

The Paradoxes and Promise of Community Coalitions¹

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Community coalitions, as they are currently applied, are unique organizations whose ability to promote community change is different from other types of community organizations. This article explores those differences and elaborates how community coalitions can use those differences to transform conflict into greater capacity, equity, and justice. Concerns are also raised in this article about how community coalitions can intentionally and unintentionally protect the status quo and contain the empowerment of grassroots leadership and those of marginalized groups. There is a need for more theory, research, and discourse on how community coalitions can transform conflict into social change and how they can increase the power of grassroots and other citizen-lead organizations.

KEY WORDS: coalitions; community change; transforming conflict; community capacity building.

Community coalitions³ and other forms of community collaboration (e.g. partnerships and networks) are among the most defining approaches to social problem solving over the last decade. Collaboration has become an essential requirement for government and foundation support. Social policy has supported organized collaboration since the Charity Society movement in London in 1869 (McMillen, 1945). Coordinating and planning organizations have been a critical component of social welfare systems since then. They

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³Community coalitions in this article refer to all formal multisectoral collaborations (e.g., partnerships, collaboratives, etc.) that involve representatives of diverse community institutions working within an organizational structure to improve community conditions.

have been able to engage representatives from nonprofit/community agencies, government, with businesses and philanthropy, in planning and resource development. Over the past decade, formal collaboration has probably become the most common key element of all social problem-solving efforts.

The recent rise in public support for health and crime prevention initiatives has led to an expansion in the theory and research on community coalitions. Coalitions provide direction to comprehensive community initiatives that address a broad array of complex social problems (e.g., violence, crime, disease, and substance abuse) and increase community capacity (e.g. economic development). Expectations for community coalitions and partnerships have been high. At times, it appears that a community cannot be stopped if they can form a coalition, create a plan, and take care of business. Even with all this enthusiasm, it is unclear how much is really known about the effectiveness of community coalitions and their development.

The practice and research literature has primarily conceptualized community coalitions according to traditional organizational characteristics such as governance, planning, resource development, and structure (cf. Fawcett *et al.*, 1996; Gray, 1985; Goodman & Steckler, 1990; Kaye & Wolff, 1992; Mattesich & Monsey, 1992). The implementation of community coalitions has however turned out to be far more complicated and different than most initially believed. Coalitions are a different type of community institution. Community coalitions include more diverse interests among its participants. The different interests, history, and power of participants create a more complex setting than any other type of community organization. These differences nonetheless are the basis for participants to work together in contrast to other community organizations that are dependent on their participants' commonalities.

The flow of resources within community coalitions also distinguishes it from other community organizations. A community organization, at its best, consolidates members' resources so that the organization can achieve its goals. Community coalitions, in contrast, must disperse resources to enhance the capacity of participating institutions in order to achieve their common goals. In addition, although most other community organizations are hierarchical, there is also an explicit or implicit pretext of equality among participants in community coalitions, even when it isn't true "outside the room." The norms to "get along" dominates many coalitions. These norms, whether intentionally or unintentionally, maintain the status quo by not allowing members to address community conflicts and inequalities. There needs to be additional theory to explain how coalitions contribute to community and systemic change, especially when it comes to issues of equality and justice.

Community coalitions have another major distinctive difference from other community or voluntary organizations (e.g. neighborhood associations and nonprofit organizations); community coalitions are inherently paradoxical, which leads to inescapable conflicts. As this article will argue, community coalitions—by their nature—are dominated by paradoxes and foster conflicts; these paradoxes can be an opportunity for systemic change (Rappaport, 1981). These tensions provide the vehicle for larger community conflicts to emerge within the coalition. Paradoxes posed by community coalitions reflect the conflicts that exist within their larger communities. Community coalitions can create progressive community change through the transformation of those conflicts that arise within it.

The process of conflict transformation builds community capacity to manage and control change through institutional changes (Bush & Folger, 1994; Dukes, 1996; Lederach, 1997). Community coalitions have great potential for transforming community conflicts because, unlike other community organizations, community coalitions can engage representatives of different community institutions. These coalitions have the potential to develop community capacity to achieve not only healthy, but also just communities.

WHAT DO COALITIONS DO WELL?

Coalitions, partnerships, and other collaborative efforts bring together representatives of community institutions in order to combine resources and to foster relations needed to address threats to the community, such as violence, disease, crime, and racism. Coalitions have built community health and resilience by promoting economic development, intergroup relations, civic participation, and other community strengths. As mentioned previously, community coalitions and other collaborative structures have traditionally been successful in raising funds and in the design and implementation of local social welfare systems (e.g. United Way and Community Chests). Coordination has been improved at both the systems (e.g. resource allocation and policy) and individual levels (e.g. case management). Coalitions have also enabled “spin off” activities and initiatives. Studies, such as Yin, Kaftarian, Yu, and Jansen (1999) and Manley *et al.* (1998), have begun to show the long-term effects of coalitions on community change (e.g. collaboration and policy changes) and improved individual well being (e.g. reducing cigarette smoking and substance abuse). The successes have largely been due to the ability of community coalitions to mobilize and focus resources.

