



Community organization in Asia

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I. INTRODUCTION

THIS PAPER DRAWS on the work of the Asian Committee for People's Organization to set out lessons learnt about how a community organizer should work. Section two is an example of poor people taking action and section three is about the Asian Committee for People's Organization and its guiding philosophy. Section four describes the different steps in the process whereby a community organizer comes to work in low-income settlements with organizations formed by their inhabitants. Section five summarizes the *Tagisan Statement* produced by representatives from over 85 organizing groups in the Philippines in 1985. The final section draws on the author's 20 years working with community organizations to consider their strengths and the difficulties they face.

II. THE POOR TAKING ACTION

RECENTLY, TENG KA CHENG, a 62 year old grandmother living in Bangkok told me how she and her neighbours pressured the government to give them land.

"They (the government officials) refused many times to meet our people. They always said the director was out. Ten times the people went, but never met him. I said, 'I'll go', I knew they were lying just because we were squatters.

"We went to the director's office. 'He's out again', they said, but I noticed someone go in by another door to the office with a paper that seemed to be for signing. I strolled around in the anteroom with my hands behind my back like I had nothing to do, and then when I was near the door of the director I rushed over, opened it and there he was at his desk. I called our neighbours in, 20 of them. They sat on chairs, but I sat on the floor. I was the oldest and it confused the young director. That night we got his commitment to help us."

The writer helped organize the Asian Committee for People's Organization (ACPO), a group of Catholic and Protestant church people who introduced community organizing into several Asian countries, including Thailand. It was tempting to speculate that somehow, the committee's influence had reached this grandmother, although there was no ACPO organizer or any organizer at all in her area. Where else but from the committee or a similar group would the old woman have learned how the powerful often have to be forced to meet the poor, and

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where would she have learned the importance of numbers and psychological advantage?

However, neither the committee nor any outside group had anything to do with Teng Ka Cheng's actions, although ACPO later helped her community in small ways, for example, to form a housing co-operative and build houses for 160 families.

This story should stand at the beginning of an article on organizing communities in Asia for several reasons. Firstly, Asian people clearly knew a great deal about organizing before the Asian Committee for People's Organization and other groups appeared on the scene. These groups have systematized what the people already knew but have not presented a wholly new method of working.

Secondly, anyone talking about such work in Asia, who implies that this work has been crucial or has made a difference to social change, is mistaken. Asia is a vast, disparate continent with over half the world's population. It is not so easily influenced. The committee and other groups have had some success in establishing community organization in Asia but this activity is still only one drop in a cavernous bucket.

III. THE DEVELOPMENT OF ACPO

THE ECUMENICAL ASIAN Committee for People's Organization (ACPO) was headed for ten years by Dr Masao Takenaka, a Protestant theologian from Doshisha University, Kyoto, and since 1981 by Bishop Julio Labayan, Catholic Bishop of Infanta in the Philippines. ACPO committee members are Catholic and Protestant, but the full-time organizers in the different countries may be of any religion or no religion, and of all ideologies. The only characteristic they share is that they encourage the poor to make basic decisions and do not impose their own beliefs on the people.

The committee started many of the best-known community organizations in Asia, including the Zone One Tondo Organization (ZOTO) in Manila in 1970, the Society for Community Organization (SOCO) in Hong Kong in 1971, People's Responsible Organization of United Dharavi (PROUD) in Bombay in 1979, and the organizing work of People's Organization for Participation (POP) in Bangkok in 1986. Similar groups have also been started in Indonesia, South Korea, Malaysia, Japan and Nepal. The committee has trained organizers from all these countries and from Burma, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

The committee usually provides a veteran trainer who helps prepare the young people to become organizers, and provides funds and other forms of support until this effort can be taken over by local people. The committee usually selects a large slum area in which to begin, such as Dharavi in Bombay, India or the Tondo area along Manila's piers in the Philippines.

In 1981, at ACPO's tenth anniversary meeting, organizers and support groups from ten Asian countries linked the work of organizing communities with national efforts for basic social change.

