

# **Participatory Change: An Integrative Approach to Community Practice**

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## **Participatory Change: An Integrative Approach to Community Practice**

This paper outlines a community practice methodology developed at the Center for Participatory Change, a nonprofit organization in the Appalachian mountains of Western North Carolina. This methodology, which we call *participatory change*, signals a confluence of three practice approaches that have rarely been integrated: community organizing (e.g., the approaches of Saul Alinsky, Cesar Chavez, and Si Kahn); popular education (e.g., the approaches of Paulo Freire and the Highlander Research and Education Center); and participatory development (e.g., Participatory Rural Appraisal or PRA). This paper begins by providing an overview of these three practice approaches. We then discuss their strengths and limitations. This is followed by an overview of participatory change as a community practice approach and an introduction to the core values, attitudes, and behaviors that guide the use of the methodology. We have developed the participatory change methodology as a practical and effective next step in the evolution of community practice approaches. We are disseminating this methodology to demonstrate how such integrative approaches are critical in shaping the theory and practice of community organizing and development in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **Three Approaches to Community Practice: Overview**

This section introduces the three practice approaches that we integrated to form the participatory change methodology: community organizing, popular education, and participatory development.

Community organizing. Community organizing refers to the process of bringing citizens together for the purpose of task accomplishment (e.g., accomplishing specific tasks related to community social, economic, political, or physical well-being) and capacity building (e.g., developing skills in organizing, problem analysis, leadership, forming an organization) (Weil & Gamble, 1995). According to Weil and Gamble (1995), organizing efforts can target either *geographic communities*—such as the residents of a specific neighborhood or community—or *functional communities*, which are groups of like-minded people who may share concerns, needs, or issues (such as women, gays and lesbians, or people with developmental disabilities) but who may or may not be in the same geographic area. In terms of practice, organizers are involved in writing action pamphlets, door-to-door canvassing, action research, interagency collaboration, grassroots education and leadership training, lobbying, running meetings and conferences, and community economic development (Rubin & Rubin, 1992). In the US, many of these organizing practices have been built directly or indirectly on the work of Saul Alinsky (Alinsky, 1969; 1971). Alinsky's original approach was based on the idea that a professionally-trained organizer would come into a marginalized community to focus on a specific issue, mobilize people around that issue, build an organization, direct actions and conflicts, and win concessions from elites (Fisher, 1994). In the literature on community organizing, there are both theoretical and historical overviews (e.g., Betten & Austin, 1990; Delgado, 1994; Fisher, 1994; Jenkins, 1985; Rivera & Erlich, 1992) and handbooks for practitioners (e.g., Bobo, Kendall, & Max, 1996; Kahn, 1991, 1994; Rubin & Rubin, 1992; Staples, 1984).

Popular education. Popular education is associated with the work of Paulo Freire in the Global South (Freire, 1970, 1974, 1996) and Myles Horton of the Highlander Research and Educa-

tion Center in the United States (Glen, 1996; Horton, Kohl, & Kohl, 1990). The practice of popular education is based on two processes: learning from experience and dialogue (Castelloe & Watson, 1999). Learning from experience means that through the process of coming together and reflecting on their everyday experiences, people can learn about the larger social, political, and economic contexts in which they live. Dialogic education refers to the idea that educators and students interact with one another in a way in which both are co-speakers, co-learners, and co-actors; this is opposed to traditional approaches to education where passive learners receive deposits of ready-made knowledge from directive teachers. These two processes result in critical consciousness (i.e., a more critical understanding of the broader social, cultural, political, and economic contexts in which one lives), group self-confidence, and collective action. As is the case with community organizing, the literature on popular education includes both theoretical overviews (e.g., Freire, 1970; Horton & Freire, 1991; McLaren & Leonard, 1993; Shor & Freire, 1987) and practitioner-focused handbooks (e.g., Arnold, Burke, James, Martin, & Thomas, 1991; Hope & Timmel, 1995; Nadeau, 1996).

