

# The Participatory Change Process: a capacity building model from a US NGO

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## Introduction

This paper describes the Participatory Change Process (PCP), a new practice model which promotes the formation and action of sustainable grassroots organisations in poor and marginalised communities. This model uses participatory learning and action methods to provide people with the capacities, self-confidence, and organisational structures needed to plan and implement development projects and influence policy formation. The Participatory Change Process was developed by the Center for Participatory Change, a US NGO which nurtures the development of grassroots organisations in western North Carolina.

At the core of the PCP are the concepts of participation and capacity building. Participation occurs when people use their life experiences as the foundation for community assessment, the analysis of community issues, and the planning and implementation of projects to address those issues (Chambers 1997). It refers to a process whereby community members control their community's development, shape the policies that affect it, and influence its direction of change (Nelson and Wright 1995). 'Capacity building' refers to the process of supporting groups as they develop the skills, knowledge, confidence, and organisational structures to act collectively over time to improve their community's well-being (Eade 1997).

The PCP signals a confluence of three practice approaches that have rarely been integrated: Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), popular education, and community organising. PRA consists of a collection of exercises which enable grassroots groups to participate in the planning and implementation of development projects (Chambers 1997). Popular education refers to the use of small-group dialogues to help people to learn to use reflections on their everyday experiences to critically analyse the social, political, and economic systems in which they live (Freire 1970). Community organising refers to the process of

bringing community members together in order to build their capacities and accomplish tasks related to fundamental social change (Alinsky 1969). The PCP builds on the strengths of these three practice approaches (Castelloe and Watson 1999).

## Overview of the Participatory Change Process

There are five major activities that make up the PCP.

- 1 **Forming community-based groups.** The Process begins with the recruitment of 10–15 community members to form a community-based group. This recruitment is based upon two methods from community organising: (1) developing relationships with grassroots leaders (via door-to-door canvassing and visiting hubs of community life); and (2) developing relationships with professionals who work at the grassroots level (e.g. religious leaders, staff from governmental and non-governmental organisations). In order to ensure wide participation, community-based groups generally include as much racial, gender, and generational diversity as possible.
- 2 **The Triple-A Methodology.**<sup>1</sup> The Triple-A Methodology is a systematic sequence of participatory exercises which enables members of grassroots groups to plan development projects that meet their needs and address their priorities (Castelloe and Watson 1999). These exercises are implemented over a four-month period of weekly two-hour meetings.<sup>2</sup> We use the term ‘Triple-A Methodology’ because it emphasises *assessment*, *analysis*, and *action*. Phases of the methodology include: (1) *assessing* the issues faced by the community, and potential resources for addressing those issues; (2) *analysing* the social, cultural, political, and economic causes underlying those issues; and (3) *planning actions* to address the issues. As we facilitate the Triple-A Methodology, we also teach it; hence participating groups develop the capacities to implement the methodology on their own. Most of the exercises in the Triple-A Methodology were adapted from the literature on popular education or PRA. They include the following:

### **Assessment**

- Cardstorming on community issues: brainstorm issues via index cards on wall.
- Community living-room assessments: pairs of group members conduct informal assessments of community issues with 7 to 15 community members.

- Community asset mapping: group members list and map community assets.
- Prioritising a community issue to focus on, via pairwise ranking.

### ***Analysis***

- Who decides, who benefits, who loses? – in relation to community issues or problems.
- Root-cause analysis: analyse the root causes of community issues or problems.
- Community assets analysis: analyse the degree to which local assets meet needs.

### ***Action***

- Identifying and ranking solutions to the identified community issue – via matrix ranking.
- Analysing outcomes of potential solutions: analyse what is gained in each solution.
- Force-field analysis: analyse helping and hindering forces in implementing the project.
- Project implementation plan: specify activities to implement highest-priority solution.
- GANTT Chart: clarify the timeline and major phases of the project.

3 **Action and Capacity Building.** After completing the Triple-A Methodology, the grassroots group has a plan for community action to address a high-priority community issue. It also has a deep and critical analysis of the larger contexts in which that action will take place. At this point, the group faces a choice. It can choose to engage in the Action and Capacity Building process, where the Center for Participatory Change (CPC) provides two forms of support: support for implementing the plan for action developed in the Triple-A Methodology, and support for building their capacities to form as a non-profit organisation.<sup>3</sup> Alternatively, it can choose not to engage in the Action and Capacity Building process, in which case CPC still provides support for implementing the plan for action developed in the Triple-A Methodology.