Coalitions have not been successful when they have been expected to develop and manage services and activities in the community. Experience has

taught community coalitions that it is far better to delegate service delivery to other community organizations that either have the capacity or need to develop it with additional support.

SO WHY ISN'T IT EASY?

There has been growing theory and research on the centrality that the transformation of conflicts plays in the success of a coalition to build community capacity (Chavis, 1996; Mizrahi & Rosenthal, 1993; Smith & Berg, 1987). Conflict transformation is the process whereby the resolution of a conflict builds the overall capacity of the coalition and actually makes it stronger (Bush & Folger, 1994; Dukes, 1996; Lederach, 1997). A study of 86 substance abuse prevention coalitions (Chavis, 1996) showed that conflict transformation was the major contributing factor to a coalition's ability to attain its programmatic goals. Conflict transformation was a much stronger predictor of the goal attainment of community coalitions than the combined effects of traditional organizational factors such as a strong structure and detailed planning activities.

Successful coalitions are able to transform these “conflicts” or paradoxes within coalitions into a process of positive change (Mizrahi & Rosenthal, 1993). Community coalitions have inherent paradoxes that facilitate the emergence of larger community conflicts within them. These conflicts find “fertile soil” within community coalitions because of the diversity of interests, different levels of power, and other factors (e.g. community history). The following are the paradoxes that previous studies have found within coalitions based on the work of Mizrahi and Rosenthal (1993; see also Chavis, Florin, & Felix, 1993):

- *Mixed loyalties*: Coalition members are expected to have a dual commitment—to the coalition and to their own organization;
- *Autonomy versus accountability*: The coalition must have enough autonomy to take independent action and accountability to several levels within the coalition (i.e. member organizations);
- *Means versus model*: A coalition can be viewed as means to accomplish a specific social change goal by the community (address poverty and powerlessness) as well as a model method to achieve an externally determined goal by its funders (e.g. substance abuse prevention);
- *Unity and diversity*: Coalitions bring together diverse interests and are expected to act with unanimity. Coalition members share compatible, but not identical interests. There are diverse “self-interests” and levels

of power within the coalition that work against developing the unity that is expected of a coalition;

- *Scarce resources*: Coalitions require people and organizations with limited time and resources to commit themselves to another organization. Member organizations are asked to contribute more than they receive;
- *Dependence–independence*: The symbiotic relationship between the coalition and the lead agency (the organization that has the resources to support the coalition) is an inherent paradox. The lead agency and coalition members will emphasize the independence of the community coalition. The coalition is actually very dependent on the regulations and expectations of the lead agency (who have the legal and financial power).

Inequities in power and access to resources must be addressed to ensure that there are substantial transformation of these conflicts into increased community capacity for social change. Relatively few coalitions have been able to make this transformation.

THE ULTIMATE PARADOX: WHO IS BEING EMPOWERED?

These paradoxes produce environments where conflicts will emerge that are related to inequities in power and access to resources. Most progressive human service experts and funders have touted coalitions as a vehicle for community empowerment (Fawcett *et al.*, 1995; Himmelman, 1992; McMillan, Florin, Stevenson, Kerman, & Mitchell, 1995). Yet, it may very well be that community coalitions have more often been a major force in limiting the ability of grassroots community organizations to obtain greater power. In most cases, coalitions are good management techniques for the implementation of social welfare activities (e.g., planning, coordination, resource development), but not necessarily for actively promoting greater control and participation by the leadership of disenfranchised members of the community.

Anecdotally, there have been reports that the public and private funding for community organization has decreased during the same time that there has been an increase in funding for collaborative strategies such as coalitions. It may be that a good deal of funding that would otherwise go to community organization has been directed toward collaborative strategies such as community coalitions. In order for there to be true collaboration, there must be a recognition of equal power among all those “at the table.” Many community

organizations have not attained that level of power (or respect) within their larger community (e.g. city or state) when invited to join a community coalition. Equal power is not “given” to them within the community coalition and therefore basic power inequities are never resolved.

It is also important to recognize that there have been many coalitions that have supported community-organizing efforts. However, more commonly, the “culture of collaboration” within most community coalitions is used to either avoid or squash any conflict that may result as grassroots community leaders advocate for their constituencies. Redressing inequities in the larger community is considered counter to the goal of collaboration.

