Key Concepts for Understanding How Communities Change

As with any large system communities tend to resist change in an attempt to maintain the status quo, or equilibrium. Change can occur however, and typically does in one of two ways. First, a crisis precipitates a sudden push from a large or at least vocal and powerful portion of the community to address what ever precipitated the crisis. An example of this is a recent fire in a rental house in Two Harbors that claimed the life of a young child. As a result of this tragedy there was a large outpouring of public support to begin licensing and inspecting rental properties in Two Harbors. A second scenario of how communities change is through a grassroots effort to organize a critical mass to make a demand to change a policy or introduce an existing policy. This is done through building a coalition of different entities that have a stake in resolving the given body. Through mobilizing their constituents, pressure can be mounted against policy makers for a change. A recent example of this is the anti-smoking ordinance recently passed in Duluth through the efforts of the American Lung Association and other concerned groups and individuals.

As social work professionals we are called to help alleviate suffering, and we are also called to alleviate suffering by changing the structures that promote suffering. Below are some examples of social action strategies for changing communities, and empowering the more marginalized members of communities.

Community Building / Community Renewal – A new response to reducing poverty, community building seeks to create communities that ‘work’ for low income families by taking a comprehensive approach and looks at poverty as an interdependent set of problems that closes people off from opportunities.

The National Community Building Network developed a set of principles to offer guidance in community building efforts:

- **Integrate community development and human service strategies**
  Traditional antipoverty efforts have separated “bricks and mortar” projects from those that help families and develop human capital; each approach needs the other to be successful.

- **Require racial equity**
  Racism remains a barrier to a fair distribution of resources and opportunities in our society; our work promotes equity for all groups.

- **Value cultural strengths**
  Our efforts promote the values and history of our many cultural traditions and ethnic groups.

- **Forge partnerships through collaboration**
  Building community requires work by all sectors – local residents, community-based organizations, businesses, schools, religious institutions, health and social service agencies – in an atmosphere of trust, cooperation and respect. It takes time and committed work to make such collaboration more than rhetoric.

- **Start from local conditions**
  There is no cookie-cutter approach to building community; the best efforts flow from and adapt to local realities.
• **Support families and children**
  Strong families are the cornerstone of strong communities; community-building efforts help families help themselves.

• **Build on community strengths**
  Past efforts to improve community life have too often addressed problems or deficits; community-building efforts build on local capacities and assets.

• **Foster broad community participation**
  Many community programs have become professionalized and alienated from the people they serve; new programs and policies must be shaped by community residents.

**Financial, Human and Social Capital**

  In realizing the need for a comprehensive approach to address poverty (or other problems), a new approach is to look at the different types of capital (or resource or asset) available and needed.

  **Financial Capital** refers to money or property that can be used to generate more wealth. A key problem for people living in poverty is access to financial capital.

  **Human Capital** refers “to an individuals skills, knowledge, experience, creativity, motivation, health, etc.” Human capital is distinct from financial capital in that it can be used, but cannot be used up. Building human capital can be done in a variety of educational settings that include classrooms, apprenticeships, internships and more. The emphasis here is on opportunities that give a person skills, knowledge and experience that they can then leverage for change.

  **Social Capital** refers to resources that are neither financial nor human, but as Briggs describes are “resources stored in human relationships,” it is the networks of people we utilize to solve our everyday problems as well as the major crisis. Wallis states, “In both the public and nonprofit sectors, there is a growing belief that programs that empower communities strengthen the resources they can provide to individuals. From this perspective, community development and individual development are intertwined, and social capital suggests the substance that is both binding and created between them.”

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