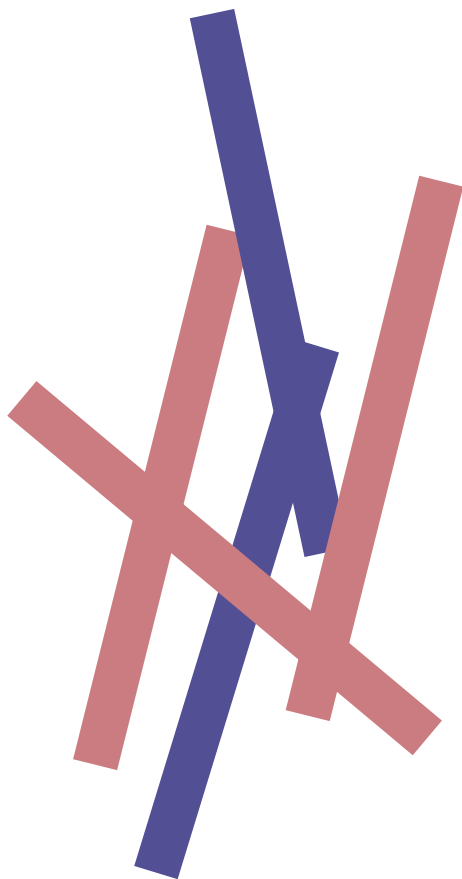


community organising

Yvette Geyer



COMMUNITY ORGANISING

Handbook series for
community-based organisations

Yvette Geyer

2006



idasa



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CONTENTS

1. Introduction	1
2. Definitions and models	2
2.1. What is community?	2
2.2. What is community-organising?	5
2.3. Organising vs mobilising	6
2.4. Assumptions and principles	8
2.5. The role of CBOs in the community	10
2.6. Community-organising model	10
3. Prepare to organise!	10
3.1. Knowing your community	10
3.2. Knowing your goals	13
3.3. Knowing the team	14
3.4. Knowledge	15
3.5. Outside resources	15
4. Organising your community!	16
4.1. Situational analysis	17
4.2. Plan of action	17
4.3. The organising cycle	18
4.4. Raising awareness	18
4.5. Open dialogue	19
4.6. Challenge the community	19
4.7. Strengthen the community	20
5. One issue organising vs long-term organising	21
6. Special interest groups	23
7. Areas of concern	24
8. Conclusion	24
9. References	26

COMMUNITY ORGANISING



1. Introduction

The single most powerful asset that community-based organisations (CBOs) have is that they are so close to the people in their communities.

This means you and your organisation are best placed to identify the needs of your community. You also are most able to organise the different sections or parts of your community in a way that ensures their voices are heard and they have a say in what happens in the community.

This notebook will guide you on some of the strategies and techniques you can use to enable your organisation to have the biggest impact possible at a local level. You might use some of these strategies and techniques already. The main aim of this guide is to help you to check to see if what you are doing can be improved by using the structured tools and techniques of development. We hope that you will find some new ideas that will make your work at local level more powerful.

It is important to note that when people talk about community-organising in the field of development, they are usually trying to sensitise and show development workers in outside organisations how to be respectful of communities. This is knowledge that you and your community have already and you have probably discussed this with people working in your community.

However, sometimes those of us who work in CBOs might make some of the same mistakes that outside agencies make. This notebook is a guide to help those who

work in your organisation to learn from the mistakes that many of these agencies make. In many ways the issues raised in this guide will serve only as a reminder for the people who volunteer or work for your organisation to ensure that it is the community which drives your programmes and projects.

The main objective of community-organising is to improve local governance so that the lives of people at a grass-roots level are improved. Effective community-organising can and must transform fundamentally how governance takes place.

It should empower members of communities to drive the development agenda in their communities. It also should enable citizens to hold accountable structures of government, as well as outside development agencies.

The notebook will examine what we mean by community-organising, the difference between community-mobilisation and community-organising, the steps that should be followed when mobilising and the different aspects that will ensure community organisers are effective. It also will highlight areas of concern that should be addressed during the organising process.

