

Organizing Toolbox Articles from Kentuckians for the Commonwealth and the Southern Empowerment Project

Holding House Meetings

One method that local groups have found effective in strengthening an organization is to hold a series of house meetings. House meetings help an organization to get basic information out quickly and efficiently to a wider range of people. It can also be an efficient approach to get a broader group of people to define a particular issue and to be more specific about what they want to see changed in their community.

For example, in one county, a group of people interested in forming a VOP chapter had one-to-one conversations with members of the community for over nine months. They heard in many of these conversations that education was a problem, so they decided to hold a series of house meetings to find out more specifically what people wanted to see changed about the educational system in the county.

The group had to develop a plan for the house meetings. At a planning meeting, the coordinating committee set a goal of having 20 house meeting in two months, assigned tasks that are described below and set a date to come together to discuss the comments they received at each house meeting.

Besides refining the focus of the issue work, the group was hoping to get more people active and to build support and momentum for a public action (or actions). The group also used the house meeting approach to increase the diversity of their group, to get new ideas about possible strategies and to help members learn new leadership skills.

Although the examples in this article deal with education, a local group could substitute any issue and effectively use the house meeting format.

What is a house meeting? It's simple. It's a small meeting at someone's house. (It could also be at a community center, a church or any place where people can be comfortable.) The key is for someone to invite five to ten people to their house - in this case, to talk about education issues in the county - for about an hour or an hour and a half.

What happens at the meeting? The host/hostess makes everyone feel comfortable, serves some refreshments, and then introduces someone from the coordinating committee who has been assigned to make a general presentation. The coordinating committee member explains the overall process the group is using to get ideas about shortcomings in the school system and gives some general background information that is helpful for everyone to know (such as the Standards of Learning). After the general presentation, each person who is attending is asked to give her/his ideas about what needs to be changed in the schools.

What are the different roles at the house meeting and what does each person do?

HOST/HOESSTESS:

acts as chairperson by letting everyone know what will happen and when, and then keeps it moving introduces the person(s) from the coordinating committee who will make the presentation encourages individuals to give their ideas and also to become active in the group's efforts thanks guests for coming

MEMBER OF THE COORDINATING COMMITTEE:

makes a presentation of the key points that the coordinating committee agreed upon and tries to answer any questions takes notes on people's ideas suggests ways that people can be involved

GUESTS:

learn about the group and the issues feel wanted, needed and important volunteer to get involved enjoy the refreshments!

What would a typical agenda look like at a house meeting?

Guests arrive. Host/hostess greets them, introduces everyone. Host/hostess describes the agenda for the meeting and serves refreshments. Presentation by a member of the coordinating committee. Pass out handouts and fact sheets. These materials provide background information that allows the participants to have a basic understanding of some of the policies and decision-making procedures of the school system (including the names and contact information - address, phone, fax, e-mail - for the Superintendent and School Board members).

Questions and answers. Host/hostess asks everyone to give their opinion about what should be changed, what could be improved about the school system. A member of the coordinating committee gives some ideas about how people can be involved in the campaign and asks for volunteers. (Possible list: do research, hold your own house meeting, recruit new people to the effort, attend a public meeting, write a letter to the editor, etc.) Host/hostess thanks everyone for coming and lets them know how they will be informed about the outcome of the house meeting process.

AFTER: The host/hostess and the member of the coordinating committee should de-brief what happened and make sure that notes are written about the ideas generated. A reporting form should be filled out and sent to the person on the coordinating committee who has agreed to collect them.

IMPORTANT: A few days after the house meeting, the host/hostess should call everyone and ask them if they have any questions, more ideas and so forth.

How do you get started?

- Pick a date and a time that you think will be convenient and then contact people you want to invite.
- Do you need to make special arrangements for transportation or child care?
- Try to eliminate any distractions during the meeting. Hide the TV and have someone else in the house designated to answer the phone!

Conclusion

Because house meetings are small gatherings, they provide an opportunity for people to listen to each other, ask questions, share ideas and become informed. In the process, people can discuss ways to get involved in the organization that are best suited to their personal skills and interests. A successful house meeting will inspire guests to hold their own house meetings and help your organization grow.

Special thanks to Kentuckians For The Commonwealth. Portions of this article came from KFTC's Leadership Development Training Manual.

If you are interested in using this house meeting approach to strengthen your organization, the VOP staff is available to do trainings and help you develop your plan. Call (804) 984-4033 for more information.

Approaches to Change

This article originally appeared in the April 1992 issue of *balancing the scales*, a publication of Kentuckians For The Commonwealth.

Imagine living in a rural community where strip and deep mining for coal takes place and where wells are going dry or turning up contaminated. Imagine reading in the local newspaper that a waste disposal company plans to build a huge landfill just outside your town. Imagine being a resident of an urban neighborhood where children and elderly people are going cold in the winter because the utility company shuts off electricity due to non-payment of a bill, and the rates are too high for people on a fixed income.