Community organization, they held, begins with the gut feelings of the people. An organizer helps people to identify and analyze issues which concern them. Often the issues are small, for example, water taps and latrines, but the organizer helps people to see how these small issues or problems are connected to the larger national

Box 1: Examples of Community Organizations Working in Low-income Areas in Asian Cities

PEOPLE'S RESPONSIBLE ORGANIZATION OF UNITED DHARAVI (PROUD): a democratic organization formed by the residents of Dharavi, an illegal settlement with some 400,000 inhabitants in Bombay, India. PROUD was formed in December 1979 by representatives from 35 *chawls* (*chawls* being small neighbourhoods which usually have around 50 households but may have as many as 600). It has now grown to more than 165 *chawl* committees. It has entered into agreements with the government to upgrade the area, including roads, light, water, latrines and drainage.

ZONE ONE TONDO ORGANIZATION (ZOTO): formed in 1970 by residents of a part of Tondo Foreshore, one of the largest illegal settlements in Manila (the Philippines). It has organized self-help projects and programmes to improve conditions in Tondo and has represented the residents in negotiations with (or opposition to) government plans. Its biggest victory was winning in-city relocation for thousands of families.

SOCIETY FOR COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION (SOCO): started in Hong Kong in 1971. It has won rights to public housing for boat people and other groups, ameliorated conditions in the older public housing estates, and worked with other groups to influence government land and housing problems. It has influenced nearly all other community development groups in Hong Kong.

PEOPLE'S ORGANIZATION FOR POWER (POP): organized in Bangkok in 1985, POP supports young community organizers in the Bangkok slums. They have won light, water, footpaths and land security for the people, and even helped arrange permanent land sharing schemes.

issues and overall national problems. Thus, the action of the people is a step towards national liberation and is not isolated and unrelated to the larger issues. The community organization's analysis of issues is careful to illuminate the class interests of the people involved. ("Class" is understood in the way generally accepted by sociologists and other social scientists).

The qualities which community organizations bring to national movements include, the tenth anniversary meeting said, a determination to be free from all kinds of foreign domination, true land reform and people's democratic participation. The nature of the link between community organization and such larger movements develops out of the struggle for people's liberation.

The organizers also answered fairly widespread criticism that community organizations are insensitive to people's religion and culture. They believe that organizers are deeply aware and appreciative of the culture and religion of the people, but that there are dimensions of culture and religion that have been used to sanction existing unjust structures. Community organizations try to identify such dimensions and prevent them being an important social influence. But the organizers recognize that there are tremendous resources for building a just and democratic society within tradi-

Box 2: The Asian Committee for People's Organization's Philosophy

In 1971, at the end of one of ACPO's first meetings in Manila, the committee asked Edicio de la Torre, then a young Filipino priest, to summarize what had been said at the meeting about ACPO's goals and philosophy. The following is what he wrote. It remains the best expression of what ACPO is about:

"ACPO's basic thrust is to help develop people's organizations through which the poor can overcome passivity and fear and acquire power to decide and plan for themselves. ACPO does this by funding training and organizing projects, hiring training consultants to train organizers and promoting the philosophy and methods of organizing the people for power.

ACPO recognizes the many previous efforts to organize people for power in Asia. It does not claim to be the first to discover or promote this cause.

ACPO acknowledges the initial influence of methods and principles worked out in organizing efforts in western urban slum areas. But ACPO's organizing and training programmes look to the Asian traditions and situations to provide the specific guide to action.

In the growing repression and restrictions on organizing activities in many Asian countries, the search for specific Asian answers to problems of organizing people becomes even more pressing.

Organizing people for power is both necessary and possible in any social system. It is precisely in people's organizations that the people can decide either to better their lot within the system or to struggle to change the system into one that is more open to people's participation. What if the system and its movement 'hardens its heart' and suppresses the people? ACPO remains basically committed to the people and their growth towards freedom and responsibility.

Without idolizing the people, ACPO believes that it is their organized power that will break through the present vicious cycle of misery and despair. They will both proclaim and achieve, in their struggle, the basic conditions for our common and continuing task of liberation."

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tional religions and cultures which community organizations also try to identify and emphasize.

III. METHODS OF ORGANIZING AT COMMUNITY LEVEL

THE COMMITTEE'S BASIC method of organizing was described in some detail at a workshop held in the Philippines in 1984, with organizers and development workers from 11 countries. They divided the organizing process into ten steps, which can be summarized as follows:

Step 1 - Integration: the first and basic step in organizing commu-

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nities is integration, or becoming one with the poor in the community. The organizer tries to immerse himself or herself in the poor community in order to understand the culture, economy, leadership, history, rhythms and lifestyle of the community. They visit the people, engage in small talk, do the people's work (for example, pounding rice), take part in informal group discussions, and share the people's housing, food, entertainment and meetings.

