people learn civic skills much more multidimensional than voting or protest and where people develop new intellectual life. They experience what Doran Schrantz, a leading organizer in the Gamaliel Foundation, calls 'public growth'.

East Brooklyn Churches (EBC) is a citizen organization based largely among African American churches in impoverished neighborhoods of Brooklyn, New York. The group began modestly in 1978 with a small group of Catholic and Protestant clergy and laity to discuss the formidable array of community issues they faced. They followed the organizing dictum to start with small 'winnable' issues around which poor and powerless people can experience confidence-building success and develop clear-eyed

assessment of risks (the approach that Shirin Rai urges). EBC members forced clean-ups of rotten meat in local food stores, pressured the city to install hundreds of street signs, forced renovation of local parks and worked together to clean up vacant lots. Slowly they forged a sense of solidarity and potency. 'We are not a grassroots organization', thundered the Rev. Johnny Ray Youngblood, a key leader in the organization, at one rally. 'Grass roots are shallow roots. Grass roots are fragile roots. *Our* roots are deep roots. Our roots have fought for existence in the shattered glass of East New York'.

In the early 1980s, EBC took on a project to build thousands of houses affordable for working class and low income people, a scale that dwarfed not only their own prior activities but any other low income housing development initiative in the country. The EBC turned to housing out of the conviction that only widespread home ownership could create the kind of 'roots' essential for renewed community pride and freedom from fear. Teaming up with a well-known newspaper columnist and former developer, I.D. Robbins, they adopted his controversial argument that for half the cost of high-density, high rise apartments, it would be possible to build large numbers of single family homes, owned by low income families that could create stable neighborhood anchors.

EBC named their undertaking the 'Nehemiah Plan', recalling the Old Testament prophet sent back to Jerusalem by the King of Persia in 420 to lead in the rebuilding of the city after the Babylonian captivity. Nehemiah was a skillful politician as well as apparently a great orator. He gained permission from the king of Persia in 446 B.C. to return to Jerusalem in order to lead the Jews in rebuilding the city walls. 'You see the trouble we are in; Jerusalem is in ruins, its gates have been burned down', he told the assembled crowd. Nehemiah did not present himself as a Moses-like rescuer. Rather, he called people to work and helped develop their capacities for such work. 'Come, let us rebuild the walls of Jerusalem and suffer this indignity no longer'. The people responded. 'Let us start! Let us build'. The Bible recounts that 'with willing hands they set about the good work' (Nehemiah 2:17-18).

During the Babylonian captivity, enemies of the Jews had multiplied. Jews persevered in the face of ridicule and posted guards against plots. More subtly, rebuilding the walls required civic restoration. A culture of greed and instant gratification had produced fragmentation and a decline in morale in the community. Nehemiah held together a motley crew - 40 different groups are named - including merchants, priests, governors, nobles, members of the perfume and goldsmiths' guilds and women. At one point he organized a great assembly to call to account nobles making excessive profit from the poor. As the Jewish people rebuilt their walls, they renewed their purpose and identity.

The cultural aspects of the Nehemiah story held important lessons for the East Brooklyn Churches group. 'The story connected our work to something real, not something bogus', explained Mike Gecan, EBC organizer.

'It got it out of the 'housing' field and the idea that you have to have a bureaucracy with 35 consultants to do anything. It made it a 'nonprogram', something more than housing'. As the EBC leader Celina Jamieson put it, 'We are more than a Nehemiah Plan. We are about the central development of dignity and self-respect'. Like the biblical story, 'Nehemiah' symbolized the regeneration of community and civic life and a sense of shared control over the future.

Although the group had financial commitments from an impressive array of backers, the project's success depended on city funding for a loan pool. Early in 1982, they had waited for weeks for word from the New York mayor Edward Koch about whether he would support their plans. He refused to meet with them, citing a negative experience with a sister organization in the Queens area of New York. Leaders held a press conference to publicize his indecision. That evening, the local CBS television affiliate broadcast clips of the desolate area, while an announcer read from the Book of Nehemiah: 'You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come, let us build the wall of Jerusalem, that we may no longer suffer disgrace'. Viewers were outraged and audience reaction was immense. The following day, Mayor Koch declared himself the new Nehemiah and pledged his support for the effort. He gave Nehemiah speeches for several months thereafter. Thousands of Poles and Italians and other ethnics from Catholic parishes in Queens joined an interfaith religious celebration at the groundbreaking of the first Nehemiah homes. Nearly 4,000 were built, and it became the spark for national low income housing legislation.