All of these situations have occurred in places where KFTC is active. In all these situations, one of the first things people affected by the problems did was get together and form a group.

Perhaps there is a similar problem or situation in your community or neighborhood and you have just organized a group, or you're planning to do so. One of the most helpful things your group can do at the beginning is to think about ways in which you might approach changing the problem or situation.

There are various ways to approach social and economic change. Three of the most common are **direct service, advocacy and direct-action community organizing**.

Some characteristics or descriptions of **direct service** are:

- people helping others in need by providing for that need
- involves a recipient and a provider
- immediate, direct aid, treats symptoms, not preventive
- a dependent, one-way relationship
- "power over" instead of "power with"
- charity
- public service or social service

Some examples of direct service are the Red Cross, soup kitchens and food pantries. An example of providing direct service in one of the situations given at the beginning of the article would be to give or raise money to pay utility bills for those who can't.

Some characteristics or descriptions of **advocacy** are:

- people, such as experts, resource persons, lawyers or lobbyists, helping others by speaking for them or acting on their behalf
- depends on the expertise of a few rather than many
- recipient/provider, we/they relationship
- separated, removed from the problem
- standing for a person or group, pleading another's cause

Some examples of advocacy organizations are the Legal Aid Society and the National Rifle Association. An example of providing advocacy in one of the situations listed above would be for a lawyer and a water quality specialist to speak in Frankfort (the state capitol) on behalf of the people who are losing their wells.

Some characteristics or descriptions of **direct-action organizing** are:

- people helping each other and themselves

- people working together to solve a problem or achieve a common goal
- putting pressure on people with power to make the changes a group wants
- confrontation
- people using their own power to bring about change
- involves groups
- bottom-up, not top-down

Examples of organizations that use direct-action community organizing are KFTC, Save Our Cumberland Mountains and the Community Farm Alliance.

Using this approach to change in one of the situations given earlier might mean, in the town where a landfill is planned, that a group forms. They meet to brainstorm solutions to their problem, choose one that is winnable and plan a strategy. Then they take action, such as holding a forum where county officials are asked to explain their positions in a public setting. Local and regional media are invited to the forum and a press conference afterward where citizens tell what they thought about what the government officials said. They then plan ways to hold those officials accountable for any promises made.

There are other approaches to social and economic change in addition to these three. Some of them are:

- research and education (Highlander Center)
- electoral campaigning (political parties)
- mobilization (marches on Washington)
- networking (Citizens Clearinghouse for Hazardous Waste)
- economic development (food co-ops, credit unions)
- technical assistance (environmental consultants)
- lobbying (political action committees)
- organizational skills training programs (Southern Empowerment Project)
- religious conversion, evangelization, prayer ("The 700 Club")
- militarism, violence, terrorism, intimidation (KKK)
- economic pressure or boycott (Nestle, grape, lettuce boycotts organized by different groups)
- passive resistance, non-participation in the system (conscientious objectors, war tax resisters)
- education and publications (Institute for Policy Studies)
- media use (Appalshop)
- labor organizing (United Mine Workers of America)
- crisis intervention (farm hotlines)
- litigation (Kentucky Citizens Law Center)

There are both similarities and differences between KFTC's chosen approach to social change, direct-action organizing, and direct service and advocacy. All the approaches are alike in that they all involve people working to solve a problem and they are often motivated by a desire for justice. They are different in that direct-action organizing doesn't involve a provider/recipient relationship as do the other two approaches; instead everyone works for each other.

Other differences are that organizing focuses on institutional change, organizing is long-range and aimed at prevention, and the people who benefit from the change through organizing are the ones who take the action for change.

There is an appropriate use and need for all the approaches (with a few exceptions, such as violence). For example, if you or someone else were literally starving or freezing to death and there were no direct service providers to take care of your needs, organizing for long-term change might not be practical or possible!

An organization or group should be clear, deliberate and explicit about the approach(es) to change on which they decide to focus. If a direct-action organizing group is not clear about its priorities, it could

easily become consumed by networking, advocacy or other approaches that don't lead to the desired long-term change.

Groups should take some time to look at various approaches to change and decide which approach they can take most effectively, given their members and resources. An organization that is clear about its priorities has a better chance of staying focused and accomplishing its goals.

Direct-action community organizing is one of the most, if not the most, empowering for people, since they become stronger as they unite with others, act for themselves, and work for structural change.

How to Delegate

"I would delegate if I weren't so busy." All too often this is the excuse people use instead of sharing with other members the responsibilities of building our organization or working on issues. As a result, they become overwhelmed by the amount of work they are doing, and frustrated by the lack of help from other group members. In fact, leaders who tend to do everything in a group are often faced with the puzzling results of a shrinking and inactive membership, despite their hard efforts. Overworked leaders may recognize the need to delegate their responsibilities, but find it very difficult to do after the group has gotten used to bad habits.