Participatory development. Like much US-based community development work, participatory development (which emerged from the Global South) centers upon the planning and implementation of discrete projects that improve a community's well-being. Unlike some US approaches to community development, however, participatory development starts from the basic belief that everyday people in low-wealth communities are not the target for community development projects; rather, they are the people who determine, drive, and control the entire development process (Chambers 1997; Prokopy & Castelloe, 1999). Participatory development starts from the assumption that marginalized and low-income people best understand the problems they face and how to fix them. Participatory development is notable for three innovations: (1) its emphasis on participatory group methods, especially Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) methods such as community mapping, wealth and well-being ranking, and preference ranking (e.g., Pretty, Guijt, Schoones, & Thompson, 1995); (2) its equal emphasis on the attitudes and behaviors necessary for implementing these methods in a way that is fundamentally participatory (e.g., Chambers 1997); and (3) its emphasis on building the capacity of grassroots groups to thrive on their own over the long haul (Eade, 1997; Gubbels & Koss, 2000). There are several theoretical overviews and collections of case studies related to participatory development (Blackburn & Holland, 1998; Chambers 1997; Guijt & Shah, 1998; Holland & Blackburn, 1998). There are also handbooks that provide practitioners with guidance for implementing PRA exercises (e.g., Archer & Cottingham, 1996; Gubbels & Koss, 2000; Leurs, 1996; Pretty et al., 1995; Theis & Grady, 1991; Thomas-Slayter, Polestico, Esser, Taylor, & Mutua, 1995).

## **Strengths and Limitations of the Approaches**

This section outlines the strengths and limitations of the practice approaches outlined above. We developed participatory change as a practice approach primarily through the experience of doing (and then reflecting upon) community practice work, rather than from academic reflection or study; this is true of much of the analysis presented below.

Community organizing: Strengths and limitations. In terms of strengths, community organizing methods can enable grassroots groups to reach out to potential members (e.g., one-on-one outreach conversations), bring a group together, plan and facilitate meetings, and accomplish tangible community actions. A second strength is that community organizing provides grassroots

groups with proven strategies for facilitating fundamental systems change. From our experience, the major limitation of community organizing stems from its focus on winning on an issue, which leads to a relative neglect of individual learning and participation, and a relative lack of emphasis on analyzing the broader social, cultural, political, and economic contexts in which community organizing takes place. In issue-focused organizing campaigns, a group typically focuses on a single issue (e.g., housing discrimination), wins or loses on that issue, then moves on to another issue (Kahn, 1991). Seasoned organizers recognize that focusing on the short-term work of building the large numbers needed to win on an issue can often mean spending less energy on the long-term work of building sustainable grassroots organizations – organizations that enable people to work together over the long haul to continue meeting their needs (Kahn, 1991). Further, we have found that many organizing efforts are successful at bringing people together and helping them take collective action or influence systems change – but this process has often been planned and managed by an outside community organizer (rather than by the people themselves). While community action and systems change are certainly beneficial, conventional organizing approaches sometimes fail to provide the support that grassroots groups need to address community issues on their own, over the long haul, without the help of community organizers.

Popular education: Strengths and limitations. The strength of popular education methods is their usefulness at promoting learning from experience, dialogic group processes, and critical consciousness. These methods provide excellent tools for drawing forth people's wisdom and ideas, and for helping grassroots groups develop their own framework for understanding and critiquing the causes of community and societal problems. However, we have found that these methods are less effective at providing guidance for planning and implementing projects to address those problems. Popular education, by itself, lacks the action component that is needed to translate critical consciousness into tangible community change. A second limitation is that popular education is most useful when a community-based group already exists; it is an approach that provides little guidance for building a grassroots group from the ground up. Popular education is based on the assumption that collective action best promotes learning. Collective action is most effective and successful when carried out by a grassroots group or organization. Thus the work of helping form and build grassroots groups is of central importance to the process of learning through action – yet popular education, by itself, provides little guidance for forming and building grassroots groups.

Participatory development: Strengths and limitations. The strength of participatory development methods (especially methods from Participatory Rural Appraisal, or PRA) is their usefulness for facilitating participation in community assessment, project planning, and project implementation. These methods provide tools (and a set of attitudes and behaviors) for ensuring that community improvement projects are planned, carried out, driven, and controlled by marginalized people. A second major strength of participatory development is its emphasis on building the capacity of grassroots groups, so that the groups will be able to continue working on community improvement over the long term, with or without external support. A major limitation is that participatory development methods are rarely used to analyze or question the social, cultural, economic, and political forces that result in oppression and domination (Crawley, 1998). PRA methods are useful in assessing community problems and designing interventions to address those problems, but they generally fail to ask why it is that community problems exist in the first place. Consequently, they are less effective at promoting critical consciousness among participants, which leads to the second limitation of PRA methods: their failure to provide guidance for influencing fundamental systems change.

Systems change refers to the process of influencing distributions of resources and influencing policies, procedures, and practices. Although PRA methods do provide guidance for planning and implementing local community development projects, those projects can't be scaled up to create institutional and systemic change without a working framework for understanding and critiquing those larger systems and institutions.