2. Definitions and models

2.1. What is community?

The word community is used all the time by people working in development. It is assumed that everyone knows what we mean when we say ‘the community wants something’ or ‘this is in the interests of the community’. It is useful to stop sometimes to examine what we mean when we use the word ‘community’.

Traditionally a community is a geographical place, which can refer to a village, town, district, city or refugee camp. But communities also can be groups of people

organised around interests. For example, you could refer to a community of HIV activists, a community of police officers, a community of small business owners or a community of brick builders.

To see if a group of people are a community, you should ask these questions:

- ◆ Is there a sense of belonging by the people in the community?
- ◆ Is there a common purpose and common goals among the people of this community?
- ◆ Do the people in this group define themselves as being part of a community?
- ◆ Is there co-operation between the members of the community?

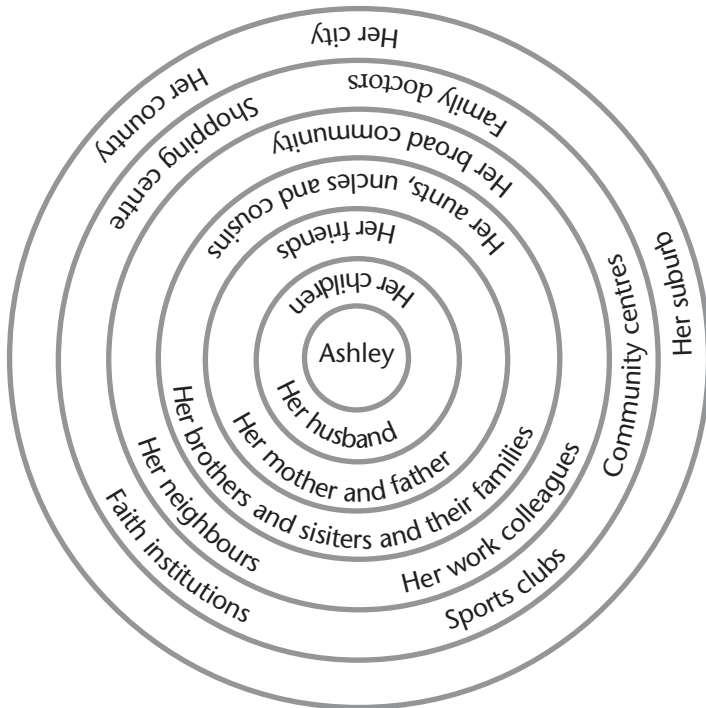
Often the word 'community' is used to label a large group of people. However, even within large communities there might be smaller communities that operate separately. Within a township community, for example, there might be smaller communities, such as the Muslim community, or communities that are made up of young women, disabled children or cultural associations.

It will be easier to organise if you and your organisation are clear about which part of the community you need to work with to achieve your aims.

The word 'community' is used often to describe all the people in a certain area. However, often there are divisions between the people who make up that community. These divisions might be because of economics, religious beliefs, tribal differences or age differences. The differences also might arise because people cannot agree on how to achieve certain goals. It is important to take any tension among community members into account when you are planning to organise any action.

You might have to build a sense of community with others so that you and your organisation can work collectively to organise citizens. In all communities there are some people who have organised themselves into groups already. However, you might find that there are many people who are not organised, but who would like to be. Often it is the poor and most marginalised in a community – such as children running households affected by HIV/AIDS – who you can help so that they can learn to organise themselves.

This example might help you to understand the concept. Ashley is a thirty-something woman who lives in a small mixed-income suburb in Durban. The picture below represents her community.



This kind of illustration is known as a community onion. To get the full picture of a community, think of it as made up of layers like an onion. Just as you find many different layers in an onion, a community is similar: there are many different layers and many different people and organisations that make up that community.



Communities are places where people work together to achieve common goals. Usually CBOs are created for a certain purpose. To be effective the technique of community-mobilisation can help your community.

2.2. What is community-organising?

Community-organising is bringing people together to achieve a goal.

Various role players need to take action to achieve the goal. The role players should come from all walks of life, including people from formal organisations, community leaders and individual citizens.