The Action and Capacity Building process is a systematic sequence of participatory education and training sessions that has

two foci: action and capacity building. 'Action' refers to supporting groups as they implement a development project (planned during the Triple-A Methodology). 'Capacity building' refers to building grassroots groups' organisational capacities, developing their board of directors (i.e. the organisations' governance), and supporting their formation as independent non-profit organisations (in accordance with US laws). The Action and Capacity Building process is implemented over a five-month period of weekly two-hour meetings. Specific action and capacity building activities include Action meetings (held every other week) for ongoing support and revision of project implementation; and Capacity Building meetings (held every other week), involving the following exercises: developing an Organisational Mission to describe the organisation's purpose; developing an Organisational Vision, which sets forth the expected future of the organisation; forming a Board of Directors: the group responsible for governing the organisation; understanding incorporation as a nonprofit organisation, according to US laws; writing Organisational By-laws (two meetings): the organisation's rule book; completing forms related to incorporation as a US non-profit organisation. For the directors, there is a three-day retreat, held to approve the work so far (half day); learn the basics of grassroots fundraising (one day); and learn about board development in general: participatory decision making, working as a group, shared leadership, and group process skills (one and a half days). The ultimate outcome of a group's engagement in the Action and Capacity Building process is the formation of a sustainable non-profit organisation that is responsive and accountable to community members, and which will work to implement development projects and shape policy formation at a local level.

- 4 **Ongoing organisational support.** The PCP also includes ongoing support for the grassroots organisations that complete the Action and Capacity Building process. This takes the form of ten hours of consultation per month for at least three months, with the option of an extension after three months. The support can focus on organisational capacity building and/or on continuing to plan and implement development projects; the nature of the support is determined by the grassroots organisation.
- 5 **Grassroots Federation and Community Roundtables.** The Grassroots Federation refers to semi-annual meetings of a federation of grassroots organisations which uses participatory methodologies

(based on the Triple-A Methodology) to address regional development issues. The purpose of the Grassroots Federation is to enable grassroots groups to learn from each other; support each other; and plan the work needed for poor and marginalised people to participate in shaping the policies that affect them. The Federation is crucial to the Participatory Change Process. The Triple-A Methodology and the Action and Capacity Building process emphasise using people's priorities as a basis for development at a micro or project level. Such a focus may be excessively local and parochial; it may neglect the broader contexts of community change and result in a failure to become involved in wider political processes. Further, a single community-based group is simply too small to effect fundamental social change. As a network of organisations, the Grassroots Federation represents a form of grassroots social action that moves beyond the parochialism of single-issue or single-community efforts by aiming to have a significant influence on policy formation at a regional and state level.

Community Roundtables are semi-annual meetings of a coalition of grassroots organisations (i.e. the Grassroots Federation), religious organisations, governmental and non-governmental organisations, businesses, and/or elected and appointed officials across western North Carolina. The Community Roundtables are held only after the Grassroots Federation is fully established – after it has set its vision, defined its goals, and prioritised the issues that it plans to address. Their purpose is to enable grassroots organisations to develop collaborations and alliances with sympathetic professionals in various fields, thus building a broad-based coalition that can influence policy at a regional and state level.

## Conclusion

Facilitating fundamental change in social, cultural, economic, and political structures cannot occur in a short period of time. To bring about sustainable change, we need to create a new way of working with grassroots groups over the long haul. We need to help grassroots groups to develop sustainable organisations for building the power to implement development projects and influence policy formation. This is the goal of the Participatory Change Process. This is designed to empower grassroots groups to assess and analyse community issues, design and implement projects to address those issues, and develop the

capacities needed to form as independent organisations (in order to continue addressing community issues). A more long-term goal is the development of a federation of grassroots organisations that aims to influence resource distribution and policy formation at a regional and state level. The Participatory Change Process is based on the priorities of community members (rather than outside ‘experts’), and the projects that result from the model are initiated, planned, implemented, and evaluated by community members themselves. This model signals a new way of structuring development work so that communities can control their own development, and so that community groups can build the capacities to influence fundamental change at a regional and state level.

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## Notes

- 1 The term ‘Triple-A Methodology’ is adapted from a process (‘the Triple-A cycle for social mobilisation’) developed by the Iringa Nutrition Project in Tanzania (see Krishna et al. 1997).
- 2 Holding weekly two-hour meetings is consistent with the culture of US community development. In other settings, the timeframe for implementing the Participatory Change Process might differ.
- 3 A ‘non-profit organisation’ is a US NGO that meets the tax-code requirements for tax-exempt status.

## References

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