Integrating the three approaches. Staff at the Center for Participatory Change come to our work with practical and theoretical familiarity with all three of the approaches outlined above. We also have a deep commitment to and respect for all three approaches; all three fit our values, as individuals and as an organization. Our approach – participatory change – emerged from our practice, and our practice has been an ongoing attempt to work from a participatory standpoint, using the best of these three approaches to support grassroots efforts in the region in which we work. Sometimes that grassroots work has demanded an approach that looks like community organizing, sometimes more like popular education, sometimes more like participatory development. As a result, our practice has led us to build on the strengths of these approaches – community organizing, popular education, and participatory development – to create participatory change as a distinct practice approach. We have discussed these strengths above; they are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Strengths upon which participatory change is built

<b>What Participatory Change Borrows:</b>		
<b>From Community Organizing</b>	<b>From Popular Education</b>	<b>From Participatory Development</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· outreach methods</li> <li>· bringing a group together</li> <li>· running meetings</li> <li>· collective action methods</li> <li>· systems change approach</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· learning from experience</li> <li>· drawing forth people's wisdom</li> <li>· education through action</li> <li>· critical consciousness</li> <li>· emphasis on larger contexts</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· focus on participation in assessment, project planning and project implementation</li> <li>· capacity building for long term sustainability</li> <li>· recognizes importance of attitudes and behaviors</li> <li>· tangible, self-directed community improvement</li> </ul>

**Participatory Change: Two Core Perspectives**

Core perspective: Power through participation. At a community level, power is participation and participation is power. An early conceptualization of community power suggests that power can be studied by looking at who participates and who gains and loses from the formal decisions made within conventional systems and institutions (Dahl, 1961; Polsby, 1963). This idea is based on two questionable assumptions: (1) that formal community decision-making processes are open to anyone, and (2) that the openness of these decision-making processes means that leaders should be viewed “not as elites, but as representative spokesmen [sic] for a mass” (Gaventa, 1980: 6). If one believes these assumptions, then poor and marginalized people’s lack of participation in the decisions that affect their lives can be explained away as apathy on the part of nonparticipants, and a form of consent for the decisions made. Dissatisfaction with this theory, which blames the poor and

marginalized for their nonparticipation, led political theorists to focus on the “second face of power,” the idea that elites gain power not only through participation in formal decision-making processes, but also through the exclusion of certain participants and issues from those decision-making processes (Bachrach & Baratz, 1970). Subsequent theory focused on a “third face of power,” power that is evident not only in decisions made and the exclusion of certain participants and issues, but also in the shaping of nonparticipants’ fundamental conceptions of the issues to be discussed (Gaventa, 1980; Lukes, 1974). Finally, Gaventa (1980: 24) notes that elites’ power may be challenged when excluded or nonparticipating groups “go through a process of issue and action formulation by which [they] develop consciousness of the needs, possibilities, and strategies of challenge” and carry out “the process of mobilization of action upon issues.” In other words, challenges to power occur when marginalized groups develop a critical consciousness (Freire, 1970; 1974), then act collectively to articulate and meet their needs.

As a practice approach, participatory change is built upon the theory of power and participation outlined above. We start the work of participatory change with a commitment to what participatory development practitioners call “putting the last first” – starting from the perspectives, hopes, needs, dreams, and visions of those who are most marginalized in contemporary local, national, and global societies (Chambers, 1983; 1997). We also start our work from a belief that conventional systems and institutions (e.g., political, economic, social, educational, administrative, and legal systems) fail to meet the needs of society’s most marginalized people, and that these systems are set up to actively deny the participation of marginalized people in the decisions that affect their lives, their families, and their communities (Friedmann, 1992; Gaventa, 1980; Harrison & Bluestone, 1988; Hirschman, 1981; Katz, 1989; Myrdal, 1957). In our experience as community practitioners, existing conventional systems generally benefit certain groups (e.g., men, European Americans, the wealthy) at the expense of others (e.g., women, racial and sexual minorities, people with disabilities, people in low-wealth communities) (Brohman, 1996; Kabeer, 1994; Mander & Goldsmith, 1996; Nelson & Wright, 1995). The goal of participatory change, therefore, is twofold: (1) to work with people to create alternative structures (structures outside of existing systems, such as grassroots organizations) through which groups of marginalized people can come together to articulate and meet their own needs, on their own terms, over the long haul; and (2) to work hand-in-hand with groups of marginalized people as they gain the collective power needed to shape existing systems to become more inclusive, responsive, accountable, and participatory. The ultimate aim of participatory change is to support marginalized groups as they build the power needed to control their own development and participate fully in the decisions that affect their lives.