Community participation should be sustainable and ensure that decision-making processes at a local level are

transparent and accountable to individual citizens and organisations. It also should make the community more self-reliant so that it can sustain a better lifestyle for all who make up that community.

Citizens often feel disempowered on a social, psychological and/or political level in their community, which is why it is necessary to organise people. Through social organising political power can be restored to communities, enabling them to change their environment and improve their standard of living.

2.3. Organising vs mobilising

Mobilising is usually associated with protest politics. In South Africa, particularly in the last decades of the apartheid regime, leaders of the struggle worked tirelessly to mobilise communities. At that point in South Africa's history, the strategy of mobilising the masses was extremely effective. The government began to see the extent of people's anger and realised that support for overthrowing apartheid was overwhelming. After the unbannings and the 1994 elections a conscious effort was made to 'demobilise' communities.

Mobilising strategies allow for mass participation and, because of this, they can be said to be democratic. However, they are not the most effective strategies for building the capacity of citizens. Leaders tend to remain firmly in control. They decide on any action, sometimes in a consultative manner, if the situation allows, and sometimes not. Then they mobilise citizens to support it. Actions include marches, mass meetings, boycotts, strikes, etc. The work of mobilising mainly involves persuading people to swell the numbers. Citizens on the ground are not involved in planning the action itself – they simply follow orders. During the action, the leaders have the

highest visibility, addressing meetings and speaking to the press.

By contrast, the work of **community-organising** focuses on development. **The golden rule of organising is: ‘Do not do for others what they can do for themselves.’** This is often a difficult rule for leaders to follow. They fall into the trap of thinking that they need to ‘rescue’ communities. Often leaders believe that they have all the answers and that communities should pay attention to their ideas. A community organiser begins by listening to people, not by telling them what to do. Organising is based on respect for the history, traditions and knowledge of communities.

Organising strategies rely on building public relationships. Conducting interviews provides a tool for strengthening these relationships. Organisers are motivated by the fundamental belief that citizens have talent, energy and resourcefulness. Community-organising is about liberating this potential. In particular, the organiser consciously works to develop people’s public skills and confidence, enabling them to speak in public, meet authorities, evaluate actions and demand accountability.

Organising work goes beyond protest. It is attentive to diverse interests and aims to bring different groups together to solve problems. Above all, organising is not coercive. It does not strive to drum up massive support in the shortest possible time. It is slow, patient work. People become involved in an action not because of emotional appeals or instructions to do so, but because they make a personal commitment on the basis of their own self interest in that action. A community organiser is a catalyst, aiming not for personal visibility, but striving to build people’s capacity to speak on their own behalf and to initiate action themselves.

Sometimes organising and mobilising work overlaps. Each situation determines the best strategy. The main difference, however, is in where the most power lies – with the leaders or with the people. Mobilising tends to use command and control, while organising emphasises collective action, shared power and capacity-building.

2.4. Assumptions and principles

The assumptions that underlie community-organising can be summarised as follows:

- ◆ Problems are experienced collectively;
- ◆ People (including those who might have otherwise been ‘labelled’ as vulnerable) are highly resourceful and the process aims to maximise these resources;
- ◆ These community resources are supplemented, only if necessary and appropriate, by selected external resources;
- ◆ The community defines its own needs and objectives;
- ◆ Planning and decision-making are the responsibility of the community and occur in a bottom-up rather than top-down manner;
- ◆ The interests of the community as a whole take priority over those of individuals;
- ◆ Participation is a key concept; and
- ◆ People must ‘own’ whatever project is undertaken so that it reflects the community’s cultures and values and ensure its sustainability.

The **principles** of community-organising are:

Capacity-building

As an organiser, primarily your job is to build the capacity of the individuals in the community so that they become active citizens rather than having to rely on you or outsiders for community action.

Social responsibility

At all times, as an organiser, you are responsible in your community. All actions taken have consequences and you should think these through.

Transparency and accountability

Just as one of your aims is to ensure that governance is an open process, so too is it important that you are transparent and accountable in your community. You should ensure the community knows about decisions and processes that your organisation undertakes.

