

Funding Community Organizing, Changing Lives

By Christine A. W. Doby

“It seems to me that every person, always, is in a kind of informal partnership with his community. His own success is dependent to a large degree on that community, and the community, after all, is the sum total of the individuals who make it up. The institutions of a community, in turn, are the means by which those individuals express their faith, their ideals and their concern for fellow men We recognize that our obligation to fellow men does not stop at the boundaries of the community. In an even larger sense, every man is in partnership with the rest of the human race in the eternal conquest which we call civilization.”

— Charles Stewart Mott (1875–1973)

Since its beginning in 1926, grantmaking at the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation has focused on the well-being of communities. While much of the earliest grantmaking was done through the local school system, at the core of it was the belief that individuals, families, neighborhoods, schools, businesses, nonprofit organizations and government each have critical roles and responsibilities in creating effective, functional communities.

The Mott Foundation first formally funded community organizing in the 1970s. Since that time, its approach has evolved to address changing times and opportunities. Over



Members of the Interfaith Federation of Northwest Indiana. The Federation received a general support grant from the Mott Foundation, and is a member of the Gamaliel Foundation, an international community organizing network and long-time Mott grantee.

Photo: Rick Smith, Rick's Photography, Rochester Hills, Michigan

the past three decades, the Mott Foundation has been viewed as a national philanthropic leader, embracing community organizing as a central strategy for alleviating poverty and promoting civic engagement.

At its best, community organizing is a transforming experience. Through strategic issue selection, research and direct action, people engage in public life and redefine their relationships to each other and to those in positions of

power. In the process, they build democratically controlled community institutions that can address complex problems, represent the will (continued on page 13)

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Changing Lives

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and power of the community, and contribute knowledge and experience that other communities can use. Regardless of the issue, community organizing works for public policies that, by design, enhance citizen engagement rather than treating residents as consumers, clients, victims or claimants.

The Mott Foundation's community organizing grantmaking is part of its Pathways Out of Poverty program, one of four programmatic interest areas. Launched in 2000, the poverty program expresses the belief that with the right mix of policies, leadership, commitment and social action, our nation can make great strides to alleviate poverty.

While there is substantial evidence that Americans want to reduce poverty, there persists a myth that poverty alleviation is an insurmountable challenge. Yet, from past experience, we know that this is not the case. For example, during the strong economy of the 1960s and the War on Poverty, the poverty rate was cut in half, from 22.4 percent in 1959 to 11.1 percent in 1973. The poverty rate crept back up over the following 20 years. However, in the 1990s, we had a strong economy along with a set of policies that promoted and supported work, and the poverty rate dropped from 15.1 percent in 1993 to 11.3 percent in 2000.

In each of these periods, the U.S. experienced a near-full employment economy along with federal and state policies that rewarded work and individual initiative, supportive civic institutions, and spirited community organizing and civic engagement that insisted on a sustained national commitment to reduce poverty.

Organizing provides the opportunity for people to develop their own analyses and promote their own decisions by building individual and collective capacity for study, reflection, deliberation, decision-making and action.

The start of the current decade was a time of nearly unprecedented prosperity in the nation. Many Americans were living well, and most were removed from the segregated neighborhoods and rural communities where working class and poor families are concentrated. It often was difficult for most people to grasp fully the depth and consequences of poverty, especially after seeing the economic improvements in the previous decade. Yet, millions of

Americans at that time also lived in communities suffering social and economic decline, far from vital services, plagued by crime and unemployment and, by most measures, conscripted to failing schools.

Against this backdrop, the Foundation launched a robust grantmaking effort to enhance the effectiveness of community organizing as a tool to reduce poverty and increase civic engagement. While most philanthropic support for organizing is focused on a specific issue, the majority of Mott's support to organizing networks has been for general purposes. These grants allowed the groups to assess their infrastructure and growth needs and develop plans to strengthen their organizing work.

Mott's support for community organizing arose from its long-held interests in:

- Learning how people can live together to create a sense of community, whether at the neighborhood level or as a global society;
- Nurturing strong, self-reliant individuals to ensure a well-functioning society;
- Promoting the social, economic and political empowerment of all individuals to preserve fundamental democratic principles and rights; and,
- Encouraging responsible citizen participation to help foster social cohesion.

The primary way that community organizing differs from other efforts to increase civic engagement is that rather than focusing on programs or activities, organizing

focuses on leadership development, relationship building, and culture change. Instead of asking people to participate in projects or initiatives designed by others, organizing provides the opportunity for people to develop their own analyses

and promote their own decisions by building individual and collective capacity for study, reflection, deliberation, decision-making and action.

While community organizing is nonpartisan and pluralistic, it does not require people to leave behind their beliefs, affiliations or perspectives. Instead, individual belief systems contribute to a deliberative process through which people determine how to work coopera-

tively to identify issues and to develop solutions to problems. Organizing initiatives do not take the place of politics, other democratic processes or institutions. Rather, the relationship building and the skills of organizing enhance politics and can inspire people who have tuned out of public life. At the end of the day, however, organizing must deliver tangible assets to low- and moderate-income communities.