Core idea: Education through action. The goal of participatory change could be said to be *community* development; but it is community development that is built on *people* development – on people developing the power and voice to articulate their most pressing issues, and the self-assurance to use their existing skills and knowledge to create positive community change. In this sense, participatory change springs from the same philosophical roots as popular education (Freire, 1970; Horton & Freire, 1991). Like popular education, participatory change focuses on community-based education through collective action. Also like popular education, participatory change assumes that people have gained many skills and much knowledge through their life experiences, and that this experiential wisdom can provide the foundation for creating significant community change. The work of a community practitioner is to draw forth these experiential skills and knowledge, help make connections among the skills and knowledge of group members, and help harness those skills and

knowledge for community change (Arnold et al., 1991; Horton & Freire, 1990). At the same time, through the action of creating community change, people begin to have a need to learn new skills and knowledge to supplement their experiential skills and knowledge.

We have found that the best way for adults to learn is to get to work on something important. People learn best when they have a need to understand; this *need to know* is crucial in participatory change, and it comes about through the work of community change. People learn best not through training or education sessions, but through the process of building indigenous grassroots organizations and carrying out locally-controlled community improvement projects.

For example, we have worked with a group of people laid off after a textile plant shut-down in Western North Carolina. Most of these people had traditional skills as craftspeople, so they came together to form a crafts cooperative to generate extra income. Through the process of building this crafts cooperative, group members found that the textile company left a large sum of money to the county Economic Development Commission (EDC) to help laid-off workers. The group asked the EDC if they could have access to that money; they were told that the EDC's resources were restricted to recruiting outside industrial development and couldn't support local entrepreneurs. Because they had a *need to know*, group members began to ask questions such as "How much money does the EDC receive each year? Who gets these funds? How are decisions made about who gets these funds?" As a result of these questions, group members developed critical consciousness – they came to critically understand, perhaps for the first time, the way that formal decision-making occurs in their county, and the way that money is allocated and spent. The development of critical consciousness is as important as the development of a crafts cooperative; but it would not have happened without it. Instead of sitting through a training on the ways that the county budget is used, the group simply got to work. Through their collective actions, the group experienced first-hand what it meant to meet either support or resistance from local and regional institutions. By reflecting on these experiences, the group developed their own framework for understanding, critiquing, and eventually working to change the larger contexts in which their work was taking place.

### **Ten steps in participatory change**

Participatory change: Introduction. As a practice approach, participatory change aims to organize people in low-wealth and marginalized communities into small, locally-directed grassroots groups; support these groups as they create community-based organizations; foster participation in local decision-making; and bring grassroots organizations together to influence systems change at a local, state and regional level (see also Castelleo & Watson, 2000).

In general, the role of the participatory change practitioner is to question, advise, facilitate, and draw forth local people's ideas, skills, and strengths. Practitioners refrain from making decisions for groups or directing their course of action; instead, their role is to facilitate a process where group members work together in an inclusive and participatory way to define their own vision for their community's future, and then create concrete plans for making that vision a reality. This general approach to community practice is consistent with the merging of popular education methods (e.g., asking questions, drawing forth people's knowledge), community organizing methods (e.g., bringing people together for community change), and participatory development methods (e.g., helping to build sustainable grassroots groups). This practice was articulated well by one of the grassroots

partners with which the Center for Participatory Change (CPC) works: “*What CPC has done is ask us questions. I think we’ve learned for ourselves, but they’ve brought all of this out of the group. They’ve brought all these ideas out that were there, but maybe not expressed. They haven’t told us what we’re supposed to do, or when we’re supposed to do it, or how. They have drawn all this out of us.*”

In order to make the practice of participatory change concrete, we have sketched out ten steps that a community practitioner would go through to implement this approach. These steps are not necessarily carried out in the order that they are listed, but they do portray a general progression over time.

**Step 1: Research.** Research refers to the process where a community practitioner learns everything she can about the community in which she will be working. We use two major research methods: community immersion and talking with community gatekeepers. *Community immersion* means spending significant amounts of time driving the community’s roads, reading the local papers carefully, and stopping in at community gathering places to talk informally with local people. At the Center for Participatory Change, we usually work in rural communities in which we do not live, so spending this time getting an informal sense of the community is important before we begin our one-on-one conversations with people. Once we feel that we have this general sense of the community and its issues, we begin to set up one-on-one conversations with key *community gatekeepers*. Gatekeepers are professionals who are well connected in the community, who understand our work, and who are willing to sanction our work. These professionals understand grassroots leaders’ needs and opportunities, and they are trusted and respected by both grassroots leaders and formal decision makers. As an example, the Executive Director of a local domestic violence organization played the role of gatekeeper in one community in which we work. This woman understood our work immediately, helped us understand pressing community issues, connected us with key grassroots leaders, and sanctioned our work with both grassroots leaders and other professionals. Finding this kind of entrée into a community is crucial for the initial success of participatory change efforts.

