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We, The People: Policy-making at the Local Level

In the California of the late 1980s, rock cocaine, or “crack,” employed hundreds of young men and women in Oakland’s underground economy. At the all-too-frequent funerals of crack trade victims, ministers appealed to the young people to quit the trade and end the violent competition for turf. Though the numbers of youth actively involved with drugs were a small minority, increased police presence was a burden imposed on all of the city’s teens and young adults. Police tactics emphasized confrontation and intimidation, including harassment, random searches and curfews. As if pouring gasoline over smoldering community anger, the city diverted already meager public spending on schools, social services, playgrounds and recreation centers to bolster the high-profile police presence.

From the scattered protest actions, a growing political consciousness spurred local youth groups and youth-serving agencies to look for ways of bringing the voices of young people into the policy arena. They surveyed over 1,000 kids throughout Oakland and found that the youth had very clear ideas about what to do. At the same time, they examined the city budget and visited youth-serving facilities. Their research confirmed that there weren’t nearly enough resources for kids, and those that existed were under-funded and understaffed.

The youth groups formed a coalition, Kids First! “to shift Oakland’s public policy from approaches that punish youth to policies that engage youth as partners, utilizing youth development.” The group promptly launched a successful effort rescinding the curfew. Five months later, a coalition-sponsored ballot initiative setting aside 2.5 percent of the city’s General Fund exclusively for kids won by a landslide, garnering 75 percent of the vote.

Grassroots Policy-making: Something Old, Something New

Oakland isn’t the only locality where citizens have spoken up and pushed for better policies. We have often heard that “all politics is local,” and in recent years, more than 600 localities have adopted policies regulating tobacco availability, use and marketing; nearly 100 localities have enacted gun control and violence-prevention policies; and Milwaukee, Boston and Oakland are among the over 40 municipalities that have passed “living wage” ordinances guaranteeing above-minimum wages for workers.

Making Policy, Making Change: How Communities Are Taking Law into Their Own Hands offers vivid accounts of the (sometimes arcane) workings of local policy campaigns. Author and activist Makani Themba tells the stories of Oakland’s Kids First! coalition, of a labor-community coalition’s fight for a living wage in Baltimore, of grassroots advocacy around liquor outlet licensing and public health in South Central L.A., of myriad local efforts to reduce cigarette advertising that became a national movement against Big Tobacco, and more. These stories, or as Themba prefers, “chronicles,” demonstrate the growing power of local policy-making to effect progressive social change.

Three crucial lessons, drawn from the growing list of local policy initiatives, are worth noting for their value in these campaigns, as well as for the everyday practice of nonprofit leaders.

First, strength and energy arose from groups shifting their mindset from one of decrying what's going wrong to one of articulating a vision of what can be done. For example, in the case of Oakland, the Kids First! coalition, instead of carping at young people about the dangers of dealing drugs, chose to address root causes and underlying issues: poor education, high unemployment, and limited opportunities. Asking kids what they thought could be done to reduce violence and finding that, in fact, there was no money in the budget to fund the safe, supportive places that kids wanted generated the demand for a youth development set-aside in the municipal budget.

Second, in each story, the community was deeply involved in defining the issue, framing the demand and planning subsequent action. Local policy-making is not new, nor is policy-making "on behalf" of poor people, but policy-making founded on a strategy of engaging disfranchised people as equals in the process of defining the public interest is a more recent development—and gaining popularity. One of the most difficult tasks associated with this kind of advocacy involves working across racial and ethnic lines (see the Box on the "gorilla in the living room").

Finally, good local policy efforts do their homework. Painstaking research, constant diligence and attention to detail prepared them for the inevitable bumps in the road—from the many tedious bureaucratic hurdles to the sometimes ruthless counter-tactics of the opposition. They also pay close attention to the "fine print" of policy agreements, understanding the difference between a promise and a commitment. (See the Stages Box for a closer look at the elements of a successful policy initiative.)