In the process of integration, certain things should happen to the organizer:

- He or she should come to respect the people and see the liberating aspects of their culture that give them the strength to struggle. The poor are tough, determined and good-natured. They also have all the weaknesses of other human beings;

- The organizer should observe how any social analysis of the national situation which they may have made is actually realized in the people's lives. He or she can see to what extent this social analysis is true and discover how reality is much more dense and complicated than any possible analysis;

- The organizer should try to identify or feel by intuition God's activity among the poor since, according to the teaching of the churches and the great religions, the poor are the privileged site of God's work today;

- He or she should, in the end, be accepted as a member of the community;

- Finally, the organizer's values and lifestyle should change. He or she should become more understanding and tolerant, more dedicated, more realistic, and a poor man or woman as much as possible.

To integrate well, organizers should, at least at the beginning of their training, live in an ordinary house in a poor urban or rural community for six months and eat the food the people eat.

Integration guarantees that a person's commitment to change society is attuned to what the people want and not to some theoretical model, ideology or religion. Integration is basic to all other steps. If organizers are not one with the people, they can never really learn the true dimensions of the people's problems nor how to motivate them to change.

Step 2 - Social Investigation: social investigation, the second step, is the process of systematically looking for issues around which to organize the people. The organizer, immersed in the community, looks for problems about which the people feel strongly enough to act. The organizer looks for concrete objective problems, obvious to all (visitors and residents alike) such as lack of water and inadequate latrines, but also problems which are recognized as problems by the people. The two are not always the same.

Step 3 - Tentative Programme: an organizer should have no preconceived ideas on what are the right issues to tackle. He or she should be continually curious. However, the organizer should choose a single issue on which to work. At some point it is necessary to begin and believe that, as a result of action, you will discover further information.

The issue chosen must:

- Affect a large number of people. It is good organizing practice to include large numbers of people in actions;

- Be one the people feel strongly about. For example, they must have complained about the problem to the organizer, or given some

sign that the problem bothers them;

- Be "winnable", that is, the people should be able to get what they want, soon;

- Interest other people who will join the action. Allies are needed at every stage;

- Be dramatic, interesting and create wider interest;

- Lead to further issues. For example, action on water faucets might lead to a small water consumers group that later could oppose a traditional, government controlled group.

Step 4 - Groundwork: groundwork means going around and motivating people on a one-to-one basis to do something about the chosen issue. This is also called agitation.

Grounds for motivation can be found in self-interest, morality, human or civil rights, honour, shame or anger. Some examples of agitation might be worded as follows:

"It is economically good for you to get public water faucets. You can buy rice with your savings."

"You pay taxes. You deserve the faucets."

"God wants you to work for this. It is God's wish that you provide for your families, especially the children."

"Are you people or sheep?"

"The government does it for the rich. Why not for you?"

"The government neglects your needs. That's why you don't have the faucets."

As they go around, the organizers should tell people about a general meeting to which they can come for further discussion and action. The organizers could, for example, propose a meeting to talk about going to city hall to demand water faucets, and discuss the merits and problems of this action.

Step 5 - The Meeting: at the general meeting, the people ratify and clarify what they have already decided as individuals. The meeting gives a sense of collective power and confidence, and people discover that they are not alone. They learn from one another's motivation and conviction. The meeting also settles the details of any proposed action. This is the time to give assignments; for example, who will make the posters, who will get the necessary permits.

If the groundwork is done well, the meeting will go smoothly. Should someone at the meeting say, for example, "Why don't we get our local leader to solve the problem?", the people at the meeting could answer, "No, we have decided to do it ourselves. The local leader has had years to do something." If the police come, the people can defend their right to have such a meeting.

Step 6 - Role Play: role-playing involves acting out an event before it takes place. For example, the leaders of the people are to meet government representatives. In the role play, the leaders play themselves while some other people take on the part of the government panel and answer as they think the government people would answer. This helps prepare the people for the event, especially in anticipating what might happen. It can also be fun and very enlightening to see poor people's imitation of the powerful. Role playing is a good way to develop quick reaction skills.