**Step 2: Outreach.** Outreach refers to the process of holding one-on-one meetings with grassroots leaders about the community’s needs, assets, and goals. We define grassroots leaders as indigenous, local, natural, informal leaders based in marginalized, disenfranchised, or low-wealth communities or groups. In our one-on-one conversations with them, we ask grassroots leaders about their community’s most pressing issues, the community’s major resources, and the ways that people think these issues should be addressed. Crucial to this outreach process is listening – fully, deeply, and actively. Listening to grassroots leaders can be powerful: one grassroots leader told a staff person at the Center for Participatory Change, “You were the first person who ever listened to me. You’re the first person who has ever listened to what I had to say and taken it seriously.” We have found that we are able to listen well because during this step in the process, listening is our only agenda. We may have some sense of pressing community issues from talking with community gatekeepers, and we may have the seed of an idea for addressing those issues. But the goal of outreach is to hear, in a fully present way, grassroots leaders’ thoughts on community issues and potential solutions. At this point, we have no predetermined set of issues, no predetermined solutions – and that allows us to listen openly.

**Step 3: Forming an Idea.** Through the process of holding one-on-one conversations with

grassroots leaders, an idea for a community improvement project starts to emerge. As community practitioners, we may have some ideas for solving the problems that grassroots leaders are facing, and we will often share those ideas with the people with which we are talking. Yet from the start, all decisions and choices are made by local people. We ask questions and listen deeply to the hopes and visions of emerging grassroots leaders, and from this process the seed of an idea for community improvement begins to form. This might be little more than a vague idea – the idea of coming together to generate some extra income, preserve family farms, or carry out a community oral history project. What we are looking for is a starting point – something that could potentially meet people’s needs, something that meets people’s self-interest enough to bring them out for a first meeting. By the time a group meets for the first time, people attending the meeting have a general sense of the meeting’s purpose, and that sense of purpose is shared by everyone attending. The purpose itself – to form a group to generate some extra income, for instance – is less important to us than the fact that the idea is powerful enough to bring people together.

**Step 4: Forming a Vision.** In the first few meetings of a group (usually attended by five to ten people), we use participatory exercises and methods to help the group clarify its vision and goals. We usually facilitate these early meetings; we also generate notes that summarize the group’s decisions. (Later in a group’s development we will hand over facilitation and note-taking to group members, as part of the capacity building process.) These first meetings are crucial for the group’s long-term development. It is here that the group sets its vision – its overarching definition of why members have come together. This vision can later serve as an anchor, should the group drift from its original intent. It is also here that the group begins to set both short-term and long-term goals. By setting a vision and goals, the group effectively charts its future direction. From this point, it is important that group members begin working together on concrete, easily accomplished tasks.

**Step 5. Project Definition and Planning.** Project definition and planning refers to three activities: (1) defining and planning a community improvement project, (2) making connections with people or groups that can support that project, and (3) conducting a feasibility study to make sure the project is doable. The first activity refers to the process of brainstorming possible projects to meet the goals that the group has set, prioritizing those projects, and planning those projects (e.g., who will do what, where, by when). This focus on projects is found in many participatory development manuals (e.g., Thomas-Slayer et al., 1995). We have found that it is important for groups to start with concrete, small-scale projects that improve group members’ community or their quality of life. Projects are important because they are usually doable and affordable (in terms of cost and labor), because they tap into group members’ individual and collective self-interest, and because they are a tangible form of community change that group members can easily define and control. Projects are also important for proving a group’s success, building its reputation, drawing new members, providing experiential learning opportunities, and building more participation among members.

The second activity associated with project definition and planning is making connections – brainstorming a list of individuals, organizations, and groups that can provide funding, knowledge, skills, connections, or political sanctions that will further the group’s work. This process of making connections is crucial, and has two main parts: (1) making connections with professionals who understand and care about the group’s work, and (2) making connections with other grassroots groups doing similar work. First, it is crucial that grassroots groups make connections with professionals who understand and support the group’s work. In many cases, larger service systems will

not be responsive to grassroots groups; however, there are always individuals within those systems who will support the group's efforts. It is important to find these professionals and tap into the resources that they offer. For a group of small farmers starting a grassroots effort to preserve family farms, this might mean finding someone within the Cooperative Extension Service who supports that effort. Second, grassroots groups find it equally useful to connect with other grassroots groups who have undertaken similar work. If there is a group of small farmers in a nearby state that has worked successfully to preserve small family farms in their area, it might be worth visiting that group to learn from the story of their success. The positive and negative experiences that the group has while making these connections are a major factor in shaping their critical consciousness of the larger systems in which they are doing their work.