The story suggests lessons of successful civic initiative: Public work politics that is visible, large in import, involves a variety of people, generates a different model of civic leadership and uses government tools but is not dependent upon government services, can change people's sense of themselves and produce also new 'citizen professionals'.

A story with some parallels has taken shape in recent years in the neighborhoods surrounding Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI).

### **Overcoming a legacy of bitterness: IUPUI and WESCO<sup>13</sup>**

William Plater was Executive Vice Chancellor of the IUPUI from 1987, four years after he arrived there, until 2006 when he left that post to work full time on international community development for the university. He has become a key leader in the higher education movement to 're-engage' with the life of communities and their populations in respectful, reciprocal, sustained fashion, carrying with him the values and practices he learned as a student activist in the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Plater has become a champion of what he describes as the public work method for public engagement of universities, elaborating the concept in the process. In his view public

work is voluntary, non-coerced action for the public good. It generates a variety of civic outcomes and enlists a myriad of civic talents. He argues that 'When all citizens are included in the possibility of acting together for the common good, the things they do and the assets they create are always greater than what government alone can do'. He sees public work as a means to realize values of inclusion, equality, and productive contribution. 'Public work recognizes the individual citizen - and not only her elected representative - as a relevant, valued, and even powerful co-creator of the democratic process. This is the generative power of inclusiveness because it engages everyone who would participate, and because ideas, projects, actions, and works produced do not depend on government or on enfranchisement through voting status. Youth, immigrants, religious minorities, and - in some places still - women can contribute equally with voting citizens, even when they are officially excluded from political processes'.

He believes that while global consciousness and connections are important - fostered by an international public university - public work also depends on a vital sense of place. 'Public work is local work through the institutions of communities - clubs, schools, nonprofit organizations, businesses and corporations, religious organizations, sports, and voluntary groups of all kinds, even when it reaches to other places in other nations'. Finally, Plater believes civic agency - 'the capacity of ordinary people to act on their own behalf without relying on experts or deferring to the mystique of the technical or the professional' - builds capacity to do public work. 'Civic agency is the means to achieve public work, and it has skills, methods, and capacities that can be taught and learned'.

Translating values he learned as an activist in the civil rights movement to higher education turned out to be a process over years filled with conflict and learning.

In the 1960s and 1970s, IUPUI expanded rapidly. The school now has more than 30,000 students and includes one of the two largest medical schools in the United States. As it expanded, hundreds of families were displaced from the surrounding neighborhoods, which once formed a vital center of small businesses, jazz clubs and street life. Most of those displaced were African American, low income whites, and Mexican Americans. In their view the university, working with local government, had manipulated building and traffic regulations, political boundaries, school placements and other levers to move them out, across the White River. In the Westside neighborhoods across the river bitterness and resentment was widespread. When Plater met community residents in the mid-eighties at the performance of a student-created play, 'The Bridge', about what had happened, he heard story after story of anger. 'Families got up and told stories about how they had been moved about, about the sense of loss they felt and the fragmentation that had occurred'. Anger and despair was passed on to children and grandchildren.

