

Learning 15 – Associating Associations: The Power of Convening

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Because most associations are affinity groups of like-minded people, the potential for dialogue about issues is small. The focus of most associational discourse is about how to manifest their like-mindedness. There is, however, a context in which associations engage in discussions about public issues because they usually have some diversity of viewpoints. This occurs when they come together as a group – an association of associations. This creates enough diversity that contending views (or tensions) emerge.

An example of the dialogue created by associated associations was the Chicago Neighborhood Innovations Forums convened by The Center for Urban Affairs at Northwestern University. For several years, twenty neighborhood associations were convened every six weeks at a retreat center. The convened associations were often different depending on their interest in the topic of discussion.

The topics to be discussed were determined by an advisory group of neighborhood organizations. They tended to fall into two categories. The first was *issues* of common concern. The second was *innovations* created by neighborhood groups from across the United States. The topics of discussion are listed below. Those focused on innovation are preceded by an asterisk.

The Place of Local Community Organizations in Decisions About City Expenditures in Their Neighborhoods

*Building a New School/Community Partnership through the Participation of Local Schools in Economic and Community Revitalization of Their Neighborhoods

Organizing for Chicago School Reform

*The Neighborhoods' Options in the Energy Crisis

Neighborhood Economic Interests in Chicago's Mandatory Waste Separation Ordinance

Developing an Affordable Housing Agenda for the Nineties

Illinois School Reform Legislation Bill #18-39

*Credit Unions as a Tool for Community Development

*Rethinking the Welfare Dollar: New Initiatives by Local Community Groups

*Issues in Local Ownership and Control: The Prospects for Community Land Trusts in Chicago Neighborhoods

*Neighborhood Responses to the Drug Trade

*Expanding Opportunities and Creating Community Change Through Small Groups

*New Directions in Community Strategic Planning: Thinking Through and Taking Charge

*New Directions in Community Organizing

Local Community Stakes in State Economic Development Policies and Programs: Building an Agenda for the Future

*Community Gardening: A Community Building Tool

The Role of Community Organizing in Chicago Public School Reform

*Neighborhood Initiatives for Improved Transit to Work

The Future of Neighborhood Health Planning for Chicago's West Side Corridor

Developing a Comprehensive Plan for Chicago Westside Strategy on Drugs

Building a Neighborhood Agenda

Neighborhood Capital Budget Group Board/Staff Annual Retreat

*Neighborhood Innovations in Financial Services as a Base for Community Economic Development

Resources for the Neighborhood Agenda

Public Policy Development for the Campaign for a Drug-Free Westside: Strengthening Prevention, Treatment and Enforcement

The Greening Network: Past-Present-Future

*Strategies on Developing a Chicago Association of Local School Councils

Planning for the Comprehensive Housing Affordability Strategy for the City of Chicago

*Exploring Governmental Initiatives for the Neighborhood Agenda

*Exploring Women's Initiatives to Build Multicultural Relationships in Chicago

Chicago: Where Have We Been? Where are We? Where Do We Want to Go?

Community Policing: Where Do We Go From Here?

Youth Policy Forum I

Youth Policy Forum II

The discussions of issues tended to focus on *what* to do. The discussions on innovations focused on how something might be newly created. These two categories reflected key functions of associations – public decision-making and creative innovations. Both are essential to the democratic process.

These discussions resulted in the creation of 13 sustaining groups of associations focused on acting on their discussions. These working groups made major contributions to neighborhood well being and public policy, often over a lengthy period of time.

This kind of forum is an example of the power of convening. While many institutions are interested in enabling neighborhoods, they tend to focus on interventions and see convening as a means to their ends. An even more productive function could be to act as a neutral convener.

There were two distinctive features in the convening of the Neighborhood Innovations Forums. The first was that the neighborhood groups defined the questions they wanted to discuss rather than relying on institutions to define or join in to defining the questions. As a result, built into the discussions was the participant's motivation to act because the questions were those the associations themselves cared about.

The second distinctive feature was that the participants were all neighborhood organizations. With a few rare exceptions, representatives of agencies, business and government were not invited. The result was that the discussions placed responsibility and accountability for action on local citizen organizations. The presence of institutional representatives would have diminished associational accountability and, predictably, resulted in finger pointing and institution blaming.

There usually came a time when the forum groups met with institutional actors. However, this was after the groups had first become clear about their agenda and had determined how their own resources could be used in implementing issue or innovation decisions. This process

reflected, in practice, the basic sequential planning process for productive neighborhood groups:

1. To achieve our purpose, what resources do we have in the neighborhood that will allow us to deal with our issue or innovation with no outside resources?
2. Using our own resources, what purposes can we fulfill if there are also some outside resources to *support* our work?
3. Finally, which purposes do we have that depend entirely on outside resources?

In this sequence, citizen capacity for productivity is the primary question and institutional roles are understood to be supportive of these capacities.

Finally, there are many possible institutions that could convene local associations including universities, local governments, community centers, some social service agencies, civic organizations, chambers of commerce, etc. The unusual aspect of this type of convening is that the institution needs to set aside its own substantive priorities while recognizing the critical value of increasing the social capital and productive capacity of local citizens.