Learning to delegate is a skill which is critically important to developing and maintaining strong, membership-run organizations. Like many other organizing skills, delegating is a process which involves setting goals, careful planning, and follow-up. To do it well, we need to change the way we think about asking other people to participate in our organizations. Delegating means sharing the work load, but it also means sharing the fun and satisfaction that come from accomplishing something.

Successful delegating is a two-way process: one person asks another person to do something and the second person decides whether to accept the responsibility. These roles involve skills that every member of a group should understand and practice. It is a good idea to have a group discussion about the importance of delegating and techniques for doing it well, especially if you belong to a group which has developed some bad habits about not sharing responsibilities.

Your discussion can begin by asking the members to think of a time when they were part of a group in which responsibilities were not shared well. Their examples may come from personal experiences as leaders or as group members. Go around the room and ask each person to give their example and one consequence of poor delegating. These examples will generate a list which may include some of these points:

Consequences of poor delegating:

- information and decision-making not shared by the group
- leaders became tired out
- when the leader left the group no one had the experience to carry on
- group morale was low people became frustrated and felt powerless
- skills and knowledge concentrated in a few people
- new members did not find any ways to contribute to the work of the group

Ask people to look at the list they have just created and think of reasons why it is important for the strength of the group to delegate jobs well and share responsibilities. Again, go around the room and have each person offer one reason. The list might look something like this:

Why delegate?

- to use skills and resources already within the group
- to keep from burning out a few leaders
- to develop new leaders and build new skills within the group
- to get things done
- to prevent the group from getting too dependent on one or two leaders
- to become more powerful as a group
- to allow everyone to feel a part of the effort and the success
- group members feel more committed if they have a role and feel needed

It should be clear from these two lists that delegating well is central to good organizing and developing new leadership and a strong membership base. Your group's discussion can now focus on some specific skills and techniques of successful delegation.

It can be helpful to think of delegating as a process with three separate phases or steps. Divide into three smaller groups and give each group a large sheet of newsprint with one of the following headings written at the top: "planning," "assigning responsibilities," and "following up." Ask the small groups to think about one of these phases of delegating and come up with some important things to do and remember for successful delegation. The small groups can then share their ideas with the whole group. Some of the important points from each phase are discussed below, but your group will probably come up with many others.

Planning:

It is generally true that people will be more committed to working on projects which they had some input in developing. Therefore, it is important to bring people in at the first stages of an idea, rather than at the moment that something needs to be done. If a group has discussed and agreed upon its goals, the members will be much more willing to carry out the necessary work. In addition, group decision-making can help avoid a situation where a few people set goals or make promises which the group cannot fulfill.

Once the group's goals have been established, a smaller group of people, for instance an event planning committee, can make a list of the tasks or projects which need to be done. This is the time to clearly define what is involved for each job and to develop a timeline for carrying out each one. The plans should be as detailed as they need to be, but remember to leave plenty of room for the creativity and input of the members who will actually do the work.

Another important part of the planning involves careful consideration of the skills and resources available within your group as well as the interests and motivations of individual group members. As a group leader, this involves getting to know the members of your group and understanding why they are involved and what they have to offer. As a group member, it is equally important to think about the talents you have to share, some areas you want to improve in, and the time and resources you are willing to commit.

A lot of this type of information is shared informally within any group through daily conversations and friendships. It can be useful, however, for each member to make a list for themselves of their specific skills and interests, including things they enjoy and areas where they want more experience. The information from these notes can be shared as a group, and many hidden talents may be revealed, perhaps including poets, sign makers, great cooks, or costume makers.

Assigning responsibilities

This is the stage we usually associate with delegating. Although it can happen in many ways, the simplest situation involves one person (usually a leader or a member of the planning committee) asking another person (or several others) to do a task or project. If the planning stage has been done well, there should be few problems with finding people willing to take on necessary responsibilities. However, there are a few points to keep in mind.

- **Decide what setting to use.** Some jobs can be delegated during your group's regular meeting, and others are better discussed personally with a specific member. In general, it is better to ask members to do more complicated or demanding projects in person, when there is plenty of time to explain what is involved. Group meetings are great times to get lots of volunteers for more basic tasks like volunteering at a bake sale or posting flyers.
- **Be enthusiastic.** Standing up in a meeting and saying, "We have this nasty job that I don't want to do, and for once someone else is going to have to help," will not get the desired results. Remember that there may be people in the group who enjoy and have time for tasks other people consider

grunt work. For instance, some people like doing jobs that have a beginning and an end, like stuffing envelopes or calling people before meetings.