Sustainability

This is probably the most difficult of all the principles. You must ensure that all initiatives are sustainable and can be grown and maintained. This applies to all resources, not only financial resources.

Gender equality

Our Constitution makes provision for the principle of gender equality. This is sometimes difficult because often people are committed to the old-fashioned ways of operating in society. This might mean that men believe they are the decision-makers and women also might believe that men are the key players in making decisions in the community.

Research has shown, however, that if you empower the women in any community the likelihood of success is much greater.

Do no harm

When organising in your community, your actions should improve the lives of the people. You should not cause any harm. If, for example, you create tension

between different groups that cooperated effectively before, you have done harm to the community.

You should keep these principles in mind in each of your tasks and in all your actions.

2.5. The role of CBOs in the community

As a CBO in your community your role is to:

- ◆ Help people to organise themselves, clarify ideas on needs and objectives and of ways to achieve them. You need to be the catalyst in the community;
- ◆ Help to facilitate representative leadership and democratic structures;
- ◆ Provide knowledge and information;
- ◆ Provide or advocate for resources to support your community's own efforts and to supplement (but not replace) their own resources. These might include training.

2.6. Community-organising model

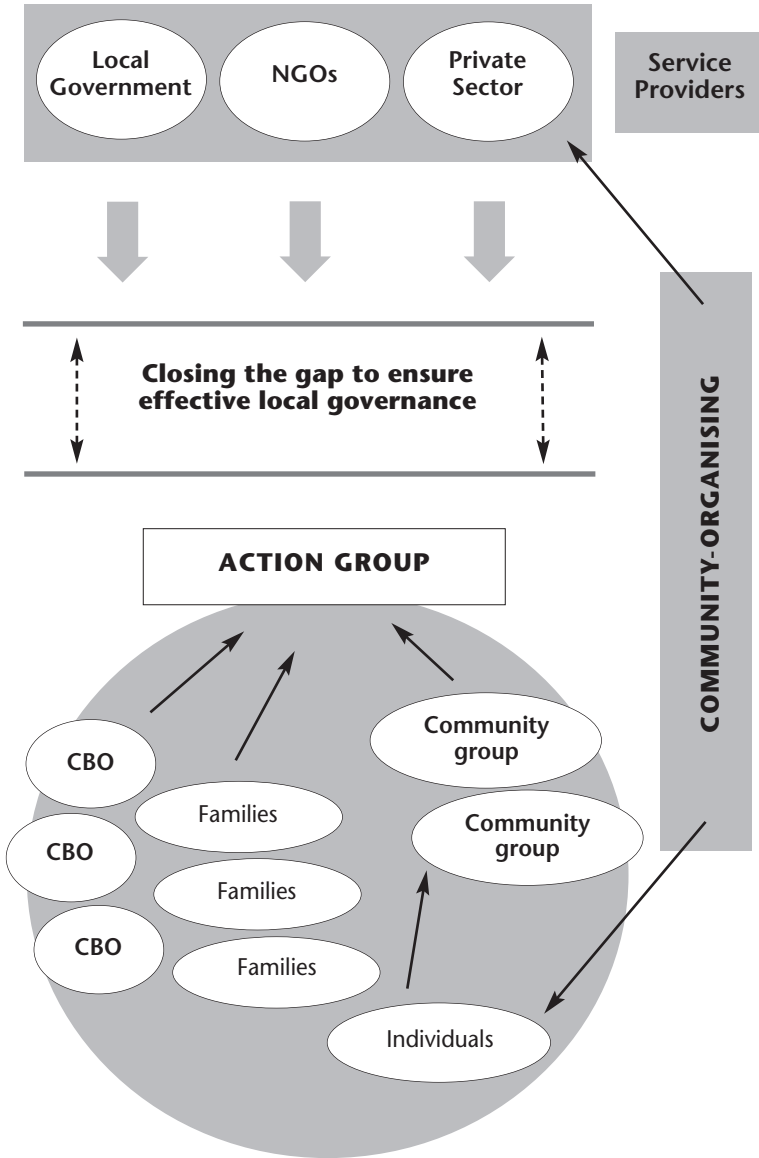
Opposite is an illustration of the different aspects of community-organising.

