



Snapshots

Research Highlights from the Nonprofit Sector Research Fund

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What Makes Community Organizing Succeed? Comparing Church- and Neighborhood-Based Organizations

Urban community organizations can make a difference for people with low-income, though the organizations themselves need more resources and better relationships among themselves and with larger political processes, says a study funded by the Nonprofit Sector Research Fund.

In her study, "Shut Out from the Economic Boom: Comparing Community Organizations' Success in the Neighborhoods Left Behind," Heidi J. Swarts, of Syracuse University, begins with the question, "Why are some organizations much more successful than others in advancing their members' interests?" Swarts' findings allow her to identify mechanisms that seem to help produce organizational success, and they suggest what grassroots organizations can hope to achieve in spite of declining resources and difficult political times.

Swarts studied four organizations in St. Louis, Missouri, and San Jose, California during 1997-99. In each city she studied a chapter of the Association of Community Organizations for Reform (ACORN) and a church-based organization (CBO) that represented a federation of churches. In St. Louis, the CBO was Metropolitan Congregations United (MCU), and in San Jose, the CBO was People Acting in Community Together (PACT). The CBOs were also part of national networks.

All four organizations achieved significant outcomes during the period of the study: CBOs won millions of dollars for neighborhood and city programs, diverted city funds from downtown redevelopment projects to neighborhood services, focused on preventing crime and drug use and supporting youth services and education, and pressured businesses to act responsibly in low-income neighborhoods. The ACORN chapters won traffic improvements, more textbooks for local schools, and accelerated neighborhood repairs. They were also able to launch ambitious political campaigns that they couldn't win, but which raised awareness of poor people's issues and influenced the political conversations.

At least in St. Louis and San Jose in the late 1990's, Swarts says, the CBOs were more successful than ACORN at improving conditions for the constituencies they served. Swarts found that churches could draw on many more resources than ACORN, including dues, captive social networks, and legitimacy. Organizing practices also varied significantly by type, with CBOs basing mobilization on social networks fueled by a culture of accountability and ACORN placing the burden of mobilization on the organizer. Because the CBOs sought leadership development as a goal in itself, they were more successful in empowering members with concrete organizing skills. For a sampling of Swarts' findings, see the box on page 2.

Analyzing Structure

All of the organizations studied share some important features: They are political, social change organizations rather than social service providers. They are multi-issue organizations

with modest budgets. They seek power through mass mobilization. They are part of a federated structure of local chapters that act autonomously on local issues and join together on issues that are city- or region-wide. They emerge from a common history of community organizing.

*In This Issue:
Comparing
Community
Outcomes*



Comparing Outcomes in Community Organizations

Outcome	Church-Based Organizations	ACORN Chapters
Mobilizing large numbers of people	Mobilized 100-300 people for individual church actions, and 750-2,000 for city-wide actions. Within the churches, more organizers on staff translated into higher numbers of mobilized people.	Mobilized only 15-100 people.
Winning concrete policy changes	Enjoyed significant wins, with one CBO bringing in \$20 million in new programs for neighborhoods and \$43 million for citywide programs. CBOs had skilled leadership and chose politically feasible issues with broad support.	Achieved some policy changes. The St. Louis ACORN had the least success: Understaffed and facing more distressed neighborhoods, the organization's director launched ambitious campaigns without the allies or resources to win.
Organizing and representing poor people	Individual churches serving low-income neighborhoods were able to advocate poor people's issues, but successful advocacy on major issues typically requires cross-class representation from a group whose members range from very low-income to affluent.	Because its membership is mostly low-income, ACORN primarily takes on strictly poor people's issues. The CBOs had greater organizational capacity, and therefore achieved more successful policy outcomes.
Building multi-racial and multi-class coalitions that give low-income people greater voice	Forming diverse coalitions was a significant challenge for the CBOs, but since churches as a group draw from the entire spectrum of race and class, they have a structural advantage in meeting this goal.	ACORN is racially diverse at the national level, but not in St. Louis where 95 percent of members are African American and San Jose where 90 percent are Hispanic and 10 percent are African American. ACORN members are mostly low-income in both cities.
Forming stable organizations with strong social networks	Little turnover of leaders; good leader development; good maintenance of relationships among leaders, members, and community; and ongoing participation from members.	St. Louis ACORN had isolated activists who couldn't mobilize their social networks. San Jose ACORN did better at this outcome, owing to its less-impooverished neighborhoods and greater effort in training leaders.
Training and empowering leaders	Leaders felt more politically effective than they did before they got involved. CBOs made leadership development a high priority, and their leaders learned useful civic skills.	Leaders felt more politically effective than they did before they got involved.
Gaining organizational power	Struggled to maintain access to authorities, but their legitimacy, resources, and civil tactics helped. A former mayor saw the San Jose CBO as valuable for setting neighborhood agendas.	ACORN's boisterous tactics may have alienated officials, and their membership was insufficient to force access.