The third activity associated with project definition and planning is conducting a community-based feasibility study (e.g., Koback, McCormack, & Robinson, 1988). In this process, group members outline all of the questions that they need answered before starting their work; they then go about the process of answering those questions. For example, one group that we work with planned to grow and sell native Appalachian plants such as ginseng. Group members developed a long list of questions about their work (e.g., what sort of land is best for growing ginseng, what price will we get for it?), and worked to answer most of these questions before investing substantial time and money in ginseng cultivation. As part of the feasibility study, group members begin to identify, both individually and collectively, their existing skills and knowledge that can contribute to the implementation of their project.

**Step 6: Project implementation.** Implementation is usually thought of as the action stage of a project. In participatory change, project implementation refers to a larger process – a spiral of action, learning, and planning. *Action*: the group works together to accomplish a concrete task (e.g., a task within a larger project plan); *learning*: group members stop and reflect to learn from the experience of accomplishing that task (e.g., what went well, what would we change?); *planning*: the group plans the next phase of the project. This is followed by a return to further action, learning, planning, and so on. It is during this spiral of action, learning, and planning that group members use their existing skills and knowledge and develop a need to gain new skills and knowledge; the new skills and knowledge may relate to either project implementation or the larger social, political, and economic contexts in which project implementation takes place. As community practitioners, our main role in project implementation is to facilitate this process of learning through action. However, we often work hand-in-hand with group members on specific project tasks, especially tasks where they have to direct our efforts (e.g., helping set up before a grassroots group's tailgate farmers' market). Such tasks provide concrete help for the group, and also demonstrate a balance of power and leadership between our organizations.

**Step 7: Defining the organizational structure.** Defining the organizational structure refers to a process where the group looks at several ways of structuring itself, then selects a structure that makes sense to group members and seems sustainable given the group's vision and goals. We tell groups that the bottom line is to find an organizational structure that gives them the least burden (e.g., in terms of paperwork) and the most freedom to operate in a self-determined way. Options range from operating as an informal community group (i.e., running projects as a group of interested citizens, without having any formal, legal status) to operating as an independent program of another nonprofit organization (i.e., running projects as part of another nonprofit organization, but having

the ability (via an advisory board) to make independent decisions about project work) to forming as a nonprofit organization (i.e., filing with the IRS for nonprofit status, and being a completely independent and self-sustaining organization). We have worked with groups that have selected organizational structures that cover this entire range. We do not push groups to select a particular structure; rather, we encourage groups to explore all their options before they select a structure that makes sense for them and feels like it will work for them over the long haul.

**Step 8: Organizational capacity building.** Organizational capacity building refers to the process of facilitating the development of sustainable grassroots organizations that are accountable and responsive to community members and their priorities. To help groups build sustainable organizations, we focus on two areas: (1) organizational capacity building, and (2) individual skill development. *Organizational capacity building* refers to the process of supporting members of grassroots groups as they take on cooperative tasks such as writing a vision statement, developing a work plan or a fundraising plan, creating a budget, or learning to raise money (via grantwriting and grassroots fundraising). Sometimes groups need help with relatively straightforward issues (e.g., setting up a phone tree for communication); other times the support that they need is more complex (e.g., writing organizational bylaws, developing a board of directors, creating a long-term strategic plan, filing as a nonprofit organization). *Individual skill development* refers to the process of helping specific members of the group develop the skills, knowledge, and confidence to manage the work of the group. This development includes both technical skills—creating press releases, managing financial accounts, writing grant proposals—and interpersonal leadership skills like facilitating meetings, speaking in public, and mediating conflicts. Because different members of a group have affinities for different tasks, responsibilities are widely shared and the group develops a broad foundation of skilled leadership. Nearly all of our training in both individual and organizational capacity building relates to the concept of education through action, which was described above. For instance, we rarely offer formal trainings on grantwriting; rather, we sit down with group members and work hand-in-hand with them as they struggle to write a grant proposal for the first time. The second time they write a proposal, we'll take a less intensive support role, and by the third and fourth times, they will start writing the proposals on their own. This learning-by-doing process helps the group build the skills they need to sustain their organization, without becoming dependent on external resources.