3. Prepare to organise!

3.1. Knowing your community

The first step is to ensure that everyone on your team knows the community equally well. It might be useful to spend a day getting everyone to share their knowledge of the community, finding out who their networks are and who they believe has power in the community. Team members should share information on the social organisation, culture, economy, languages, layout, politics, ecology and problems in the community.

To do this most effectively you might want to draw a map of your community using the following tool:



(Adapted from IFSP model)

Mapping community structures – REFLECT trainers' tool

You will need the following to construct the map:

- ◆ Flipchart paper;
- ◆ Marker pens;
- ◆ Flashcards (different colours); and
- ◆ Prestik or masking tape.

Step 1:

- ◆ After listing all the community structures, ask your team members to write them down on flash cards. They should use only one card for each structure.
- ◆ On a bigger flashcard write the word 'community' and stick it in the middle of the flipchart paper.
 - ◇ Ask your team members where in the community the structures are placed; and
 - ◇ Ask your team members if there are structures outside the community that could help you with the issue around which you are trying to organise.

After this chart is complete ask these questions:

1. What structures exist in the community?
2. What membership do they have?
3. What do they do – what is their main purpose?
4. Who do they serve?
5. How did they come together?
6. When were they established?
7. What have these structures achieved? What are the successes and challenges of each structure?
8. What do they do for the community?
9. Do they have any sub-projects running in the structure?
10. How can they be contacted? Who is the contact person? (Name, telephone, address.)

11. Who is sponsoring the structures?
 12. What printed materials are being produced by these organisations?
 13. How are women represented in these organisations? Do they participate? If the answer is no, ask why not. If the answer is yes, ask what roles they play in the structures.
-

Think Box

Team members must also continue to analyse how the different elements in their community relate to one another. A community is not merely a collection of individuals, but is a system that is bigger than individual citizens. As a system it has various aspects such as the technological, economic, political, institutional, ideological and the perceptual. People come in and go out of the community, by birth, death and migration, but the system continues. And it is always changing. Your team members need to understand the system so they can nudge ongoing change in certain directions.

It is useful to establish what kind of contact individuals have, as well as the kinds of contacts they have with local-level political decision-makers.

3.2. Knowing your goals

As a team leader you need to ensure that all the members of your team are clear about the goals of organising the community on an issue. This is critical because it is easy to get side-tracked from your goals. Team members might be running from one meeting to another; they might get involved in certain activities and could lose sight of the ultimate aim, which is to organise community members to

become responsible citizens who will hold local government structures accountable for development in the community. Citizens can be organised into groups that are self-sustaining, so that they do not rely only on your organisation to help them.

3.3. Knowing the team

It is important for all members of the team to share their skills and to discuss areas about which they do not feel confident. This will help you to choose the right person for the right job.

Each member of the team should share their skills. It is important that you and your team do not abuse skills for your own interests, but use them instead for the benefit of the community. Some of the skills you need in your team are:

- ◆ Public-speaking – in a facilitative style, not a lecturing or preaching style;
- ◆ Planning;
- ◆ Managing;
- ◆ Observing;
- ◆ Analysing;
- ◆ Writing;
- ◆ Listening; and
- ◆ Conflict resolution.

These skills are discussed in some of the other notebooks in this series. It will help your team to work through these together. Remember that the best way to become good at a skill is to practise it. You can go to many courses or read many books, but you need to implement these skills on a day-to-day basis.

Characteristics that your team members will need are:

- ◆ Honesty;

- ◆ Enthusiasm;
- ◆ Positive outlook;
- ◆ Tolerance;
- ◆ Patience;
- ◆ Motivation; and
- ◆ Openness to ongoing learning.

3.4. Knowledge

Team members should have some basic knowledge of community-working concepts. This knowledge can be found in newspapers, magazines and books or by attending college or university courses.

