Roles for Community Economic Development Practitioners

Within the community economic development literature there are generally three accepted roles for the practitioner: self-help, technical assistance and conflict. Each of these has both pros and cons and the appropriateness of each varies across communities and particular situations.

Self-Help is based on the premise that the people of the community can, should and will solve their own problems. The practitioner is a facilitator of the process and is aimed at extracting local knowledge and local solutions. The self-help approach requires the practitioner to act differently depending on whether or not the community is well defined in terms of local institutions (e.g., leadership, organizational capacity, active citizen engagement). If the community is not well defined, or lacks organization, the practitioner serves as a facilitator or organizer, and as a proxy leader. On the other hand, the practitioner injects the right kind of information to key participants if the community is well defined or organized, but may not be forward thinking. The advantages of the self-help approach include: it often builds a stronger sense of community; it often evolves into a holistic approach; it builds a self-sustaining ability to deal with new problems; and it allows for community specific solutions. Some of the disadvantages of the self-help approach include: it works best in smaller communities or neighborhoods but change is often slow; special interests may cloud issues and cause the true community to take a longer time to appear; since the practitioner is concerned about the community learning to do-it-itself, accomplishing specific tasks may be secondary; decisions may be based on impression rather than fact; process can be more important than outcomes. In the end, the practitioner "knows" if they are successful with the community if they over time work their way out of a job. But from a funder's perspective the changes can appear slow and less tangible.

The *Technical Assistance* approach is based on the premise that the community is well defined, has well-functioning local institutions, the community has identified a problem or goal, and is moving toward a plan of action. Here the practitioner supports task-oriented actions. If the practitioner is working toward policy development (developing a plan of action or set of strategies) the practitioner uses the *scientific method* to identify strengths and weaknesses of the community. These

analyses are then used to help formulate policy. In policy implementation the approach is based on the premise that the community has identified policies to achieve defined goals or objectives. The practitioner helps in the technical implementation of the policy. Advantages of the technical assistance approach include: change can be rapid; it works in any size community; it is task driven (easier to "sink your teeth" into it); and that decisions are based on fact. Also, from a funder's perspective, the "action" is clear and easily documented. Disadvantages of the technical assistance approach are: it can give the illusion of finality of the process; that the process may be lost to task accomplishment; that it often loses the *holistic* view; and that it presumes the practitioner has, or can obtain, the necessary technical skills.

Conflict is based on the premise that the community is fragmented and grid-locked. The practitioner works to break the gridlock. Here the practitioner works either as an advocate or mediator. As an advocate, the practitioner works with a segment (perhaps the silent majority) of the community assumed to be suppressed by the leadership of the community or other more vocal groups. The role of the practitioner is to act as an advocate for the oppressed group. As a mediator, the practitioner acts as a facilitator to open lines of communication between and within sub-groups then works toward compromise to effect change. Advantages of the conflict approach are: rapid change; communication within the community is opened (silent majority); and future alliances forged. Disadvantages of the conflict approach: the possibility that the practitioner may be viewed as biased; that opponents may become enemies; that change is often not sustainable; and practitioners don't plan on living in that community very long because the conflict approach often "burns bridges".

For the appropriate role for the Extension Educator it is it is useful to revisit the Vision Statement for CNRED: *To be the premier source of research and education that benefits the lives of individuals, families, businesses, organizations and communities; and Wisconsin's educational network for engaging people and their communities in positive change.* Here "…premier source of research…" directly implies the technical assistance through research while "…network for engaging…" directly suggesting the self-help through organizational development or in the terms of the Shaffer Star development of local institutions. Again, if we view the ultimate role is to "help communities make more informed decisions" the "more informed" implies technical assistance by interjecting research base knowledge while the helping make decisions implies the self-help approach. Ideally, the educational program is a blending of the self-help and technical assistance approaches.

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