Step 7 - The Action: the mobilization or action is the actual experience of people confronting the powerful and exercising their

power. Mobilization needs to involve conflict. People's confidence and self-respect are buried beneath centuries of oppression. Confrontation is a good way to cut through this. A heated argument can create a sense of equality and dignity between rich and poor.

Some of the fun of organizing lies in the tactics used. They should be within the experience of the people, but outside the experience of the powerful. For example, a factory in India polluted a community. The people decided to visit the officer responsible and brought bags of the polluting debris which was falling on their homes to place on his desk.

Step 8 - Evaluation: after the action, the people should sit down and review the good and bad points of what has happened. This is actually a review of steps one to seven. Some of the questions to be covered are:

Did we prepare well? Did we go to the right person? Was the government official in the office as planned? Did we have the necessary permits to march? Were we punctual? Was our march orderly? Were our leaders ready to speak? Were the demands clear and feasible? Could they have reasonably been granted? Did we have enough people? Did we overestimate our strength? Did we learn anything about how the system works in practice, about the value of people's power and about our own weaknesses?

Step 9 - Reflection: theoretically, reflection could be part of evaluation. However, in practice, it is better to separate them because reflection should deal with deeper, ongoing concerns and may need a quieter atmosphere. Reflection is the time to look at the positive values we are trying to build in the organization. It deals with sacrifice, community building, the role of leaders and authority, the nature of freedom and democracy. It is often useful to read the scriptures of different religions in these discussions.

Step 10 - The Organization: a people's organization is the result of many, successive and similar actions of the people. Gradually, groups of people who have acted can come together, choose their leaders and form their own organization. The following are some characteristics of people's organizations that the Asian Committee for People's Organizations has tried to promote:

- an organization of smaller organizations, not individuals;
- an internal structure to help people participate and deliberate, and which provides a system of checks and balances;
- it deals with more than one issue at any given time;
- it is in constant action; action is the life blood of an organization;
- it is serious and out to win;
- it chooses effective tactics;
- it is visible and controversial;
- it projects an image of power;
- new leaders are constantly emerging;
- the people, with their leaders, think and operate in terms of increasing their power so as to promote their self-interest, and do not equate this with selfishness;
- partisan political alliances are made very critically;
- it raises funds from among the people;
- it creates an impact beyond its immediate concerns and areas of work.

Usually, people introducing this organizing methodology in a new

place are told by people in authority "It won't work here", "Our people don't want conflict", "We solve our problems other ways", "It's peaceful here".

Usually, these people are proven wrong. Organizing suits the people of Asia, they take to it with relish and have benefited from it. However, the basis of organizing has been adapted to Asian societies. This is perhaps obvious in the care given to religion and the people's culture.

In Asia, organizing has sometimes taken an almost revolutionary turn because, in some countries, the organizers are involved in mass movements seeking radical changes in their societies.

V. AN IDEOLOGY FOR ACTION

AT A MEETING in Manila in 1985, over 85 organizing groups in the Philippines formulated their position on radical change in a document called the *Tagisan Statement*. Organizers in India and South Korea would readily agree with the position taken. Below are excerpts from the statement.

"Every organizer must possess an orientation and political line which means: a perspective that specifies the analysis of the situation; an assessment of the forces and classes that are for and against change; the methods for change; and a concept of the alternative to the current system.

"While these necessarily have ideological underpinnings, an organizer may not have a systematized ideology but may develop one in the process of struggle. An orientation and political line are not the sole possession of members of political organizations. Every organizer must be clear on his or her political line and his (or her) orientation to the people.

"To further clarify this issue, a general orientation, which may have different expressions in terms of a distinct political line, underpins our work. We are motivated by faith - Christian, Islamic, or faith in the power and goodness of the people and their capacity to transform reality. We use tools for analysis which are drawn from Marxism, the social sciences and others. We are guided by a vision of an attainable future that is basically socialist, a system that should conform, not to stereotyped images or to the mechanical duplication of foreign models, but to the following minimum features:

