

The Oil Drum: Campfire

Discussions about Energy and Our Future

Facing Forward Together: Four Models for Organizing a Community for an Uncertain Future

Posted by [Jason Bradford](#) on February 25, 2009 - 7:48pm in [The Oil Drum: Campfire](#)

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This is another contribution to Campfire from Michael Foley (user greenuprising). As a rather recent inductee to the process of community organizing, I found myself nodding along to this essay and wishing I had had this sort of background before beginning my work in Willits.

In a [previous post](#), I argued that an important part of preparing at the local level for an uncertain future lies in strengthening our communities and making them more resilient. That takes community organizing, or making use of existing organizations. Mobilizing for policy change at both local, state/provincial, and national levels also requires organization. A few letters to the editor or cranky phone calls to your representatives won't cut it, though it may occasionally be personally satisfying. So how do we organize? And what sorts of organizations can we put to use? The following is an effort to lay out the basic models I've seen in action in the United States and Latin America. With minor differences, I suspect they're pretty much universal in the "modern" sector of societies around the world.

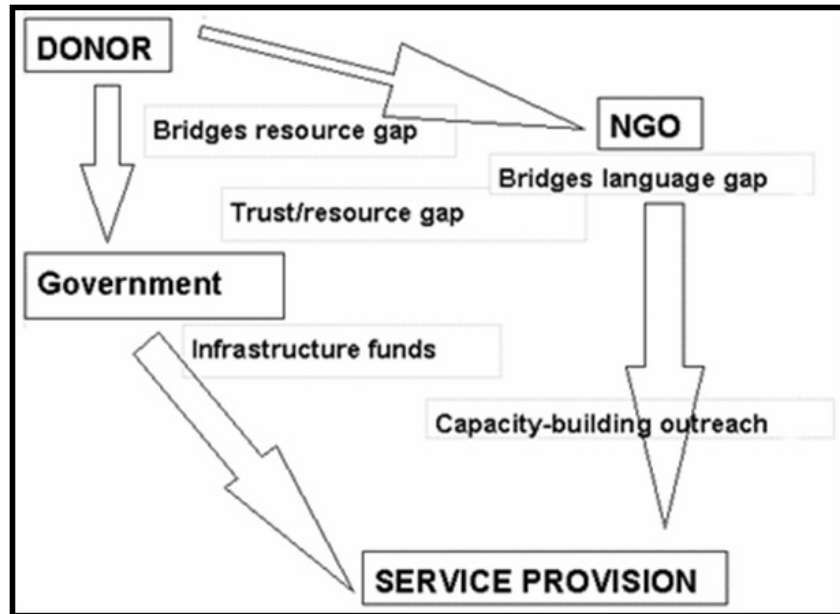
There are four basic models: NGOs (non-governmental organizations), community organizations, coalitions, and "coordinadoras" or "organizations of organizations."

NGO's

NGOs (non-governmental organizations) are relatively small, professionalized advocacy and service organizations. They've proliferated over the last thirty years around the world and become major players in development, advocacy for the disadvantaged and oppressed, and the environment. They can be distinguished from other sorts of non-profits in their small scale and niche market characteristics: hospitals are big, permanent community institutions while health NGOs bring healthcare to refugees and displaced persons; schools and universities have established places in society while education NGOs sponsor early childhood education programs where there are none, conduct after-school classes for disadvantaged kids, or pursue adult literacy programs. Most environmental organizations, big and small, are NGOs. Obviously, there's lots of overlap between traditional non-profits and NGOs, but the difference should be clear enough.

NGOs are very adept at identifying community needs, coming up with solutions, and mobilizing funding. Mostly grant funded they generally have a good deal of independence from government and governmental red-tape. They employ professionals, many of them deeply committed to doing good and pursuing innovative solutions to societal problems. They can make decisions quickly and adapt to local circumstances.

[Caption: NGO graphic for the G8 Summit in Hokkaido, Japan last year]



[Caption: One image of where service NGOs fit in society. Oops! Where are the rest of us?]