- **Delegate important tasks, as well as less important ones.** People are likely to be willing to do some of the "grunt work" if they also have the chance to contribute to the decision-making and more important work of the group. Giving people increasing responsibilities and challenges will allow them to grow and develop confidence in their abilities. When there are routine tasks to be done, remember to emphasize how the smallest details contribute to the strength of your organization.
- **Try to make every task a learning experience.** You might ask, for instance, "Who would like to learn how to make flyers for the next fundraiser?" This approach will help involve new people and will build talents and knowledge within the group. It will also avoid the trap where a member who has a specific skill gets stuck doing the same job all the time.
- **Let the person you ask say no, but don't say it for them.** Instead of asking, "I know you are really busy and you probably can't do this..." Simply explain the reasons why the job is important and ask for the person's help.
- **Be clear about your expectations and get a commitment.** Explain clearly to the volunteer what needs to happen and by when. It may be necessary to negotiate with him or her about the timeline or about specific parts of the project. However, be sure to come to an agreement that both of you commit to live up to.
- **Remind the group of its goals.** If it is hard to find volunteers to do the work, it may be necessary to revisit the group's goals and see if people are still committed to doing the work it will take to accomplish them.

Following up

The delegator's role does not end when the jobs are all assigned. Giving careful attention to the final follow-up stage is essential to make sure that the delegated work is done well and on time. Proper follow up can achieve much more than simply what needs to be done; it can help each member who volunteered feel good about his or her contribution and be likely to do more in the future. Some of the things to keep in mind during this final stage are:

- **Provide training.** Some people may need training to do the tasks they have offered to do. This could involve accompanying them to a government office and showing them how to get access to the information they need. It could also mean pairing a volunteer with another member who has experience in a certain area.
- **Be accessible.** Be sure volunteers know how to reach you if they have questions or concerns. They should be told that they are responsible for informing you if problems arise. The night before a major event is not the best time to check in with a volunteer the first time, you may want to call then as well. Each person will have a different style of working and some may need more supervision than others.
- **Be encouraging.** Help motivate others and express your confidence in their abilities to do the assigned tasks. Encourage creativity and be tolerant of risk-taking and mistakes. Emphasize the importance of learning new skills, especially if the volunteer feels uncomfortable because other group members have more experience in doing a particular job.
- **Hold members accountable.** Remind people that they have made a commitment to the group. If they are unable to fulfill their obligation, ask them to suggest a solution which will get the job done. If a task does not get done, find out why as soon as possible. It may be helpful to ask people to explain to the group why they were unable or unwilling to do what they said.
- **Congratulate!** Be sure to thank people for jobs well done. Depending on the situation, your group might give awards or some public recognition, or it might simply send thank-you notes to volunteers. Regardless of what method you choose, the important thing is to make people feel that they have contributed to building the group and achieving its goals.

Community Organizing and Civic Renewal: A View from the South

by Seth Borgos and Scott Douglas

At the core of every strong community organization - its fundamental source of cohesion - is the conviction that it offers its members a unique vehicle for exercising and developing their capacities as citizens. Like many truisms, however, it is often asserted in a vague, rhetorical, even sentimental manner, as if it could simply be taken for granted. Community organizations have invested far more time in publicizing issues and campaigns than in articulating their contributions to democratic governance. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that political elites, the media, and the public at large tend to perceive organizing as a genre of public-interest advocacy, or special-interest pleading, rather than as a vital thread in the social fabric.

For the past several years, a circle of organizers from the southern US and institutional supporters of their work have been exploring strategies to enhance the resource base of community organizing*. This discussion has been informed by the burgeoning debate among scholars, pundits, and politicians over the health of civil society. We recognize affinities between the theoretical issues at play in that debate and the problems encountered "on the ground" in southern communities. At the same time, we've been troubled by the lack of reference to community organizing as actually practiced in the US, and by the tendency to treat components of civil society as interchangeable parts despite profound differences in orientation and value. These observations have prompted scrutiny into the way that organizing is understood outside its immediate circle of practitioners.

This article is one product of our inquiry. Its goal is to support the claim of community organizing to democratic significance by articulating this claim in a more precise and explicit form. This requires us to locate community organizing within the broader context of contemporary debate over the condition of civil society, to distinguish between community organizations and other kind of voluntary associations, and to provide a more vivid picture of how community organizations fulfill their role in practice. Although these ambitions extend well beyond the scope of a single article, we hope that our brief treatment will suggest some of the rich possibilities of the subject and the fundamental issues at stake.

The Great Social Capital Debate

The recent publications of Robert Putnam - a landmark study of Italian regional governments, followed by a series of papers devoted to the US - have revived a longstanding debate over the character of civic engagement in a democratic society. This debate has established a new framework for discussion, taking a vocabulary that was previously confined to academic use (civil society, secondary associations, social capital) and introducing it into common currency. These concepts, slippery as they are, offer a useful starting point for assessing the contribution of community organizations to civic life.