**Step 9: Grantmaking.** Through our Western North Carolina Self Development Fund, the Center for Participatory Change (CPC) provides small, one-time grants (\$500 to \$5,000) for new grassroots groups or new projects. Many of the fledgling grassroots groups with which CPC works are at an early stage in their development; they are still learning organizational skills and are just beginning to develop their organizational structures. Most conventional funders cannot support grassroots groups during this formative period, because they are not formally incorporated, or because the projects seem too risky an investment. However, these groups are at a place where a small infusion of funding can make a tremendous difference. This is the niche that the Self Development Fund fills – providing support for grassroots groups in the very earliest stages of their development. With the Self Development Fund, we only invite applications from groups that we have worked with over time. We ask groups to fill out a grant application, which is similar to applications for larger foundations. We also provide hands-on support and coaching as groups complete the application. This grantmaking process gives groups the money needed to get their work started, skills in grantwriting, a sample grant proposal that they can revise to submit to other funders, and a track record of successful fundraising.

**Step 10: Building a grassroots network.** The Center for Participatory Change hosts an annual grassroots gathering for grassroots groups from across Western North Carolina. At the gathering, groups come together for mutual learning, encouragement and support. This network strengthens groups' independence from CPC and other external resource providers by creating a system of regional interdependence at the grassroots level. The network also enables groups to build collective power. By building a grassroots organization and implementing community improvement projects, groups build power at a community level. Often, group members also develop critical consciousness, as described above. The grassroots network provides an opportunity for grassroots groups come together to develop the collective power needed to begin to address the larger (e.g., regional or statewide) needs that they have discovered through the process of doing their locally-focused work.

For instance, we currently work with four grassroots groups that are carrying out community-based economic development projects in four very different communities (e.g., a crafts cooperative with a retail store, a group working together to grow and sell Appalachian native plants). Through doing the work of implementing these projects, group members in all four of these groups have come to realize that there is little support for community-based small business efforts across Western North Carolina. None of these groups, working alone, can bring about the institutional change needed to create a support system for collective entrepreneurial efforts. But by working together, these four groups (along with 10 or so related groups across the region) may have the collective power needed to shape regional economic systems to become more supportive of community-based economic development (e.g., influence policy change or resource distribution at a regional level). Through building a regional network, grassroots leaders are able to move beyond the scale of local project implementation, to making the entire region become more participatory, inclusive, and accountable to all of its residents.

### **Values, Attitudes, and Behaviors in Participatory Change**

The ten steps outlined above provide an outline of the work that a practitioner would carry out, in sparking and supporting the development of a grassroots organization through the process of participatory change. However, these ten steps are only part of the methodology, because participatory change is built upon a set of core values, attitudes, and behaviors. It is important for all practitioners to recognize that our values and attitudes get communicated in community practice work, whether we want them to or not. If our values or our beliefs are incongruent with our words or our actions, then the people we are working with will know it. Therefore, a community practitioner could implement all ten of the steps outlined above, but she would not be doing participatory change work if she were not basing her work on the values, attitudes and behaviors outlined in this section. These values, attitudes, and behaviors are the spirit or essence of participatory change – they are the force that makes the implementation of the ten steps above successful, participatory, and just.

Core values. In the participatory change methodology, the following values infuse all of a community practitioner's interactions with grassroots groups (see also Aaker & Schumaker, 1996; Chambers, 1997; Keough, 1998):

1. Participation. People shape the decisions and forces that affect their lives, their families, and

their communities.

2. Justice. Through participation, people can attain more responsive institutions and systems, fairer policies and procedures, and a more equitable distribution of resources.
3. Capacity building. Participation and social justice are achieved by strengthening what groups of people are capable of collectively doing and being.
4. Putting the last first. The poor, marginalized, exploited, and vulnerable (i.e., “the last”) are put first; participatory change prioritizes their hopes and needs.
5. Community control. People gain the strength, confidence, and vision to work for positive change by controlling the processes through which they learn and act.
6. Power. Participatory change aims to build the power – individual, group, and regional power – needed for grassroots groups to shape the decisions that affect their lives.
7. Broad contexts. Participatory change occurs within broader social, cultural, political, and economic contexts, which can be shaped through grassroots participation.
8. Sustainability. Community development and systems change projects are based upon a long-term perspective to preserve natural and cultural resources for future generations.
9. Grassroots organizations. Representative, accountable, democratic grassroots organizations are the engine of fundamental social change.
10. The long haul. Participatory change is built from long-term goals; short-term projects are viewed as part of a longer-term effort to strengthen grassroots leadership, build grassroots power, and increase citizen participation.

Core attitudes and behaviors. Complementing these ten core values are ten core attitudes and behaviors that determine community practitioners’ relationships with grassroots groups (Aaker & Schumaker, 1996; Chambers, 1997; Keough, 1998).