Some liabilities come with these advantages. NGOs are not generally democratic but hierarchical in structure internally, run by a strong director or CEO and overseen by an unelected (indeed, self-perpetuating) board of directors. They aren't formally accountable to the communities they serve. Their dependence on grant funding, moreover, makes them vulnerable to the whims of foundations and changing fashions in their field. In many cases, reputation with funders and among fellow NGOs can trump community service. Not being well-rooted in a particular community, they can flit from one trouble spot and one agenda to another, leaving little tangible behind; and they are often not good at mobilizing community support. For these reasons they are sometimes suspect in the eyes of community groups and government officials.

Community organizations

Community organizations are by definition membership organizations, though their constituency can be narrow or broad. As such they're rooted in the community and responsive to the needs, ideals, and demands of at least some community members. They have some claim to representativity and can use that claim before public bodies. They're democratically organized, at least in principle; and that, too, reinforces their claim to representativity. They often have a certain power to convoke public discussion and mobilize citizen action. And they pay their own way, through membership dues and fundraisers more than anything else.

Such organizations are essential to organizing a community response to the uncertainties of a global energy decline and "peak everything". Bringing them aboard is the first step in bringing aboard the larger, harder-to-reach community. But that task may be complicated by some of the disadvantages of community organizations.

Traditional community organizations, for one thing, may be quite narrow in scope and active membership, sclerotic in leadership and action. Peak oil activists might attempt to take them over, but for them to really serve as a vehicle of outreach to the larger community the old guard will have to be brought along, and that will take time and finesse.



As an example: I belong to the local Grange. For those who don't know this organization, the Grange is a U.S. farmer's and rural community organization founded in the 1850's. It has the trappings of traditional fraternal societies but was very active as a center for agitation in the populist movement of the late nineteenth century. It has been supplanted among farmers by the American Farm Bureaus, representing the interests of mostly big ag since the 1930's, but it's still alive and important in many rural communities. My branch has been growing rapidly over the last few years, filled up with local food activists. But there's still a powerful old guard who vehemently defend what had become the central function of the organization, the monthly pancake breakfast, a community event for many old-timers and a traditional fundraiser. (Many a semi-moribund local branch of our Democratic and Republican parties has acquired a similar fetish over the years of party decline.) To them, anything that threatens the pancake breakfast, threatens the Grange. So, when a representative of a local NGO approached the leadership with grant in hand to renovate the kitchen and bring it up to commercial kitchen standards and run it as a communal kitchen, the old guard resisted. Never mind that the purpose of the Grange is to support local agriculture and local food production, never mind that the communal kitchen is supposed to promote "value added" production for local farmers and food entrepreneurs buying their product; the proposal threatened the central activity of the Grange. We're still working this one out, but the conflict illustrates both the difficulties of shifting course in a traditional organization and the problem of NGOs commanding community support.

Activists can also start community organizations from the ground up. These can be powerful vehicles, mobilizing new energies for new purposes. But they run up against some of the problems with community organizations. First, these are by definition membership organizations, therefore, almost by definition, dependent on volunteer labor. At the beginning, when enthusiasm is high, lots of people show up. Soon participation falls off, as people find that the hard slogging of committee work is not for them, or they run into irreconcilable differences with others in the organization. A few dedicated volunteers are left with the bulk of the work, and they not only face burn-out but a possible loss of community support. Efforts to revive sputtering organizations take imagination and lots of effort, but they can mobilize wider support and spark new projects. Continuity thus can be a problem in community organizations, especially where they attempt to carry out long-running projects. For this they are best served by a permanent staff, but few community organizations can afford such a luxury, and many fear (not unreasonably) that staff will end up dominating the elected leadership.

Second, the democratic process makes decision making slow and cumbersome. Organizations have to find decision-making processes that both honor their democratic character and don't get bogged down in endless meetings-of-the-whole – not an easy task. Individual organizations, moreover, cannot take on all the tasks, or wield all the influence, they would like to. This is where our third model, coalitions, comes in.

Coalitions

NGOs and community organizations form coalitions for a specific campaign – to push a new transportation policy, for example, or stop a major polluter. Coalitions don't run projects, they gin up public support for some change in attitude or policy. They help get others to take on projects they wouldn't otherwise do or stop projects they're committed to. Coalitions mean broad support and representativeness almost by definition, and that can translate into effective advocacy. And once a coalition is built, if things don't go disastrously, groups can come back together again for the next campaign and the next and the next.