- a. The future should be democratic because it is premised on the foundation of a strong, popular autonomous people's organizations. This is in complete contrast to an over-centralized system where the state exercises too much control and where an oppressive bureaucracy necessarily develops.
- b. It must be nationalistic because its focus is on the Philippines. Considering our insertion into the world capitalist order and the degree to which we have, as a nation, become subservient to the interests of larger, more powerful nations, an organizer must be consciously pro-Filipino and, therefore, anti-imperialist.
- c. Self-reliant and self-governing because we must retrieve our sovereignty if we are to chart our own national destiny.
- d. There must be equitable distribution of wealth which allots to each according to his or her own effort, contribution and need.
- e. There should be collective ownership of the vital means of production, which refers to the collectivization of those entities which are

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used for the exploitation of other human beings and those which deprive others of the means for survival, if privately owned. f. Finally, it must be pluralistic and mass based because it allows for the freedom of different political forces to pursue their own political line on the presumption that, in the final analysis, a political line can be validated only by the people."

The Tagisan organizers said that an organizer should exhaust all open and legal means for the attainment of this vision. However, when the people decide that the existing system can no longer be altered through such means, an organizer must be open to using other means, especially the right of self-defence.

This statement was written in the last year of the Ferdinand Marcos dictatorship.

VI. CONCLUSION

IT MUST BE pointed out that behind every ideology, political line and orientation is an act of faith, a belief in an option or position. The correctness of a position - while it may seem to be the absolute truth at one point in time - can only really be judged after the passage of time and events into history.

The writer is now more aware of community organization's limitations than he was 20 years ago. There are no instant panaceas for social ills, not even organized people power.

In general, practitioners have found that trained organizers find it fairly easy to involve large communities of poor people in the organizing process and to have some initial successes on issues such as water, light and footpaths. A people's organization can be formed around these issues.

Usually, the more basic problems of the people, such as land or jobs, are harder to solve. The land issue, for example, can drag on for years, with seemingly endless meetings, compromises and frustrations. People can lose interest, begin to quarrel among themselves, become selfish and seek their own immediate advantage.

Other groups, including the government, can prove divisive. Leaders and organizers tend to become entrenched and bureaucratic. Discussion can be limited to leaders, with the ordinary people being left out. Leaders, believing they know what the people want, fail to keep abreast of the people's opinions. In turn, the people, seeing the leaders apparently ignoring them, seek other leaders or causes. Government and other agencies can become more adroit at deflecting the people's actions. Governments learn to balance the carrot with the stick.

After four or five years, such troubles have begun in earnest in nearly all the people's organizations set up with the help of the Asian Committee (see Box 3 for an example). Some groups work through the problems; others stagnate for years. The life of a people's organization is as much a rollercoaster as the life of an individual.

Community organization in Asia has had remarkable success. Beyond the projects usually highlighted, such as ZOTO, PROUD or SOCO, it seems that nearly all social action in certain countries, including India, the Philippines, Hong Kong and Korea, has been influenced to some degree by community organization methodology. In the Philippines, for example, the 85 groups behind the *Tagisan Statement* shared a great deal in organizing techniques and strategies.

Box 3: ZOTO: An Example of the Difficulties in the Life of a Community Organization

Jurgette Honculada in an article entitled "Community Organizing and Broader Political Movements" describes some of these phenomena in the life of Manila's ZOTO people's organization. She reports a general consensus in Manila that ZOTO was far more successful during its first four or five years (1970-1975) than it was later on. She gives many reasons for the decline:

- a demand for fast organizing and concrete results caused people and organizers to neglect the formation of secondary leadership. When the top leadership was jailed, the organization had problems because no other leaders were available;
- local people were paid to become organizers and there was a confusion of roles between leaders and organizers. The full-time paid people tended to dominate;
- there was ideological conflict. Some organizers and leaders opted for a more radical and militant strategy while others chose another strategy. In some ways ZOTO was run like a revolutionary political party, that is, in a "from the top down", "no questions asked" way that differed from the earlier emphasis on people's participation;
- arrests and torture brought on partly by the radicalization of ZOTO weakened the organization;
- the leadership neglected to see that the government was making concessions, but the people saw this and left to take the compromises offered by the government.

Such conflicts are only now being understood and coped with constructively within ZOTO.

Source: Jurgette Honculada, "Community Organizing and Broader Political Movements".

Some people's organizations are now 15 to 20 years old. They have had problems, but so have the societies in which they have arisen. Community organization is now accepted at all levels of society as a useful way of building democratic people-oriented societies.