In the late 1980s, a group of neighborhood residents and organizations decided to reverse the downward spiral. They created a community organization, the Westside

Cooperative Organization (WESCO). They took advantage of a variety of resources created by the city of Indianapolis, a leader in the local government movement for collaborative civic work. It is worth noting that the motivation of the local government in Indianapolis, driven by self-interests of local officials who want to get productive work done. As Matt Leighninger, who has worked closely with the National League of Cities and hundreds of local communities in the new movement for 'shared governance' observes, 'Practitioners in planning, education, law enforcement, human relations, environmental protection, housing, economic development and public health are realizing that they need more support if they are going to succeed'.<sup>14</sup>

Organizing gave people new hope and power. 'We began to realize that we as a community had value in ourselves', said Olgen Williams, president of the group. 'We could make changes. We empowered ourselves and things began to look a little better'. WESCO was able to create a nonprofit economic development corporation, to address crime, and to look at improving schools. This created a background to work with IUPUI in a new way. 'We asked them to come to have a conversation with us about how we could work together to create a better community and a stronger urban university', said Williams. On the university side, Plater voiced strong verbal support and backed it up with university commitment of resources. University cooperation with the community was based on three principles, according to Plater:

- 'The first principle was a candid statement that the university wanted to join the neighborhoods out of self-interest because the proximity of a poor community with a high crime rate was adversely affecting its ability to attract students from the suburbs and other regions. This principle of mutual benefit was articulated on both sides; parties had things they wanted to get out of working with each other.
- 'The second principle was based on reciprocity and the idea that the community had something of equal value to contribute along with the university's expertise, resources, and access to power in local and state governments... The greatest asset was the emergence of talented, natural leaders who found their voice and the respect of their neighbors in the process of talking about what to do. In 'speaking truth to power', their civic agency established them as co-equals with government officials and experts.
- 'The third principle was sustainability and a commitment of the neighbors to each other to persist even when enthusiasm waned and specific initiatives failed. This required a commitment from the university that its involvement was not defined by the length of a semester term when students were assigned class projects in the neighborhood or the duration of a research grant when faculty wanted to study someone or something. The only way to prove the principle was through time, but the commitment of the university

took the form of providing a full-time staff member whose role was to attend meetings, to listen, and to participate as a member of the community - not as a faculty member with expertise or a student doing a project or an administrator with some hidden agenda for renting space or creating a medical waste recycling center'.

Many community projects have emerged from the process, including the opening of the first public schools in many years, a new library, a health clinic, a bank, a grocery store and other businesses. Community residents have developed a plan to turn a formal mental hospital into a park and zone for economic development. There has been a significant increase in school retention and college attendance among young people. But the most important changes may be attitudinal. Plater says that years the public work of collaborating with the community in a variety of ways has significantly impacted attitudes and approaches of staff, faculty, students and whole professional programs. '[Community engagement] is now a matter of pride at IUPUI', he observes. Significant changes have taken place on the community side as well. 'The people are comfortable on the community side that the university is not going to come over across the river and take this whole community over', argues Williams. 'There is room for us to co-exist. We have trust and communication now, whereas before they ignored us. We are also more educated and knowledgeable about how to do business with the powers that be'.

### Transformative leadership

I agree with Rakesh Rajani's assessment that in a turbulent world of growing dangers, 'Small is no longer beautiful'. The stories of Nehemiah and the WESCO-IUPUI partnership hold lessons about how to promote large system change.

Mamphela Ramphela describes the challenges. She calls for 'credible, visionary leadership that expands the boundaries of possibilities for all citizens'.<sup>15</sup> She also details enormous obstacles in the way. In Africa, many liberation leaders 'delinked' themselves from poor people in the fight for freedom, either in exile or through alienation from families and communities. Against the background of North Atlantic condescension and the vast humiliations of colonial rule, 'Making it [became] associated with leaving the village, the township, even the language of one's community'. Too often Third World leaders look to Western models. Such detachment is reinforced by patterns of learning and identity formation in many school systems and higher education.