[Caption: Anti-WTO protests in Seattle in 1999 featured a broad coalition of organizations, including labor unions]

Organizing a coalition takes effort, phone and people skills, and, of course, organizations that can contribute to a coalition. The most effective coalitions are often the broadest-based. If peak oil activists can get the Lion's Club, the biker's association, and the local churches behind a new county transportation policy, they've probably forged a winning coalition. Broad-based coalitions, however, take a lot of work. Activists with considerable powers of persuasion and lots of patience have to expend hours in educational work, and they need counterparts in the leadership of community organizations who are willing to listen. The concerns and limitations of each potential partner have to be taken into account, and group leaders have to be able to defend their participation to their memberships and boards.

Coalitions are also short-lived. They're good for specific campaigns but tend to come apart once

the campaign is over. They're good at getting government to do things or raising funds for this or that good cause, but they can't run projects themselves. For this you need an NGO, solid community organization, or – the last category – an organization of organizations.

Organizations of organizations

By this I don't mean associations or federations. There are lots of these around, but they mainly provide services to their member organizations and advocacy on their behalf. The sorts of meta-organizations I have in mind don't have a name in English but turn out to be not uncommon. In Latin America, they're called “coordinadoras” or “redes” (web/network). In the United States, the most common examples are “ecumenical” or “inter-ministerial” associations, found in hundreds of towns and cities across the country. Some of these are just talking shops for ministers, but most were created to carry out projects that no one church could take on by itself. So we have ecumenical associations running housing projects, food banks, homeless shelters, adult daycare facilities, or clinics. Others provide an umbrella for the local Habitat for Humanity, Peace and Justice Center, Women's Center, etc. In either case, the organization combines the advantages of a permanent staff with community control (through member congregations) and lots of volunteer labor.

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Another example comes from community organizing. Pioneered by the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) founded by Saul Alinsky, the model is used by four major national networks in lots of cities around the country. The main form of the model is a community organization of local churches, temples, and mosques. Participating congregations pay dues to support the efforts of an organizer whose job it is to develop community leaders from among the member organizations and help in generating an agenda for action. IAF has also carried the model to schools in the Southwest, involving parents, teachers and administrators around issues related to school and neighborhood needs. In both cases, organizers are careful to let leaders lead and the community generate its own agenda. The organization puts pressure on governments through political leaders but takes no part in political campaigns. Instead, it calls political leaders to account over the issues the community has identified as important and holds their feet to the fire until their demands are addressed. In some cases, it spins off permanent organizations to manage a project like housing or a public service.

[See pictures and brief description of an IAF green jobs project in Portland [here](#)].

This is a model, then, that has the advantages of representativeness of broad-based coalitions, with the long-term carrying capacity of an NGO or community organization. For those of us attempting to mobilize communities around peak oil issues, it could provide a powerful model. For example, such an organization could carry out concrete projects around local food security, while mobilizing citizens to push for more and better public transportation.

Even more than a coalition, such an organization takes significant effort to put together. It's not for nothing that the two prime examples are the work of professionals – ministers and other religious professionals in the case of the ecumenical association; trained organizers paid, initially at least, by a national community organizing agency in the case of congregation-based organizing. Even more than with coalitions, the concerns of individual organizations within the community have to be taken into account. The most successful example I encountered in Mexico had adopted a “one for all, all for one” formula for action: every member committed to support the

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organization's initiatives – which were themselves the product of consensus decision-making; the organization and its members, meanwhile, were committed to helping to further demands that were specific to one or another member organization. Considerable accommodation to member organizations may be necessary to make this model work. Or, as in the case of the congregation-based organizations, the community organization would have to be explicitly committed to steering clear of issues that were narrowly sectarian in character (abortion, for example). Either way, successful organizing depends on explicitly working out the relation between meta-organization and the member organizations.

Conclusion

There are lots of ways to skin a cat, as we say, or organize a community. Each of these models has its advantages; each has disadvantages or difficulties. The four models I've laid out aren't pure types. There are lots of hybrids out there, and it may make sense to try to forge a hybrid that shares the advantages of more than one model and avoids most of the disadvantages. I'd welcome especially comments that reveal new models or hybrids that have been particularly successful.



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