Civil society, as we understand the term, refers to a social domain that is distinct from the formal institutions of government, the profit-seeking activities of the market, and the intimate realm of friends and family. The institutions that inhabit this domain - churches, labor unions, sports leagues, Elks Clubs, Girl Scouts, PTAs - are variously known as secondary or voluntary or mediating associations. Since de Tocqueville, many observers of American democracy have attributed the distinctive features of our politics to the density and vigor of these local institutions. But the link between civil society and democracy has become more tenuous in recent decades. Seeking to explain the growing cynicism of the American voter, the rise of "sound bite politics," and the incapacity of government to address fundamental social problems, some critics such as Putnam have pointed to the deterioration of civil society as a likely culprit.

In depicting the reliance of representative government on a healthy civil society, Putnam has adopted the term social capital, coined in the 1980s by sociologist James Coleman, which, according to Putnam, refers to "features of social organization that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit." Many of these features are intangible like sentiments of trust, expectation or mutual obligation. Recent scholarship has applied the social capital concept to the institutions of civil society: voluntary associations, regardless

of their putative function, provide their members with certain goods that enable them to participate more effectively in the realm of politics. These goods include:

- practical experience and skills in the "democratic arts" (how to conduct meetings, lead discussions, develop consensus, etc.);
- "safe space" to listen to each other and engage in sustained discussion of public issues;
- a sense of collective efficacy and competence, the conviction that problems can be resolved through cooperative effort;
- a broad sentiment of solidarity and social trust that spills over into other arenas of civic, political, and economic activity.

Putnam's findings focus on the quantity of civic activity, but say very little about its quality. Which kinds of social capital are most significant for the health of a democracy? Are certain types of associations especially productive in this respect, and what are the features that make them so? These issues have not been adequately addressed in the great social capital debate, but they are crucial to any assessment of community organizing and to the broader question of how democracy might be strengthened through the medium of civil society.

Community Organizations as Social Capital

"Community organization" is a notoriously elastic term, but its most common usage refers to organizations that are democratic in governance, open and accessible to community members, and concerned with the general health of the community rather than a specific interest or service function. For greater precision, practitioners sometimes use direct action or mass-based to designate organizations that empower their members to speak and act on their own behalf rather than through professional intermediaries. It is this type of organization, rather than the generic civic association, that is the subject of our inquiry.

Drawn mainly from our collective experience, we have distilled several elements that distinguish the character and aspirations of direct-action community organizations from other kinds of voluntary associations:

A participative culture. Many voluntary organizations seek an active membership, either for practical reasons (the work won't get done otherwise) or as a matter of equity (everyone should pull their own weight). But community organizations are unusual in viewing participation as an end in itself. Under the rubric of leadership development, they devote considerable time and resources to enlarging the skills, knowledge, and responsibilities of their members. It is not an accident that the injunction, "never do for others what they can do for themselves," is known as the iron rule of organizing, rather than, for example, the iron rule of bowling leagues. The very purpose of direct action organizing is contravened when membership is comprised of passive supporters or donors rather than people actively engaged in the work of the organization.

Inclusiveness. Community organizations are generally committed, as a matter of principle, to developing membership and leadership from a broad spectrum of the community. Many are expressly dedicated to fostering civic participation among groups that have been "absent from the table," including communities of color, low-income constituencies, immigrants, sexual minorities, and youth; unlike other kinds of voluntary associations that, in most instances, tend to draw their membership from a narrow social base and their leadership from business and professional elites. Being genuinely inclusive and developing leadership capacity among historically marginalized groups require more than good intentions; they demand a high level of skill, a frank acknowledgment of power disparities, and a major investment of time and effort.

Breadth of mission and vision. In their work in rural Minnesota, organizers Ellen Ryan and Julie Ristau have observed the tendency of civic institutions to become stuck on certain functions while losing sight of the larger problems of the community. "Rather than encouraging broad and reasoned discussion of the urgent and important issues of the day, unions, religious congregations, business associations, political

parties, schools, service, and special interest clubs focus on narrowly-defined tasks and offer their members narrowly-defined answers. Members are treated as clients and consumers of services, or volunteers who help the needy, rather than as participants in the evolution of ideas and projects that forge our common life."

In principle, every issue that affects the welfare of the community is within the purview of community organizing. In practice, strong community organizations have proven adept at integrating a diverse set of issues and linking them to a larger vision of the common good. As this holistic function has been abandoned by political parties, churches, schools, and other civic institutions, community organizations have emerged to fill the vacuum.