To use an ecological analogy, just as environmental work involves restorations of wetlands and other habitats, the long range task of civic renewal requires a systems point of view. Systems thinking looks at forces of change as a dynamic, interconnected whole; it emphasizes the influences of the parts on each other and the way they

function together, generating an overall direction to a given system. A systems approach contrasts with the event-oriented perspective that dominates in most policy fields. This linear perspective examines a particular problem or event in sequential terms without taking into account the larger patterns out of which events emerge. In a case often used by systems theorists, if six drops of reagent are needed to achieve crystallization in an experiment, an event-oriented causal analysis would conclude that the first five drops were ineffective and the last drop caused the change. In this view, the way in which the accumulating drops work together to create the change is ignored. In contrast, a systems view is about finding the right vantage with which to understand the dynamic properties of a whole system.<sup>16</sup>

From a systems perspective, the long range tasks of civic renewal must not only address the symptoms of civic decline, but also must go upstream to the roots of the problem, changing major institutions of culture formation and developing new generations of citizen professionals who respect people's capacities for self-organization and self-empowerment and learn skills of collaborative public work. Both Nehemiah and the IUPUI story show how public work can transform identities and practices so that leaders come to see people in terms of their talents, not their deficiencies, and themselves as 'on tap not on top'. It is useful to conclude with a group focused on this process.

### The Cultural Wellness Center

In Minneapolis, Minnesota, the Powderhorn Phillips Cultural Wellness Center explicitly challenges the dominant values of acquisitive individualism by promoting and revitalizing 'indigenous' values as a source of strength, health, and wellbeing and it prepares community leaders who share this view. The Cultural Wellness Center is located in a bank building on the border of the Powderhorn and Phillips neighborhoods. This is the most culturally diverse area in Minnesota, with the largest combined concentration of African Americans, Native Americans, Asians, and Latinos. The neighborhoods also include many people from European American backgrounds.

It began in the mid 1990s, when Atum Azzahir, a leader in the culturally grounded 'Way to Grow' initiative teamed up with Mike Christianson, director of the giant Medica Health Plans. They explored the idea of focusing on one place, South Minneapolis, through the prism of her core philosophy, and Medica provided financial resources.

'Rather than focusing on what was wrong with Black people - that they have high infant mortality rates, and other public health problems - I wanted to explore the other side: Why it is that some children live and flourish in the exact same conditions?' she says. 'What are the sources of resilience? What is it that gave us as African American people the capacity sometimes to transcend oppressive conditions?'

The principles behind CWC's philosophy, what they call the People's Theory of Sickness, include the idea that people are responsible for their own recovery and healing; that community provides the container and the resources for living a healthy life; and that connection to culture and a sound identity transform the historical trauma of racism. Azzahir and Janice Barbee, who came to her own commitment to cultural restoration after seeing her family, of Welsh descent, buffeted by the medical system, spent two years holding conversations with different cultural communities. They discovered that other cultural groups - Hmong, Latinos, Native Americans, and European Americans as well - had similar issues. 'I know of the collective aloneness of the African American because I am a member of this group', said Azzahir, 'but to hear the Dakota, Lakota, Nakota, and Ojibwe people, Mexican and Hmong American people speak of their deep sense of disconnectedness and aloneness has amazed me. I thought these groups had culture, language, and a home base, even if they didn't control it. I became more and more driven to be a part of and give direction to an effort to alleviate this condition for these great peoples of ancient heritage'.

The CWC prepares transformative leadership. For instance, its Invisible College explicitly addresses the meaning of education for people of all ages by conveying a different view of 'educator' and 'education'. This involves an extensive series of class offerings, including cultural competence courses for health professionals. It also consciously challenges the overly expert centered education dominant today. Thus, a class on old ways of parenting begins with parents asking what kind of values and practices they want to teach their children, how they want them to grow up, and what their traditions have to say about preparing children to contribute to community life. This, in Azzahir's account, helps families - many of whom feel marginalized by public school educators - reclaim their heritage as a source of wisdom and power.<sup>17</sup>

Strategic mapping of possibilities for leadership development in the U.S. has drawn our attention to networks such as the regionally based schools of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU), an association with an explicit commitment to becoming reconnected with local communities and developing the civic agency of students. The Center for Democracy and Citizenship and AASCU have launched a Civic Agency Project to strengthen education of students to be 'stewards of place', professionals attentive to the assets of communities and the talents of others.

