

Decision Making in Impoverished Communities

Terri Hasson

Lacking a minimum level of income needed to buy adequate food, housing, health care and other necessities is usually a good description of poverty. While poverty is defined in economic terms, poverty can have other negative results that include disinvestment, isolation, hardships, and discrimination.

But it does not mean that those in economic poverty are any less capable of making decisions around their lives and their communities than those that are not economically impoverished. Families in poverty may spend a disproportionate amount of time working to find ways to meet their basic living needs. And yes, they may succumb to a feeling of isolation and despair. When you are spending much of your time just trying to make ends meet, working at one or two low-paying jobs, and traveling long distances from home to get the basics like food and medical care, it is easy to see yourself in isolation. Making changes in the community is the last thing on your mind when your landlord evicts you because you can't afford the rent increase.

But when given the tools and the support to make changes, only those that live in a community can really say what would need to happen to make this community a better place to live. The professionals in public, private and non-profit organizations that work with impoverished communities and with families in poverty owe it to the communities and the people they serve to give these communities an equal voice and work together determine and implement strategies for change.

In most impoverished communities, the residents may not realize that there are many folks experiencing the same problem. Or if they do, fear of retaliation or lack of information on possible options, does not encourage a strong response to a community problem or issue. But organizing communities and helping to give a platform to that voice, letting the community know that there are options and programs that can support them, brings empowerment, commitment and real change for the better.



Terri Hasson is Vice President for Community Affairs for Citicorp Bank.

Economic Development

Economic Development, traditionally, looks at

reinvestment activities in isolation. The housing department of local government plans to create or rehabilitate affordable housing; the economic development department to create jobs and stimulate business development. The streets department may or may not have a neighborhood on its agenda for new lighting, sidewalks or street improvements.

Their mission is to help all residents of the locality while keeping down taxes and addressing many issues. Time may be limited and resources, as much so. It's easier to make decisions in a board room in the county center with a few key experienced staff members, and apply these decisions consistently across impoverished communities. It's harder to take the time or effort to involve community organizations or individuals that may ask difficult questions, or provide different suggestions.

Non-profit organizations also serve a community, handling many of the problems of economic poverty during their long days. Their involvement with community residents may give them the feeling that they understand the wants and needs of the community they serve. But they may not be asking the right questions, or listening well enough to truly understand what residents want in their community in physical, economic, cultural and diverse ways.

Community Participation

Communities in poverty are very capable of providing a voice in the determination of their community and destiny. Communities are not just made up of houses or small businesses or streets. They are made up of people, friends, relatives, histories, cultures, and experiences. Communities and the individuals that live in them know the best ways to reinvest in their communities, and if they are not engaged in any redevelopment or reinvestment project, then the project is less likely to succeed.

Brookmont Farms in New Castle County Delaware started out on a government drawing board as a model community where non-community decision makers created a suburban housing development and encouraged city residents to purchase homes and move in. This intention was well meant, but the obstacles were overwhelming. Brookmont was a housing development only; essential services, jobs and stores were a distance away. Without the organized community voice and activity to work with the government stakeholders, the negatives began to build and soon they became difficult to overcome. The community fell into disrepair. Major sources of capital to sell homes

moved out of this community and the community suffered.

Vince Garlick, a county employee, began to give the community tools they need to themselves make their housing development into a real community, as well as bringing together institutions (public and private) that could support their efforts. The residents, including Bob Byrne and Maria Garcia, organized and took leadership positions. They fought to keep their homes in the face of threatened demolition; fought to decrease crime through partnerships with the county police, neighborhood watches, and better landlord control of tenants; and fought to turn a community of strangers into a community of neighbors; and they succeeded. The negative perception of the community is being turned around by its residents and supporters of the new, empowered "Sparrow Run."

A community voice with decision making power is a key step in ensuring success and the development of sustainable communities. This community voice creates neighborhood visionaries and workers committed to revitalization, encourages youth to become community leaders, identifies the best of a community and building on this, and allows larger groups of people to share a common vision and join in working toward common goals.

Sometimes the community voice is all there is in shouting "I'm not going to take it any more!" The Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative (DSNI), founded in 1984, is a textbook example. Previous top-down economic development didn't work in this Boston Mass neighborhood where public and private disinvestment, discrimination, arson for profit and illegal dumping made this a less than desirable location for raising children and made this location open to speculation.