Critical perspective. Perhaps the most distinctive quality of direct-action community organizations is their critical orientation toward political, economic, and social institutions. Community organizations seek to change policies and institutions that are not working, and in many communities they are the only force promoting institutional accountability and responsiveness. Because community organizations take critical positions, they can be viewed as partisan or even polarizing in some contexts, and an obstacle to social collaboration. The current vogue for "consensus organizing" seems to reflect this view. But, it is worth emphasizing that Putnam, in his Italian research, found no correlation between the level of political conflict and the performance of the regional governments he studied. The key variable was "civicness," not consensus; regions with a rich base of civic activity had effective governance even when there was a high level of political polarization. A critical stance may generate conflict, but it can also stimulate participation and sharpen political discourse in ways that lead to deeper and richer forms of social collaboration.

Civic Life and Community Organization in the South

The South has not been immune to the trends in civic participation and political behavior that are being observed across the United States: declining voter participation; declining commitment to traditional secondary associations (PTAs, civic groups, etc.); increased distrust of government, the media, and civic institutions; and the growing appeal of simplistic responses to economic stagnation and political gridlock. However, civic life in the South also exhibits some features that are distinctive if not unique to the region:

- In many communities, particularly in the rural Deep South, white leaders have maintained the de facto exclusion of African Americans from effective participation in decision-making. The threat of economic and physical retaliation continues to be wielded to intimidate those who might challenge the status quo.
- In parts of the South that have been historically dependent on a single industry or national resource, civic leadership is often dominated by narrow cliques that are unwilling to enlist new energies and incapable of responding creatively to the decline of the economic base.
- Labor unions and other forms of association among workers remain extremely weak in most parts of the region. South Carolina, for example, has come closer than any state in the nation in creating a union-free environment, with only 3 percent of its workforce in labor organizations.
- Although religion is a powerful influence in southern society, the institutional participation of churches in civic life historically has been less explicit than in other regions of the country. This pattern is attributable to a number of factors, ranging from theological constraints (especially within the evangelical and pentecostal faith traditions) to racial exclusion (for African-American churches).
- Overall, the South is characterized by a combination of strong kinship ties and community identities with relatively weak civic institutions. As one organizer put it, "The churches, the communities, the kinship networks all operate in the same fashion. They respond to personal needs in a personal way, not in a structural or institutional way."

It is in this environment that hundreds of organizations have emerged in communities across the South, from urban neighborhoods in fast-growing cities to impoverished rural counties in Appalachia, the coastal lowlands, and the Mississippi Delta. The illustrations that follow hardly do justice to the diversity or

organizations in the region, but they offer some representative images of southern community organizations at work.

Tallahatchie County, Mississippi

For those who might assume that the "Old South" died around 1965, a visit to Tallahatchie County is instructive. Located on the eastern edge of the Mississippi Delta, with a population that is 59 percent African American, the county has a long history of racial terrorism; the men who lynched Emmitt Till in 1957 were acquitted by an all-white jury in the county courthouse. As of 1990, nearly a generation after the Voting Rights Act, no Black person had ever won a county-wide election, and Tallahatchie remained one of the ten poorest counties in the nation.

These conditions were in part due to the intransigence of the white minority, but they were also the product of internal strife, turf battles, and unaccountable leadership within the Black community. The unity of purpose achieved in the civil rights movement had dissipated into "mischief of faction" during the 1970s and 80s, as a multitude of organizations, clubs, and networks pursued their own divergent agendas. The prevailing opinion in the county was that it was impossible to unite the Black community around any issue of importance.

In January 1991, a Jackson-based organization, Southern Echo, conducted a weekend-long workshop in Tallahatchie on redistricting opportunities in the wake of the 1990 census. Community residents heard presentations on the technical aspects of redistricting, dissected the issues in small groups, and engaged in a "role-play" presentation to the County Board of Supervisors. By the end of the workshop, contrary to all expectations, the participants had formed an umbrella organization encompassing all the major factions within the African-American community, and they had agreed upon a plan to take a redistricting proposal to the County Board.

After a six-month organizing campaign, the board agreed to hold public negotiations - the first time the supervisors had ever agreed to negotiate with a Black organization. The negotiations stretched out over more than a dozen sessions, but by the end of the process, the supervisors had acquired a grudging respect for the expertise and commitment that the community negotiating team brought to the table, and they were talking face to face about demographic details. Finally, supervisors and community negotiators shook hands on a plan that was designed to create three "electable" Black districts for the five-member board.

Although this plan subsequently was rescinded by the supervisors under pressure from their white constituents and then restored, in a somewhat different form, by a federal court, the habits of unity and risk-taking that had been acquired in the process were not lost to the African-American community. In 1993, three residents who had led the redistricting struggle ran for the County Board and, with the help of a strong get-out-the-vote effort, two were elected to office. While they do not comprise a majority, their presence has fundamentally altered the culture of Tallahatchie County government. In the past two years, the county has attracted several new industries, created two public parks, and has won designation as a federal Enterprise Community. Community activists have also formed a nonprofit housing corporation and have become involved in state legislative and Congressional redistricting.