If, for example, you want to strengthen or empower a low-income community, you have to understand why it's so poor. If your aim is to eradicate poverty, you need to know more than simply the symptoms and consequences of poverty. You will need to understand the causes of poverty so you can support and promote changes that will counteract those causes. You should realise that poverty alleviation merely reduces the pain temporarily, but does not contribute to poverty eradication.

Poverty is not merely a question of money, and money alone will not eradicate poverty. (Adapted from www.iccsa.org)

You should encourage the people in your team to keep a notebook in which they record who they talk to every day during your organising campaign. These contacts could be very useful and might give you new ideas. The notebooks will become valuable knowledge in your organising efforts in your community.

3.5. Outside resources

You might find there are donor agencies which would support your work. There also might be bigger

organisations, like non-governmental organisations (NGOs), which could help you in your organising efforts.

There are advantages to getting outside help, such as access to money and other resources. But there are disadvantages too. Your efforts could go unnoticed and your achievements and goals might get swallowed up by the bigger organisations.

The biggest disadvantage is that long-term solutions are not found. Even though it is much harder to get resources from your community, it is better for the community in the long term. Resources in the community are more constant and reliable once you have identified them. Resources from outside organisations are temporary usually and cannot be relied on. For example, an outside organisation might give you money to enable you to hold meetings in the best venue in your community. But, when the organisation stops the funding, you have to meet in the school hall. It would be more constructive for both your organisation and the community to always meet in the school hall and to use money from the outside agency to improve the facilities at the school.

4. Organising your community!

Once you and your team are organised and you are clear about your roles, your implementation plan and your resources, you can begin your interactions with the rest of your community to organise them around your issue.

You should have a list of the people you need to contact to begin organising. Divide your team and give each member responsibility for contacting people and organisations from your list.

For example, you might decide that the informal settlement where you live needs a community clinic. You will need to meet people and organisations in your

community who are concerned about and involved in health issues. This might include community-based care organisations, youth organisations, faith-based institutions, and nurses and doctors in your community.

4.1. Situational analysis

You need to draw up a 'situational analysis'. You might need to do some research. For example, you should find out how many people in your community have to travel long distances to access basic health care. Research the demographics of your community: how many old people there are, how many pregnant mothers there are, etc. This information will support your argument. When you meet stakeholders you should ask them if they can give you any information.

Once you have all the information, you will discover what the priority needs are in the community. For example, dental care might not be as important or necessary to the citizens as HIV/AIDS treatment.

You should ask stakeholders what kind of action they would be prepared to take. Some might be prepared to talk to politicians; others might prefer to do a door-to-door survey to find out what health services are most needed in the community.

4.2. Plan of action

Once you have all the information and the commitment of people and structures, you will need to put together an action plan. Look at the *Project Management* notebook in this series for guidance on how to put together an effective action plan.

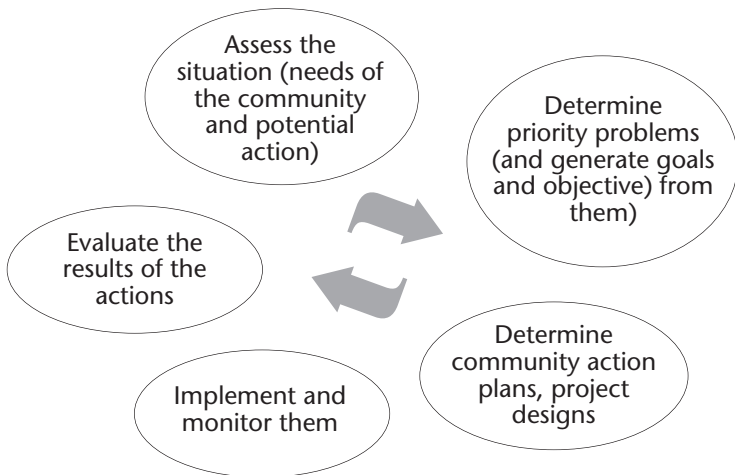
Your plan should have the following elements:

- ◆ Detailed tasks should be laid out;
- ◆ Responsible people must be allocated to the tasks;

- ◆ Measurable objectives must be put in place to ensure that targets are met;
- ◆ Timely changes must be made to ensure targets can be met;
- ◆ You need to stick to the budget and ensure that it is well controlled; and
- ◆ You must allocate the correct equipment and materials when and where necessary throughout the project.