adapted from *"Shut Out from the Economic Boom"*

Looking at Organizational Outcomes

Swarts evaluated the four organizations in terms of their ability to accomplish seven different kinds of key organizing tasks (see the table on page 2 for outcomes and a sampling of findings).

On most indicators of success, the CBOs did better than the ACORN chapters in St. Louis and San Jose. Swarts links disparities in results to the differences in available resources and practices of the organizations. ACORN relies heavily on member dues and local canvassing. Staff are low-paid, and there is a high level of burnout and job turnover among organizers. The lack of resources translates into less-stable organizations.

On the other hand, the CBOs are able to draw on organizers with a strong faith commitment and a biblically based vision of social justice. CBOs see strengthening congregations and the individual capacities of their members as ends in themselves, which ultimately creates a strong pool of organizers. And finally, a longer-term perspective on change leads CBOs to emphasize political education and responsibility. Their organizers train local people to conduct interviews that identify the concerns that will motivate people to get involved, and local people eventually do research, develop strategy, and run events. The organizers are thus free to develop long-range vision.

"Community organizations can achieve significant local results, train a significant number of activists, pioneer innovative policy solutions, and germinate the seeds of the next grassroots movements."

Heidi J. Swarts

Overarching Findings

Here are some of the study's key findings:

- ✓ The base of churches provides many more built-in resources than the neighborhood-based model.
- ✓ The scarcity of trained, experienced organizers is a problem for all four organizations and their networks.
- ✓ While the CBOs work on issues across classes, representing their diverse constituencies, ACORN is one of the few national organizations that puts forward issues specific to poor people. Although ACORN has fewer resources than the CBOs, it innovates in order to seize opportunities and win significant gains.
- ✓ Community organizations by themselves can't solve urban problems, since the causes of those problems range from local to global, and many require national political intervention.


The author cautions that her findings are only a beginning and don't represent all church-based and ACORN groups. She calls for research into whether the CBOs' approach to organizing - which emphasizes staff and leadership development, and accountability - can work in non-church organizations. But she also finds hope in the possibilities that urban community organizing offers: "Community organizations can achieve significant local results, train a significant number of activists, pioneer innovative policy solutions, and germinate the seeds of the next grassroots movements," Swarts says.

Readers may obtain "Shut Out from the Economic Boom" by contacting The Aspen Institute Fulfillment Office at (410) 820-5338.

Contact the Author:

Heidi Swarts

hjswarts@syr.edu



THE ASPEN INSTITUTE

Nonprofit Sector Research Fund
The Aspen Institute
One Dupont Circle NW
Suite 700
Washington, DC 20036
Phone: (202) 736-5800
Fax: (202) 293-0525
E-mail: nsrf@aspeninstitute.org
Web site: www.nonprofitresearch.org

Snapshots Editor: Winnifred Levy
Text of this Snapshots by Jean Grace,
Associate, Spann Publications Consulting,
L.L.C., Pittsburgh, PA

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The Aspen Institute
Nonprofit Sector Research Fund
One Dupont Circle, NW
Suite 700
Washington, DC 20036