## Conclusion

For all the differences between North Atlantic societies and the Global South, there are also many parallels when it comes to building civic agency, developing facilitative environments, and creating new visions of democratic society. New initiatives by donors that support development of civic agency, schools for public life, and trans-

formative civic leadership among poor populations can help address the greatest challenges for the 21st century: how to tap and vastly expand the civic talents and energies of whole societies to address multiplying problems that no expert systems or government agencies can begin to 'fix' by themselves; how to reverse patterns of civic decay and regenerate civic muscle. Support for initiatives that change cultures of poverty and despair into places of agency, abundance, and hope can help provide inspiration and guidance for us all.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Sacks (2000) *The Politics of Hope*. London: Vintage.

<sup>2</sup> Mamphela Ramphele (2008) *Laying Ghosts to Rest: Dilemmas of the Transition in South Africa*, p. 147. Cape Town: Tafelberg.

<sup>3</sup> Vijayendra Rao and Michael Walton (eds) (2006) *Culture and Public Action*, pp. 259. Stanford University Press/World Bank.

<sup>4</sup> Mustafa Emibayer and Ann Mishe (1998) 'What is Agency?', *American Journal of Sociology*, 103(4): 994-5.

<sup>5</sup> Richard M. Ryan and Edward L. Deci (2000) 'Self-Determination Theory and the Facilitation of Intrinsic Motivation, Social Development and Well-Being', *American Psychologist*, 55(1): 69.

<sup>6</sup> Parker Palmer (2007) 'A New Professional: The Aims of Education Revisited', *Change* November-December, p. 4, <http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/change/>

<sup>7</sup> Steven Fraser and Gary Gerstle (eds) (1989) *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order: 1930-1980*, p. 70. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

<sup>8</sup> Saul Alinsky (1946) *Reveille for Radicals*. New York: Random House.

<sup>9</sup> Marie-Louise Ström (Ed) (2008) *Living and Learning Democracy: Nonformal Adult Education in Sweden and South Africa*, Cape Town: Institute for Democracy in South Africa.

<sup>10</sup> See <http://www.abahlali.org>

<sup>11</sup> *The Citizen Solution* describes examples of citizen professionals from whom we have learned, such as William (Bill Doherty), a family therapist whose shift from 'service delivery' to 'community organizing' has generated striking movements among families. Albert Dzur describes a fledgling citizen or democratic professional movement in his book *Democratic Professionalism*, and this is a major theme in Michael Edwards' work as well. Public work practices can be found in the cultural histories of many other societies. There are many African parallels to public work in the U.S. In Sesotho, the term letsema means cooperative village work on common projects and in isiZulu, ilimo is a close equivalent. In Xhosa, dibanisani means 'let's work together for a better future', while in Afrikaans, saamspan means 'let's get to work'. In Swahili the phrase kidole kimoja hakivunji chawa - literally, one finger cannot kill the lice - is used to convey the importance of cooperative work on a project.

<sup>12</sup> Adapted from Harry C. Boyte (1989) *CommonWealth: A Return to Citizen Politics*, New York: Free Press.

<sup>13</sup> The following account is taken from 'Habits of Living: Building an Inclusive Society through Public Work, Civic Agency, Voluntary Action, and Academic Diplomacy', a speech delivered by William M. Plater. At the 2<sup>nd</sup> UCLG ASPAC Congress on July 15, 2008, in Pattaya, Thailand; and also US Department of Housing and Urban Development, *The Power of Partnership: 1994-2004*, <http://www.oup.org/files/pubs/copc10.pdf>, pp. 98-101.

<sup>14</sup> Matt Leighninger (2006) *The Next Form of Democracy: How Expert Rule Is Giving Way to Shared Governance*, Nashville: Vanderbilt University.

<sup>15</sup> Ramphele (2007), pp. 295 and 301.

<sup>16</sup> Here, as Teivo Teivainen observes in his essay, factors of scale, boundaries of inclusion and the negotiating of the politics of 'open space' become critical for the progress of civic agency towards a new type of politics and democracy.

<sup>17</sup> Adapted from *The Citizen Solution*.

## Further reading

Bender, Thomas (1993) *Intellect and Public Life: Essays on the Social History of Academic Intellectuals in the United States*, Baltimore MD: John Hopkins University Press.

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