The Tallahatchie County story differs in significant respects from the usual pattern of racially charged battles over redistricting in the South. Typically, voting rights strategies are pursued by attorneys and other experts on behalf of the disenfranchised communities. In Tallahatchie, community members took control of the redistricting process. Direct involvement in redistricting gave members of the African-American community a higher stake in the outcome and a greater investment in the political process. And the experience of face-to-face negotiation created a public relationship between Black and white leaders for the first time in the county. These benefits will endure in the community long after the current districting plan is superseded by demographic changes or new interpretations of the Voting Rights Act.

Floyd County, Kentucky

The domination of a civic life by an insular, self-serving, complacent elite is not limited to the racially polarized communities of the Deep South. Floyd County, nearly 100 percent white, lies at the heart of the eastern Kentucky coalfields. Since the turn of the century, the county has been shaped by mineral speculators, company towns, and the boom/bust cycles of the coal industry. This history has left a legacy of structural unemployment, a political system ruled by patronage and kinship ties, and a school system that, in recent years, ranked dead last in student achievement among Kentucky's 180-plus districts.

In 1981, the Kentucky Fair Tax Coalition (KFTC) was established as a "citizens social-justice organization using direct-action organizing to challenge unjust institutions." Based in Prestonsburg, the Floyd County seat, KFTC made explicit its intention to be statewide and locally based. For the next decade, KFTC members in Floyd County helped to lead the organization in successful local and statewide battles over natural resource issues, including coal mining, oil and gas drilling, water protection, and forestry.

The outcome of these battles showed that average citizens could challenge entrenched power brokers and win. It also showed that success depended as much on a democratic process within the community organizations as in the public institutions that were the targets. In the highly fictionalized political culture of Floyd County, KFTC was one of the few civic associations that was genuinely open and inclusive - and the only one that was challenging the status quo in a principled and constructive fashion.

KFTC's reputation attracted a group of local community college students--mostly single mothers receiving some form of public assistance who were upset about the closing of a student resource center. They joined the Floyd County chapter in 1994 to receive skills training, support for their immediate grievance, and a vehicle to pursue their broader ambitions for compassionate and meaningful welfare reform. They subsequently met with social service officials, members of the Governor's staff, and state and federal legislators. For many of these policymakers, it was a novel and challenging experience to debate welfare reform with people who were "living the system" rather than with professional advocates and policy wonks.

The impact of these women was equally significant within KFTC. This small group of members from Floyd County was able to convince the organization to adopt new platform planks on welfare and make the issue a statewide priority in 1997. What made this possible? In part, they were able to appeal to a set of explicit organizational values: democracy, equality, economic justice. Equally important, however, was the space created by the organization for dialogue among members grounded in a presumption of mutual trust and solidarity. Meeting one-on-one, in small groups, and in larger organizational forums, the women of Floyd County were able to confront stereotypes, change perceptions, and open up KFTC to a new set of social and economic concerns.

In seeking to replicate this dialogue within the public at large, the members of KFTC are swimming against a powerful tide. It will be a challenge for the organization to influence welfare reform in Kentucky as it takes shape over the next several years, but given the poisonous quality of the debate, the capacity to promote discourse that is reasoned, principled, and respectful is in itself a notable contribution to the state's political culture.

Fleming County, Kentucky

Fleming County lies in an agricultural region approximately 45 miles northeast of Lexington, where tobacco, a labor-intensive, high-value-per-acre crop, has long been the mainstay of the economy. Tobacco has traditionally supported a broad base of family farms, and Fleming lacks the history of extreme income disparities and political polarization that characterizes Tallahatchie and Floyd counties. Nevertheless, the community is under considerable stress because demand for tobacco is declining, and alternative sources of farm income have not been developed. The community is also facing an environmental challenge; Fleming Creek ranks among the top three watersheds in the state in pollution from "non-point sources," and runoff from family farms is the principal source of contamination.

The Community Farm Alliance (CFA) is a 12-year-old membership organization dedicated to improving the quality of life in Kentucky's rural communities. Several years ago, CFA's Fleming County chapter launched a special project to identify long-term strategies for restoring local waterways that would not endanger the livelihood of farmers. The project reached out to a wide range of people in the community, including local public school students who formed an environmental committee with several dozen members and became deeply involved in the project. Among the activities undertaken by the young people are:

- monitoring water quality on a weekly basis at six sites along Fleming Creek;
- evaluating a variety of "low-tech" pollution abatement methods that are being tested by local farmers, and researching methods that have been successful elsewhere;
- organizing a community education day on water quality issues;
- developing a paper and multi-media presentation on the project for the annual meeting of the National Soil Conservation Society;
- conducting video interviews for an oral history of the watershed and its inhabitants.

