

# Civic-Driven Change: Organizing Civic Action

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This policy brief explores the emergence of organizing as a method of citizen action for change, as it differs from mobilizing and other approaches to problem-solving. The focus of organizing is on developing civic agency as a central element of work on concrete issues. Civic agency is defined as capacities for self-directed collective action in open settings with no predetermined outcomes but a general orientation to the common good. *covery* of civic agency in aided development.

## History and definitions

*'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.'*

Saul Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals*, 1946

In his 1946 book *Reveille for Radicals*, Saul Alinsky, sometimes called the father of community organizing in the U.S., passionately restated the basic faith of the organizing and popular education tradition. Alinsky's ideas were rooted in the great organizing efforts of the Great Depression and the Second World War. They especially drew from experiences of anti-Stalinist public intellectuals and activists who appreciated 'popular front' organizing for broadly progressive goals but didn't like Soviet-oriented Marxism. Alinsky's experiences in the US were part of global 'people's fronts' that gave birth to national liberation movements across the Third World.

Organizing is a method of self-empowerment for poor people (and others) that weds practical action on issues close to home (e.g. housing, land, water, HIV/AIDS, electricity, economic development) with 'popular education,' participatory and self-directed democratic learning that develops consciousness of the larger public world and public skills, identities, and habits as people learn to work across differences on common challenges. Organizing develops civic agency, the capacities and know-how to take skillful, collective action in open environments where there are no predetermined deliverables. Though there are broad public objectives (for instance, maintenance of water resources, or crime reduction, or educational improvement), in organizing efforts people define problems themselves, determine approaches, and establish their own ways to assess success. In organizing, people's empowerment derives not from leaders but rather from the people themselves. They create intellectual activities, from study circles to local libraries and public discussions, which generate a culture of learning from experiences and a concern for the common good.

## Organizing versus mobilizing

Today, poor people most often experience mobilizing, not organizing. In mobilizing, people are rallied in support of predetermined outcomes. Citizen action groups that mobilize have developed an often used formula: define an enemy, pose the issue as good versus bad, create a script that shuts down critical thought (any questioning of predetermined goals), and convey the idea of rescue of those being victimized. Mobilizing more subtly shapes professional practices and identities because higher education generally prepares students who are 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, and who have few skills of collaborative work. Professionals typically learn to 'mobilize'. They learn little or nothing about organizing.

## Organizing and Barack Obama

The presidential candidacy of Barack Obama has shown how methods and mindset of community organizing can be translated even into large political contexts. Obama was an organizer for one of four broad-based community organizing networks in the US, the Gamaliel Foundation, in the early 1980s. His first, autobiographical book, *Dreams from my Father*, contains striking accounts of ways in which 'organizing' teaches public skills, respect for people's capacities and talents, and develops public identities, including his own. The organizing message of self-directed, skillful collective citizen action forms the heart of his campaign. 'I'm asking you not only to believe in my ability to make change; I'm asking you to believe in yours,' reads his website. 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 has found expression in many parts of the campaign organization. Thousands of staff and volunteers have received basic organizing training. 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. The campaign includes a sophisticated theory of 'self-organizing systems,' that includes continuous learning from experiences and a culture of collective accountability.

## Organizing and popular education

Organizing is infused with principles of popular education, democratic self-directed learning methods with an emphasis on people's agency, which has its roots in Scandinavian folk school and related traditions. There is also some affinity with the popular education methods championed by the late Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, though an important difference is that organizing for developmental democracy challenges the identity of 'the oppressed' which was central to Freire's version of popular education. Instead of the oppressed or victim, the citizen as co-creator is at the heart of organizing: people are agents of their own development, solving public problems and creating public goods. In Scandinavia, popular education generated cultures rich in adaptive resources, norms and behaviours. According to Marie Ström's account in *Living and Learning Democracy: Adult Popular Education in Sweden and South Africa* (IDASA, 2008), popular education emphasizes 'developing citizen competence and building a culture of democracy.' It encourages 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.'

### The Abahlali movement

In South Africa today, one can see organizing at work in the Abahlali movement and the 'University of Abahlali,' an organizing and self-directed popular education movement 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 in South Africa. Abahlali has impacted civic life, gender relations and governance, as well as created a cosmopolitan culture that asserts the humanity of immigrants (see <http://www.abahlali.org>). It has also developed the concept of 'living politics' as opposed to 'party politics'. 'Abahlali has been an intellectually serious project from the beginning,' reads the website. 'Our struggle is thought in action,' says S'bu Zikode, one of Abahlali's leaders. 'We define ourselves and our struggle.' Abahlali has partnerships with many supportive professionals and institutions, including the Freire Centre at the University of KwaZulu Natal, sympathetic journalists, and church leaders. But they are 'on tap, not on top,' in the organizing phrase.

Popular education with an emphasis on organizing emphasizes a number of skills, habits, and capacities. Organizing teaches human complexity – diverse 'self-interests,' the stories and motivations of people of income, religious, cultural or partisan backgrounds different from one's self. It involves learning to surface conflicts in ways that avoid violence and produce beneficial outcomes. Organizing educates in how to negotiate different institutional and organizational interests. It develops skills of thinking in long term and strategic ways, and attention to local cultures and contexts. It cultivates leaders who help groups to self-organize.

## Recommendations

- *Development of instruments to identify patterns of organizing, not of mobilizing or service delivery.* Currently, mapping instruments highlight 'civil society,' but organizing crosses boundaries of 'state,' 'markets,' and 'civil society.' New tools are needed to identify processes that build civic agency.
- *Funding for non-registered groups.* The method of organizing is often employed by groups which are not formally registered as NGOs.
- *Conditions should not be tied to funding.* Donors - and supportive NGOs - should respect groups' judgment about their own priorities.
- *Core funding.* Donors should provide access to core funding, not simply project-based funding.
- *User-based assessment.* Organizing includes processes (e.g. skills development, self-empowerment) as well as objectives (e.g. reduction of rates of HIV/AIDS). These need to be determined by self-organized groups themselves. Responsibility for reporting requirements should, when necessary, be borne by supportive NGO or donor staff.
- *Support for popular education.* Popular education pedagogies and practices that teach organizing skills, habits, and identities are different from conventional 'civil society training' or 'human rights training' or 'democracy education.' Popular education for civic agency includes workshops, projects, group discussions, study circles and other forms of participatory training which focus on organizing skills and concepts and creating ongoing learning cultures.
- *Support for civic media partnerships.* Twaweza! the five-year East African effort 'to enable an ecosystem of citizen agency and public accountability in East Africa' stresses efforts to 'deepen media quality, interactivity, reach and independence' as one of three key types of work.
- *Support for citizen professionalism.* Spreading organizing on any significant scale will require a new generation of citizen professionals who engage in public work and see their roles much more as catalysts than as service providers.