4.3. The organising cycle

This diagram shows the steps you need to follow when organising your community:



4.4. Raising awareness

When you encourage community members to organise themselves and take action you need to ensure that they are aware of the reality of the situation. Avoid raising false expectations and actively counteract the inevitable assumptions and rumours about the kind of help to expect. This means you also must be realistic.

For example, just because your community needs a clinic immediately, don't expect the government to provide one. You might need to think creatively to find ways to get the clinic. Perhaps you can approach doctors and nurses to donate their time for free. Or maybe a church will allow you to use its hall for a clinic. You might have to hold a fundraising event to get money to buy equipment and medication. You might be able to approach a pharmaceutical company to donate medicines and other medical equipment.

Explain to community members that if they remain passive and expect help from the government or from other outsiders, the community will remain poor and weak. No community is totally poor. As long as there are humans in the community there will be resources and potential.

4.5. Open dialogue

To achieve your goals you might need to use different techniques when approaching community members, such as holding brainstorming sessions, open dialogues and meetings to discuss and decide on the priority issues. You need to ensure that people are working together on a project for the right reasons, otherwise the project could flop.

You might have to challenge community members about their perceptions, their stated needs and priorities. For example, some people might support your goal to get a community clinic just because they want a bigger clinic than the community 10km away. This would not be a good reason for organising around an issue. The need for a clinic in your community must be genuine.

4.6. Challenge the community

If, while you are in the process of organising the community, you discover that it does not actually need a

clinic, but would benefit more from a programme focusing on hygiene issues which could prevent an outbreak of infections, you will need to adjust your goals. Ultimately it is the biggest needs of the community that should determine the issues around which you want to organise.

Your main aim will probably be to empower the community to take charge of its own development programme. The community might have decided to build a road. But there are many different ways to build a road. You and the community have to decide on the best method that will contribute to community empowerment and effective local governance in the long term. Your CBO should help community members understand that they need take charge of their own destiny and not leave it all up to government. If you wait for the government to act, it will lead to much frustration. However, if community members are empowered and work in partnership with local government, they are more likely to get roads built in a shorter space of time.

4.7. Strengthen the community

Your CBO should ensure that it is well informed. There might be a lack of skills in your community, which could prove to be obstacles that could stop you from achieving your goals. You might not have to go outside your community to look for the necessary skills. Rather find out about existing skills programmes.

There are many skills training programmes that are run through the Sector Education Training Authorities (SETAs). Get as much information as you can about these to help strengthen your community.

Some of these training programmes will include skills that will help to build strong organisations, as well as skills such as plumbing or brick-building.

There might be people in the community who are skilled already. They could be approached to teach and mentor others.

Ongoing community meetings and information flow is critical, because these will ensure that individual members of the community feel a sense of ownership. The meetings will enable community members to raise any concerns they might have and to offer ideas and come up with suggestions to solve problems.

By ensuring community members feel they 'own' the project, you will help to sustain it. You need to get people involved so that they feel empowered and are part of the project. In the clinic example, to get citizens involved, you could ask for volunteers from the community to help with housekeeping, drawing up a medical roster, managing the office, looking for new resources, continuing to lobby the government for support for the clinic and managing any money that might come in through the fees charged for health services.

If you look at the notebooks on *Project Management* and *Strategic Planning*, you will realise that the road to achieving your goal is not always smooth. You might need to study and follow the 'organising cycle' again and again.

You also will be able to get ideas from the *Fundraising* notebook to help you get financial resources to get your project up and running.

5. One-issue organising vs long-term organising

The strategies you use to organise one urgent concern in your community will be different to those you will use to organise issues that might take time to resolve.

An example of a single issue could be speeding. Perhaps there is a road in your community where people often get

hurt because of speeding. Community members might be keen to ask local government to put in place speed bumps, so that the traffic slows down and the road is made safer. You should speak to every person who has been hurt by the speeding cars; you could set up a meeting with the ward committee and the councillor in the area; and you could also involve local newspapers in covering the story.