The involvement of the young people has given the watershed project greater visibility and impact in Fleming County, and it has also helped CFA to recognize young people as an underutilized resource for community problem-solving. In a new initiative to address the outflow of youth from rural Kentucky, young people are planning to interview their peers, consult with teachers and job counselors, and conduct a forum for state legislators and policymakers. The aim is to devise specific proposals for expanding economic opportunities and enhancing quality-of-life assets that will encourage Kentucky's youth to remain in the state.

CFA did not set out to organize youth. Young people were drawn to the organization because of its inclusive orientation, and they were welcomed because they had something valuable to offer. In contrast to many youth agencies, young people were treated, in Ristau and Ryan's formulation, as "active participants in the evolution of ideas and projects" that will shape the future of Fleming County. These projects may resemble conventional service activities, but what makes them distinctive is that they are focused on systemic problems and systemic solutions. In that respect, they embody a critical stance toward the existing order rather than acceptance of the status quo.

Conclusion

These brief descriptions illustrate some of the basic features of direct-action community organizations. They also provide glimpses of how these disparate elements can combine, under favorable conditions, to generate social capital of unusual value to a democratic society.

First, because community organizations are both relational and inclusive, they can be highly effective at fostering trust among people divided by culture, class, self-interest or ideology. Like other secondary associations, community organizations promote solidarity among their members, but these solidarities tend to bridge difference rather than reinforcing them. At a moment when social identities are proliferating, and social trust continues to decline, this bridging capacity seems a particularly useful asset.

Secondly, community organizations can be a powerful vehicle for political education, providing insight into civic issues and political institutions that is far deeper and more nuanced than the information offered by the mass media. In community organizations, people learn by doing, and knowledge applied is far more likely to be absorbed than knowledge that is passively received. At the same time, the critical orientation and broad purpose of community organizations give them the opportunity (not always realized) to enlarge the sensibilities of their members in ways that go beyond practical knowledge.

Finally, community organizations have shown a knack for addressing divisive issues that often seem intractable in other contexts: conflicts between environmental protection and economic livelihood, between the welfare and working poor, between freedom and regulation, between individual rights and group

representation. In recent decades, American governance has oscillated between legislative and regulatory mandates that often seem excessively rigid and laissez-faire policies that inevitably favor the most powerful interests. When they have had the power to do so, community organizations have demonstrated a capacity to fashion solutions that are sensitive to local conditions yet attentive to broad principles of justice.

Community organizations, at their best, have a transformative effect on individuals and communities. While the classic secondary association seeks a stable niche within civil society, and evolves chiefly to survive, the community organization is a change agent. Through the medium of the organization, people move from passivity to leadership, from fear to boldness, from cynicism to a wary sort of faith.

Of course, community organizations are hardly alone among voluntary associations in making a distinctive contribution to social capital, and there are many dimensions in which they fall short. Few community organizations can match churches in providing personal support to individuals and families. While some community organizations are taking young people more seriously, they are unlikely to substitute for youth-led and youth-serving institutions. And workplace organizations are sorely needed not only to protect against exploitation, but to help shape the economy in ways that permit workers to develop their full capacities.

If our claim for the significance of community organizations is at all compelling, it has several implications. Social critics and scholars should examine the issues raised here in a more comprehensive and rigorous fashion. Community organizations should evaluate their community-building functions with the same critical attention they have devoted to issue campaigns and organizational development, and funders who support community organization should do the same. Finally, anyone who is concerned with the health of our democracy should think about what it might mean to have a much thicker web of sophisticated community organizations in this country, a web that touched ten or fifty or one hundred million Americans rather than the half million or so who are engaged now. It would take considerable investment to build this infrastructure, but is there a better investment we could make?

* Participants in the discussions that shaped this article, in addition to the authors, include: John Humphries, West Virginia Organizing Project; Leroy Johnson, Southern Echo; Ann Johnson and Corry Stephenson, South Carolina United Action; Burt Lauderdale, Kentuckians For The Commonwealth; Maureen O'Connell, Save Our Cumberland Mountains; Shirley Richmond, JONAH; Joe Szakos, Virginia Organizing Project; Bill Troy, Tennessee Industrial Renewal Project; Deborah Webb, Community Farm Alliance; Jim Sessions, Highlander Research and Education Center; Naomi Swinton, Grassroots Leadership; Walter Davis, Rosemary Derrick, Vicki Quatmann and June Rostan, Southern Empowerment Project; Millie Buchanan, Jessie Smith Noyes Foundation; Sandra Mikush, Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation; Kathy Partridge and Chuck Shuford, Needmor Fund; Christina Roessler, French American Charitable Trust; and, Alta Starr, New World Foundation. The discussions were convened under the auspices of the Southern Empowerment Project.