Toward the Future and our Role as Nonprofit Leaders

Successful local campaigns seem to fuse the best elements of community organizing with an understanding of how the "inside game" of policy-making is really played. Themba urges progressives to support "people-centered" policy work, noting that funders, scholars, and other activists are slowly discovering the power of organizing around specific policy questions and getting the agreements of public officials in writing "as law, regulation or internal policy." Arguing that local policy work is rapidly becoming the prime strategy for increasing grassroots influence on policy-makers, Themba believes that grassroots groups are especially influential at this level because of their greater access to the local constituents of elected officials looking for re-election. Moreover, she explains, the most far-reaching laws and regulations enforcing corporate accountability and protecting the public health and the environment have all emerged from local policy arenas.

Because of its focus on the responsibility and responsiveness of social and political institutions, a grassroots public policy agenda will invariably encounter what Rev. M.L. King termed "our nettlesome task." King counseled the burgeoning peace and justice movement of the late-1960s "to discover how to organize our strength into compelling power so that the government cannot elude our demands... a situation in which the government finds it wise and prudent to collaborate with us."

Echoing King's sentiments, organized grassroots effort and institutional accountability are recurring themes in Themba's thesis. "Building a movement," she asserts, "requires... a sense of collectivity, processes of communication, shared values, and a broad common purpose." Historically, responsibility for marshalling the energies and imaginations of ordinary people for collective action has fallen to the nonprofit sector. Themba suggests that nonprofits—and funders in particular—can provide the network infrastructure for oppressed (and often besieged) communities to speak for themselves.

Box: Confronting the Gorilla in the Living Room

For most otherwise well-intentioned people, racism remains the 800-pound gorilla in the living room—an unwelcome, frequently unacknowledged, yet ubiquitous visitor huffing and grunting in the corner. Confronting cherished illusions, *Making Policy, Making Change* broaches the taboo subject of racism's influence in public policy. "Local activists seeking policies to address fundamental causes of death, disease and injustice," Themba insists, "must address the structural nature of racism."

Sadly, the notion of “race” as a driving force in contemporary American life is often studiously ignored or disparaged as a source of unneeded tension and divisiveness. Themba upholds the need for a critical, race-conscious social policy frame. Illustrating her point, she notes how the frequent use of racial code words in the debates over welfare reform gave “angry white men” a ready-made scapegoat for their fears, insecurities and frustrations. Similarly, a kind of de facto segregation of the environmental movement was founded on the reluctance of mainstream environmentalists to grapple with the disparate effects of environmental racism on communities of color.

Themba proposes redefining the “terms and obligations of the social contract” by bringing the question of racial justice to the center of public discourse. She outlines three broad areas of need: first, for research that disaggregates findings by class, gender and race; second, for grassroots policy strategies that include vigorous voter registration, education and get-out-the-vote efforts in communities of color; and third, for “new, less comfortable alliances” willing to confront the racial contradictions embedded in our laws, customs and institutions.

Box: General Stages in the Development of a Policy Initiative

These seven stages outlined below tend to overlap and may not be strictly sequential. Yet effective grassroots initiatives will rarely skip any one of them.

1: Testing the Waters. A group of stakeholders convenes and begins to develop ideas for solutions to a problem, testing for legality, likelihood of success and various approaches for enlisting broad community support and involvement.

2: Defining the Initiative. The group refines the primary issue into a clear, practical policy initiative: a planned set of activities, with clear goals and objectives, to address some part of the issue. The best initiatives come from stakeholders articulating their “ideal” policy and then looking for the best mechanisms to bring their vision into reality.

3: Strategy and Analysis. The group conducts a “power analysis,” identifying targets, allies, opponents and other factors essential to the campaign—often leading to further refinement of the proposed initiative.

4: Direct Issue Organizing. This means going out into the community, door-to-door or through outreach to organizations. Many advocates skip this step on the assumption that the “sensitivity” of their initiatives will be enough to sway lawmakers without grassroots support or even public awareness, but policy is less about what makes “sense” than about whose interests are served or deferred.

5: In the Belly of “the Beast”. During the long process of getting the policy enacted, the group works intensively with city or county staff. It is important to stay focused on goals and not get lost in the political maneuverings of the bureaucracy.

6: Victory and Defense. After the celebration and evaluation, most ordinances face litigation, so groups should prepare for legal action from the beginning.

7: Enforcement. Getting a new law enforced involves negotiation on issues such as implementation timelines, interpretation of clauses, and prioritizing—it is important for the community to participate throughout this process.