

SUCCESSFUL NATIONWIDE POLICY CHANGE THROUGH COMMUNITY-BASED ACTION RESEARCH AND ORGANIZING

Over the years, a number of grassroots community organizations, university-based researchers, and others have experimented with ways of helping ordinary citizens understand and evaluate how they are affected by the policies of large public and private institutions. These approaches vary quite widely, with some oriented solely to evaluation, and others using evaluation as the basis for educating citizens to take informed action while making major institutions more accountable and improving their performance. Different terms are used to describe these approaches – community-based action research, citizen monitoring, participatory evaluation, popular education, learning initiatives, research for issue campaigns -- but each shares a common vision of the value of helping citizens thoroughly understand the policies which have such a huge impact upon their lives and their communities.

Over the years, organizations have launched a number of these "citizen monitoring" projects. Some have been elaborate and sophisticated, and have produced definitive analyses of the impacts of various federal programs or other key policies. In some cases these have had a very substantial impact on policy implementation and reform. In recent years, a number of groups have adopted a simpler, yet very effective "testing" approach – having people eligible for Medicaid or job training apply for assistance and document how they are treated. This approach has a powerful impact – it provides facts, educates people who are going through the process of "testing" and research, and often leads to major pressure for reform.

Experience with better financed, more ambitious community-based projects has produced lessons concerning the approaches which are particularly effective in helping citizen groups gain and use information about critical policy issues. These include:

- a central staff with skills in --
 - the subject area
 - participatory and action research techniques
 - training and skill transfer, and
 - the organizing, strengthening, and maintenance of local and state coalitions of grassroots organizations, service providers, and others
- funding for local and state groups so they could employ and assign staff to the research, organizing, and coalition-building work
- a research design which enabled ordinary citizens to participate in conducting the research and -- through that research process -- to discover how decisions are made, who the key decision-makers are, what the decisions had been so far, to what extent they complied with the law, whether they reflected local needs and the citizens' priorities, what handles there were for changing policies, etc.; in short, the research design combined the gathering and analysis of facts, learning applicable laws and regulations and applying them, conducting a power analysis, and developing an action plan

- inclusion in the research design of: review of data, reports, and records; interviews with key decision-makers; participation in public meetings and discussions with decision-makers; and other activities designed to expand the knowledge base and leadership experience of the local team
- inclusion in the research design of measures for helping the group/coalition to research issues which are of local priority as well as issues for which we wanted information at the national level; this has been critical to motivating local people and helping them identify unique local opportunities to mobilize people, develop media attention, win victories, and build their strength
- training for the local monitors regarding: the substantive issue; related laws, regulations, etc.; use of the research instruments and participatory research techniques; issue development; organizing and coalition-building techniques; etc.
- several on-site technical assistance visits each year by the central staff; this assistance has included:
 - review and advice on the research and analysis;
 - advice and assistance on strengthening the coalition (broadening the coalition's membership, board and committee development, board/staff relations, fundraising, planning and management, techniques for involving people across broad distances, techniques for involving people in isolated inner city or rural communities, diversity issues, etc.);
 - help with strategy development (selection of issues, alliances, use of media, etc.)
- preparation by each site of a local report which met national standards but which was also used for local advocacy and publicity
- submission by each site of reports to the national staff, which used them to aggregate the data and draft national reports describing the common trends, citing specific abuses and problems, and analyzing the overall impact of current policies
- national meetings 2-3 times a year to bring the sites together to review drafts of the national report and participate in developing the conclusions and, especially, the policy recommendations, to advocate on the issue, and to plan the next year's joint work
- publication of the national reports, with press conferences in Washington and at all the local sites, giving the monitors an opportunity to get publicity for their local report and the national report, increasing the impact and visibility of each
- use of the cross-site meetings as opportunities to develop a network among the local and state groups, and to create opportunities for local and state people to assume increasing national

leadership responsibilities; they not only played a very influential role in developing the national report's policy recommendations but also became spokespeople on the issues which, by that time, they understood superbly well; we found that their intimate knowledge of local situations and the sophisticated understanding of the "macro" picture they developed through this research/leadership development experience made them uniquely influential with policy-makers

- selection of several sites because information gathered there would be especially influential in policy debates

None of these elements are unique. However, combining them carefully has led to a remarkable combination of leadership, constituency, and issue development and to a lasting impact. On CDBG (Community Development Block Grants), for example, the victories won at the national level still hold today. 60% of Philadelphia's CD funding still goes to nonprofits, and a very high percentage of that goes to low income housing. In 2005 a top researcher with the Urban Institute found that San Francisco's entire municipal budgeting process was still being influenced by the reforms introduced more than twenty-five year earlier by the local CDBG monitoring coalition. Citizen monitoring developed remarkably well informed leaders as well. The former chair of the National Low Income Housing Coalition and several other members of the Executive Committee were people who were trained through the citizen monitoring project. Several leaders in philanthropy were deeply involved with citizen monitoring efforts earlier in their careers, including the Presidents of three foundations. Former Representatives Esteban Torres and Tom Andrews learned from and increased their power through the project. The power and knowledge brought together through citizen monitoring is a key strategy for pursuing more effective and responsive government and greater social justice.

Revised version of earlier paper
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