Often community coalitions are structured to provide major institutions with the power to control the coalition. The “numbers” work against participating grassroots citizen leaders, very often in the name of a democratic process for coalition decision making (one vote per representative). Funders of community coalitions and similar strategies (e.g. the partnerships) generally expect coalitions to engage large numbers of diverse community institutions and agencies. Most often, government agency and human service leaders dominate community coalitions, numerically, as well as in status and power. This occurs because they are considered to be the experts, they are better organized, their organizations are the recipients of the funding for the collaboration, and they have more connection among that sector of the community. More service organizations representatives are invited to the table (cf. *Join Together*, 1996). Community or consumer involvement is considered on par with all other member agencies. These and other factors often lead to relatively few community leaders of marginalized groups actually being involved in sufficient numbers in order to have a major influence on the direction of these multisectoral community coalitions.

WHERE CAN WE GO FROM HERE?

Community coalitions, with the appropriate membership and commitment, can use these conflicts as opportunities to develop collectively the capacity to address inequities and promote justice.

Community coalitions can transform these conflicts and paradoxes. The challenges of scarce resources can be addressed with funds or staff that help members in their coalition tasks. Coalitions have dealt with conflicts created by unequal access to grants and other resources by establishing rules for open competition and access in public and private funds distributed through the coalitions and members. These conflicts, which may be within the minds of members, such as mixed loyalties become the force for the evolution of

the coalition. Members have to reconcile those conflicts, in their own minds, in order for the coalition to move on. Recognition and acceptance of these paradoxes and conflicts can lead to greater progress by the community coalition. Awareness and acceptance of conflict transformation as an essential part of community coalitions is an important goal for future assistance to these coalitions.

Many issue-oriented coalitions do engage a majority of grassroots organizations and advocates. More coalitions among grassroots organizations are critically needed to advocate for changes in public policies and practices. These types of coalitions receive relatively little support and research attention. Coalitions among the institutions of marginalized groups may be necessary before community leaders can participate as full members of coalitions that are dominated by human service, business, and other more powerful interests. The power of grassroots groups must be acknowledged and respected for their power before they can be considered true partners in a coalition with more powerful interests. Multisectoral community coalitions can support the development of power among marginalized groups through capacity building activities that support, but do not attempt to control, community organizations.

WHOSE CAPACITY SHOULD BE DEVELOPED?

One of the major paradoxes that face community coalitions, as noted previously, is that they demand time and resources from people who can least afford it. Coalitions are voluntary relations among people and institutions. In most cases participants are feeling overextended before they joined the coalition, and then they are expected to contribute more to the collaboration. Funders expect agency directors and civic leaders to spend hours planning and implementing initiatives for the collaboration. Realistically, relatively little can get done in a collaboration when members can only spend 4–8 hr per month (Join Together, 1996) and therefore coalitions primarily focus on conducting business that will have the greatest impact on their communities without burning out its membership.

Coalitions and other collaborative structures have great potential for community capacity building because coalitions are driven by relationships. They have been shown to build capacity of the community through strengthening the organizations and institutions that participate in it (Butterfoos, Goodman, & Wandersman, 1993; Chavis, Speer, Resnick, & Zippay, 1993.) Community coalitions to provide the opportunity for grassroots leaders to develop relations with leaders of more powerful institutions.

Too often the “group think” of a coalition is to ask what members can do for the coalition, rather than what the coalition can do for its members. Coalitions can build institutional capacity by sharing management, programming, and resource strategies. They also develop relations across sectors and among otherwise alienated agencies, professionals, and community leaders. Often coalition members report that the major benefits of their participation in the coalitions were the things that happened outside of meetings through connections they made participating in the coalition.

HOW COALITIONS CAN ENABLE COMMUNITY CAPACITY BUILDING

Coalitions need first to develop their abilities to transform conflict within and help all residents to build their capacity to organize and make community changes. Coalitions can provide the system that can enable communities to build the capacity of community institutions to manage and control change.

Community coalitions that seek to transform conflicts should

- Identify and recognize the conflicts among members that derive from community conditions
- Equalize relations with powerful institutions and resources
- Create and support norms that allow conflict to be raised and transformed (e.g. conflicts can be presented to the coalition)
- Provide assistance in resolving and transforming conflicts

The capacity to transform conflict and to enhance community organization can be distributed through an enabling system.