An example of a long-term organising issue might be a plan to get housing for every person in the community. You will have to research the issue to find out how many people need housing. You also should find out whether they need single-quarter housing or family housing. You need information on what the budget for housing is at a local level and at a provincial level. You should find out if the public works department is involved and whether there will be enough schools and community facilities for the new development. You should identify locations that could be turned into housing. For example, there might be a school that has few learners and is in the process of being shut down by the education department and might be used to develop a housing project.

All communities grow constantly, so the housing project will probably not be a once-off effort. You need to ensure that your organising on the issue is effectively maintained.

To achieve your long-term goal you will have to organise meetings with many different people and organisations. You need to ensure that residents can articulate their needs. You might have to facilitate negotiations between residents and the council on the size of the development. There will be numerous tasks that need to be organised and undertaken.

Before you begin planning how to respond to a need of the community you should consider whether you are organising a single issue or a long-term issue.

6. Special interest groups

Special interest groups you might find in a community include:

- ◆ Women;
- ◆ Youth (including child-headed households);
- ◆ Disabled;
- ◆ Refugees;
- ◆ Elderly people; and
- ◆ Different faith-based institutions (such as traditional African churches, Christian churches, Shuls, Temples, Mosques, Buddhist Centres etc.)

Some special interest groups will need more organising than others. For example, if you want to organise health issues for a group of street children you will probably have to put in more effort and work than you would if you had to organise the health needs of pensioners, who might be members of structures such as *stokvels* already.

All communities have many different groups in them. Some are more wealthy than others. Some have more disabled people. Some have commercial sex workers as well as committed Christians who might not always agree on solutions to a problem.

Your job in organising the community is to help various parts of the community to identify their common interests and work together to achieve those interests. The more people with different interests who participate in the project, the better the outcome of your goals will be.

Make sure you provide enough time for the different people and organisations in the community to reach consensus. This can be a tricky process and you will need to hone your facilitation skills.

Your CBO should not be seen to side with any particular part of the community. Your task is to organise around

common principles and, therefore, you should work hard to find out what the commonalities between people are and help them to focus on those, rather than on their differences.

7. Areas of concern

Many of the concerns in community organising work have been raised throughout this document. The main issue, however, that should be remembered at all times is that community organisers are facilitators. This can become difficult when you are working in the community in which you live. If you want to make an input as a member of the community you should first tell people that you are ‘taking off your community organiser-cum-facilitator hat’ and that you are speaking as a member of the community in this instance. Community members should always be at the forefront of the organising process.

Another concern is burnout; to avoid burnout don’t work too many hours a day. It is important to be committed, but it is also necessary to lead a balanced life so that you can remain an asset to your community.

You must remember at all times that the aim of community organising is to build self-reliance among members of the community so that they do not stay dependent on outside organisations and can be in charge of their own destiny.

Pay attention to ways of keeping the community interested and on how to expand the number of people involved in the organising process. It might be helpful to team up with other CBOs in your community.

8. Conclusion

Organised communities are the heartbeat of good democracies. They ensure that between elections politicians and officials are held accountable and that

they keep the promises they made during election campaigns.

Democracy is only as good as the active people who make up communities. Your organisation can make a difference by ensuring that the liberation struggle in South Africa was not in vain.

Community-organising requires commitment and patience. Mistakes will be made, but you need to ensure that the community is committed, self-reliant and able to resolve the many problems that might arise.

Different communities will have different concerns, but the principles and tools of community-organising are the same in any community. Every community needs to build and develop an active citizenry.

In societies where the citizens are not well organised, democracy is fragile and can result in leaders not being held accountable to their citizens. The more people are involved at a local governance level, the more people will realise how important democracy is in our everyday lives.

This notebook is a tool to help you to strengthen the active and democratic traditions in your community. It highlights the basic areas of community-organising. However, as with all skills, the more they are practised the easier they become. Your organisation can play a vital role in ensuring that democracy grows from strength to strength in your society.

9. References

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