Community organizing continues to grow in sophistication and the ability to take action on major issues related to family economic well-being, including housing, transportation, workforce training, job development, education and health care. Today, community organizing groups work to form alliances with researchers, legal advisors, academics, advocacy organizations and think tanks to advance important changes in public policy.

A recent assessment of community organizing prepared for the Foundation identified tangible successes, including:

- PACT in Miami worked to double the county's bus fleet and won a transportation referendum, which will bring \$17 billion over 20 years to the public rail and bus systems.
- BREAD in Ohio won creation of a city-county Housing Trust Fund, which has generated over \$20 million thus far.
- InterValley Projects in New England won a \$2 million per year increase in federal funding for job training, passage of a cap on transportation fees for 70,000 temporary workers, and \$36 million for a Neighborhood Opportunities Program that resulted in 966 affordable housing units.
- Virginia Organizing Project won \$339 million to finance low-income home ownership and rental construction loans, an increase of \$1.5 billion in new state support to public schools, and worked to streamline the process by which former felons can have their voting rights restored in Virginia.
- Gamaliel affiliates in Wisconsin negotiated agreements with 16 banks that resulted in \$700 million in loans to 7,000 homeowners and helped win increased funds for drug rehab programs as a result of a "treatment instead of prison" campaign.

- PICO affiliates in California won expansion of the State Children's Health Insurance Program, expanded access to health insurance for uninsured people, \$50 million in additional funding for after-school programs in poor districts, \$15 million for parent/teacher home visitation, and an investment of \$42 million to improve the infrastructure of health clinics.
- Washington (D.C.) Interfaith Network built 150 new town homes in the district, won agreement for hundreds of new living-wage construction apprenticeship jobs, and won agreement on a \$100 mil-

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lion Neighborhood Investment Fund.

- CLOUT in Kentucky won the commitment of the chief justice of the state's Supreme Court to double the size of the Drug Court in Louisville; it also won 19 additional beds for drug treatment in the local jail.
- PEACE in Florida worked to pass an unprecedented sales tax in 2004 that dedicates \$35 million each year to provide primary and comprehensive health care for the uninsured; over the next 15 years, the program will generate more than \$525 million; 20,000 uninsured people were served in the first year alone.
- ACORN led or took a substantial part in campaigns that resulted in:
 - \$2 billion in living and minimum wage increases;
 - \$6 billion in predatory lending agreements with banks;
 - \$6 billion in loan counseling and community reinvestment;
 - \$33 million in housing development
 - \$350 million in local infrastructure and public services.

These accomplishments reflect the growth and sophistication of community organizing in recent years, and reports from the field indicate that the Foundation's general support funding has been a critical factor in that

growth. This support has enabled the networks to add staff or free up existing personnel to build new affiliates in community after community. In some cases, the growth has been dramatic:

- PICO National Network grew from 22 groups in 1997 to 53 in 2007, and DART grew from 12 affiliates to 21 during the same period.
- The Gamaliel Foundation doubled in size in the last decade and now is active in 50 metropolitan areas in 22 states.
- The InterValley Project expanded into Maine and developed two new chapters in other New England states.
- ACORN more than doubled its size in the past ten years, with local chapters in 100 cities.
- Virginia Organizing Project doubled in size, growing to 15 chapters.

Not every local organization is equally strong, but every local organization is an expression of the determination and aspirations of its members.

Growth also is evident in the increased number of trained organizers and directors, and in the overall consolidated budgets of the networks and their affiliates. Most of the networks have more than doubled the number of staff organizers since 2000 and plan to recruit and train significantly more over the next five years.

The growth in organizing brings with it the challenge of developing methodologies to evaluate the work and measure the outcomes. The National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy and several foundations are working on this task. Because community organizing has demonstrated such successes and holds such great potential for the future, developing an evaluation system is well worth the investment for funders committed to reducing poverty and reinvigorating American democracy.

The challenge before us is not that nothing can be done to reduce poverty; rather, the challenge is building a constituency of citizens who will generate the new ideas and political will to place poverty at the center of the nation's policy agenda. Community organizing is uniquely designed—and now positioned—to respond to that challenge. ○

Cris Doby is a program officer for The Charles Stewart Mott Foundation's Pathways Outout of Poverty Program.

The Latest News from NCRP

Welcome NCRP's New Board Members

Gara LaMarche, president and CEO of The Atlantic Philanthropies, is the newest member of NCRP's Board of Directors. Other recent additions to the board include **Sherece Y. West, Ph.D.** of The Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation, and **William Schulz** of the Center for American Progress. Both joined NCRP in February.

Research Advisory Committee Formed

In June 2008, we assembled a diverse group of individuals who will provide NCRP's staff with critical input and guidance in implementing our research program as outlined in the Strategic Plan. Members of the Research Advisory Committee (RAC) are esteemed experts in their fields, which represent the broad issue areas that feed into the study of philanthropy and its role in society. Brief biographies for each RAC member are available on the NCRP website.

United Way for Central Carolinas Hit with Executive Compensation Scandal

A joint investigative report by *WCNC-TV* and *The Charlotte Observer* uncovered the \$1.2M benefits package in 2007 for UWCC president Gloria Pace King. You can view Aaron Dorfman's commentaries and TV interview on the NCRP's website.

Please visit www.ncrp.org for the most recent news and information from NCRP.