An enabling system is a coordinated network of organizations, which nurtures the development and maintenance of a grassroots community development process through the provision of resources, incentives, and education (Chavis et al., 1992). Coalitions can manage, sponsor, network, or broker the components of this system in order to build community capacity. Coalitions need to make available a variety of types of assistance to individuals and institutions in order to build community capacity to change the policies and practices of larger systems. The coalitions can provide the following activities to enhance a community’s capacity to organize and develop:

Training and consultation: Coalitions can provide team, staff, and leadership training as well as consultation on community, organizational, and programmatic issues and strategies. Training on these topics would also expand the capacity to organize and develop the community. Technical

assistance can be used to increase capacity to raise funds or conduct other activities that promote community and leadership development.

Information and referral: Coalitions can disseminate information on model programs, provide data on community conditions, research information, and resources (e.g. funding, training, conferences, consultants, and volunteers). Incentive grants can stimulate community organizing or publicly recognize groups that are able to promote intergroup relations.

Networking and coalition development: Assistance can be provided in order to form networks and coalitions at more local levels (e.g. neighborhood) or among institutions and people with common interests and needs (e.g. grassroots organizations, youth workers). Networks among funders and grassroots organizations can be developed in order to improve (equalize) access to resources. Networks consist of organizations and individuals interested in common problems, issues, and strategies, that meet to exchange information, common training, and technical assistance needs. These networks can promote sharing and learning. Coalitions are made up of organizations and institutions working together through communication, coordination, and collaboration in order to solve community problems at a level closer to families and other community residents.

Communications: Coalitions can be most effective in capacity building only if they foster communications among members, the public, and larger systems. Coalitions can promote communication through newsletters, television and radio programs (e.g. community access cable stations), conferences, and electronic bulletin boards. They can build a constituency for the goals of the coalition.

Incentive grants and recognition: Coalitions can encourage innovation, experimentation, and diffusion of successful local programs by developing funds to incubate new strategies; coalitions can also provide public recognition and awards to successful local collective efforts. It helps groups normally left out of the major funding streams to develop the track record to access networks of larger funding.

Public information and social marketing: Coalitions can use the media (electronic and print) to promote public involvement and ownership of initiatives. They can also assist in the identification of public priorities, concerns, and resource usage. Coalitions can facilitate the fit between public needs, preferred methods of service delivery, and agency responses. Coalitions have even increased public access to resources by publishing printed or electronic resource directories.

Research and evaluation: Coalitions can facilitate their communities' learning process through research and evaluation activities. It is critical for communities to have the ability to generate information for decision making and self-awareness. These research services are generally too expensive

and involved for any one agency to provide to the community alone. To differing degrees, all community institutions need to be able to generate and use such information. Coalitions can sponsor or conduct action research projects; provide evaluation technical assistance; evaluate services and products; facilitate the evaluation of other local programs; train local evaluators to work more effectively and appropriately with community leadership; provide feedback on research findings; develop research-based action principles to guide community building strategy development.

CONCLUSIONS

A more critical view is needed on the role of community coalitions as a community change strategy. Although there is increasing evidence that community coalitions are able to make changes at the systems level, the critical question remains: “Who controls the coalition?” Most often, human service organizations and funders set the agenda. Coalitions and other collaborative efforts can be strategically used to develop community capacities to address the needs and aspirations of its residents as well. This has to be an intentional strategy because rarely do the major institutions in a community turn over power and control to consumers and residents. The community coalition has to plan to develop its own capacity to transform conflicts so that there can be changes in the distribution of resources, relations, and influence.

The most important component of our democracy—an active citizenry—is a monumental challenge and is frequently abandoned in frustration by community coalitions. The driving force for a healthy, just, and capable community is citizens that hold their institutions accountable to them. Active citizens ensure that institutions meet their needs through community organization, participation in the political process, and participation in other governance structures. Community coalitions can be a forum for community accountability if they see that as a primary purpose of the coalition and develop strategies to address these conflicts.

Practitioners and researchers also need to carefully distinguish community coalitions from other community organizing efforts, especially when they are not controlled by community residents. Most community coalitions can improve the planning and management of human services, but do not necessarily help bring about systemic or community change because they do not increase power among citizen leaders, particularly in marginalized communities. Community coalitions, with adequate capacity, can also be effective in supporting widespread community organizing efforts. This approach is clearly not for most coalitions. More coalitions need to be developed among organizations whose mission is primarily to promote change on behalf of

community residents and their own indigenous institutions. These coalitions can combine community organization efforts into more effective initiatives for promoting equity and justice to their communities.

Community coalitions can provide a unique forum for citizen leadership to promote equity and justice. Community coalitions need to be promoted as opportunities to transform community conflicts. Practitioners and researchers need to place greater attention on the process of transforming conflicts and use it as an opportunity, not as a barrier, for progressive community change. To paraphrase Alinsky (1972), It's a law of nature, if there is going to be change there is going to be friction, if there is friction, there will be heat. The heat will bring us justice if we recognize it is as part of the process for building just communities.

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