1. Believe in the people. Participatory change starts with a rock-solid belief that people living low-wealth or marginalized communities have both the right and the responsibility to direct their own development. The people living in those communities know best what their community needs and how to provide it, and they have the skills, wisdom, vision, and capacity to create fundamental social transformations.
2. It comes from the people. The direction and pace of participatory change come from the members of grassroots groups, rather than community practitioners; group members control decisions, plans, projects and actions. When practitioners give their input, it is given and received as one voice among many; practitioners stay out of decision-making roles.
3. Not “clients,” but “people.” Group members are seen not as ‘clients’ or ‘service recipients’ who receive a pre-determined program, but as agents or actors – as people who are the driving creative force behind significant and long-lasting change.
4. Draw out people’s wisdom. Participatory change is built from the knowledge and wisdom that people have gained from their experiences – the main job for the community practitioner is to draw forth people’s wisdom, knowledge, and skills.
5. Ask questions. Asking good questions, continually and in different ways, is the key to drawing out the wisdom that people have gained from their experiences.
6. Listen. Listening to grassroots leaders – deeply, fully, and actively – is a key behavior in participatory change; this means asking a question, staying quiet, and working hard to hear what the person you are talking with is trying to say.
7. Participatory tools and techniques. Community practitioners use participatory methodologies

- to help group members learn from their experiences, develop analyses of society, plan for collective action, and take action to improve their community.
8. Build confidence. Building the individual and collective self-confidence of grassroots leaders and grassroots groups – by constantly encouraging people, highlighting their strengths, and recognizing their accomplishments – helps people come to understand that they truly can realize their vision for change.
  9. Build friendships. Participatory change is built on relationships, friendships, trust, and a sincere interest in the lives and concerns of grassroots leaders. Chatting, laughing, hanging out, and telling stories are the foundation upon which social change is built.
  10. Mutual learning. As community practitioners, we learn as much from grassroots leaders as grassroots leaders learn from us; we listen more than we talk, learn more than we teach, and always believe in the ability of the people.

## Conclusion

The community practice methodology outlined above is built upon practice theory (e.g., the integration of three community practice approaches); more macro-focused theory (e.g., theories about power and participation); practice tools (e.g., the ten steps in the methodology); and values, attitudes, and behaviors that community practitioners can return to repeatedly when working with grassroots groups. At its core, participatory change is a community practice methodology that is based on the belief that marginalized people best understand the challenges they face and how to address them. The work of the community practitioner is to draw forth the vision and plans of people living in low-wealth and marginalized communities, and the support them as they create participatory and democratic grassroots structures that give them the resources and power to do what they already know needs to be done.

There are two larger contexts in which we place the work of participatory change as outlined above. First, participatory change is one methodology among many within a larger model of community practice that we conceptualize as *grassroots support*. We take this term from a summary of evaluation findings on grassroots leadership recently published by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation (W.K. Kellogg Foundation, n.d.). A major finding from this report is that grassroots leaders and grassroots organizations are more likely to succeed when they have support from outside organizations, which the Kellogg Foundation calls *grassroots support organizations*. The report notes that grassroots support is a new and emerging field, one that is just beginning to take shape. Grassroots support organizations provide services such as grassroots organizing, formal and informal leadership training, organizational capacity building, peer-to-peer networking, on-site technical assistance, and occasionally grantmaking. In social work, we have not yet articulated grassroots support as a discrete model within community practice. Discussions about building community capacity (Chaskin, Brown, Venkatesh, & Vidal, 2001), building citizen participation (Gamble & Weil, 1995), building an enabling system for nurturing grassroots initiatives (Chavis, Florin, Felix, 1993), and building grassroots organizations (Kahn, 1991) all raise points related to grassroots support work; however, there has as yet been no systematic outline of grassroots support as a distinct community practice model.

A second broader context for participatory change as a community practice methodology is the effort to realize the values and practices of a participatory democracy. In Making Democracy

Work Better, a recent book on the theory and practice of democracy, Richard Cuoto suggests that grassroots organizations can be viewed as democracy in its most radical, most people-centered form (Cuoto, 2000). Cuoto's thesis is that democracy works better when there are grassroots groups that provide an alternative (i.e., nongovernmental) space to address a community's common good, provide an alternative structure through which everyday people can participate in the decisions that affect their lives, create relationships and shared meaning within and beyond the groups' borders, and work autonomously to provide goods and services that improve a community's well-being. As we have tried to show in this paper, participatory change as a practice approach is all about forming and building sustainable grassroots groups – groups that can struggle over the long haul to build a healthier society from the ground up. At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as national and global resources and decisions are increasingly centralized under the control of an economic and political elite, such community-run groups are at the leading edge of a radical democracy. The long-term health of our global society depends upon people in low-wealth and marginalized communities coming together to build democratic grassroots structures that give them the collective power to participate in their own development, to participate in the decisions that affect their lives. This is democracy when it works well. And this is the goal of participatory change.

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