DSNI was created by neighborhood residents. Beginning with a "Don't Dump on Us Campaign", it cleaned up the vacant lots and closed illegal hazardous trash transfer stations. From there other initiatives were successfully implemented. Comprehensive planning with community residents and other stakeholders began in the mid-80's and by 1988 the plan was complete. The 90's saw a great deal of hard work, capital and political successes that enabled the community to implement its plan. Today, Dudley Street is a vibrant neighborhood with sustainable physical and economic development. And DSNI still continues with resident commitment and control. Its active members include neighborhood residents, agencies, businesses and religious institutions. And, in a strategy that focused on the

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neighborhood youth and promoted leadership among them, there is a dynamic renaissance as Dudley Street young people are bringing their education and their leadership home after graduating college.

Institutions such as governments, non-profits and private businesses should encourage community decision making and responsibility, for when everyone has a seat at the table, the decisions made are better in their depth and their potential for success. But organizing a community does take time and effort, as well as resources and support. People that spend their life disenfranchised are not about to believe in a new idea or accept equal responsibility unless they see where they can participate and see some success or some major issues addressed.

The Delaware Housing Coalition has realized this in its work to bring to life the S.W.A.T. tenant organizing and training agency. HUD's Rule 964 gives residents of public housing the right to participate in the operation of their public housing, including to participate in: improvements and modernizing; new programs and services; plans, policies, procedures; and all aspects of PHA operation. One critical right in 964 is the right to organize and elect a resident council to advocate on behalf of residents (Rule 964.11). Forming a resident council or strengthening an existing one gives residents a stronger voice with the housing authority and other government agencies.

SWAT is currently helping tenants in all three counties with the process of resident council formation. Resident councils give disenfranchised individuals a united voice to address their concerns affecting their community. Positive results have come from initiatives that engage the tenants in issues that affect their quality of life.

Community Based Development Organizations

The category of Community Based Development Organizations (CBDO) is not a new concept; it has at least 30 years of success in a variety of neighborhoods and communities! CBDO's differ from Community Housing Development Organizations (CHDO) or other Community Development Corporations (CDC) in philosophy and organization. CBDO's celebrate their community roots and usually require that at least 51% but up to 100% of the Board of Directors, the decision makers, are from the community or neighborhood being served. Traditionally they serve only one neighborhood and are locally organized, but may represent the community in its many forms (physical, economic and human). The one

common feature is that the vision is consistently from the viewpoint of its residents.

Communities can be challenged to take on the responsibility of determining and then actively seeking a vision for their community. Engaging community residents brings a wealth of human potential and resources to the effort. Engaged communities reap rewards and successes that empower them in other areas of life. Involvement in decisions that affect their lives and communities can turn the despair, disinvestment and isolation of poverty into hope and visionary optimism, and then to community control and successful public/private partnership and investment. Engaged communities will fight to keep their communities affordable and sustainable.

Neighborhood Assistance Act

The Neighborhood Assistance Act is an excellent example of foresight on the part of the State Legislature and Administration when it was passed in 1999. Advocated by Senator Margaret Rose Henry, the Neighborhood Assistance Act was envisioned as a tool for economic development in impoverished communities, but was also structured to ensure that the community, in the form of the CBDO, was an equal partner in the project.

Senator Henry and her fellow legislators recognized the power of a community could have to control and change its own destiny if given tools and resources. They realized with incentives, private and public sector organizations would come to the table as equal partners with community residents to work out tough solutions related to job creation, housing, economic development and emergency services. This law rewards with public corporate tax credits the partnerships between the corporate community and the local CBDOs that work in impoverished communities. This tax credit has great potential to build successes in Delaware communities by ensuring that everyone has a buy-in and a stake in the changes that are taking place.

Poverty is not a measure of a person's ability or lack of ability to take leadership roles in the best interest of his/her family and community. In fact, community residents (living in poverty or not) are the best source of commitment, involvement and leadership in any issues that impact their community. This should never be overlooked by anyone working to reinvest in impoverished communities. The greatest source of stability, leadership and reinvestment, are the people that will benefit from the change. But only if they have a sustained and equal voice in the process.