TOWARD A COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT APPROACH TO URBAN POVERTY IN THE UNITED STATES

Neil A. Eddington
University of California, Berkeley

In the light of increased efforts in the United States to combat poverty and the consequences of poverty, much of which exists in urban areas, it is appropriate to examine general approaches to alleviating poverty in the light of their demonstrated and anticipated effectiveness. A rough, but useful, classification of approaches is as follows: 1. the dole approach; 2. the service approach; 3. the community development approach. The dole approach, while it has "kept the clients' heads above water," has generally not led to the goal of "getting them back on their own two feet." On the contrary, one of its effects may be to perpetuate dependency. The service approach, i.e. providing psychiatric, public health, employment, recreational and other services at little or no cost, has likewise failed, in general, to reduce poverty to any great extent. May (1964) and Raab (1964) present a number of reasons for the general failure of the dole and services approaches. The following factors, among others, seem to be important: 1. the feeling of failure and powerlessness that being a recipient of welfare payments or services engenders; 2. the breakdown of interdependency within families and between neighbors as clients depend on "the agency" instead; 3. The natural tendency of clients to allow "the agency to do it" even when this is not good for the client in the long run; 4. in general, the absence of an attack on basic problems and issues.

What about community development? Although closely related to many fields in which group process is important, community development has grown principally in relation to the following fields: 1. applied anthropology and economic development, mainly in "underdeveloped" countries (Goodenough 1963); 2. university extension/adult education (Biddle 1957; Brownell 1952) and community colleges (Medsker 1960:72-83); 3. community organization practice in social welfare (Ross 1955. This paper is concerned with community development because it is a broader concept than community organization, the latter, as practiced in this country, being considered by many to be one aspect of community development; see du Sautoy 1961 and Miniclier 1960.). A review of the relative successes of the dole, service, and community development approaches indicate that community development has achieved substantial success, often in the same settings in which the dole and service approaches have failed. There are many cases that could be cited. The interested reader can refer to Poston (1950) for an example of a community development program in this country, while Adams, Foster, and Taylor (1955) give a good overview of community development in several other countries. Although community development has been used principally in rural areas and/or in underdeveloped countries, its use in urban settings and in technologically advanced countries has met with success and is increasing (du Sautoy 1961 and United Nations 1961). However, its potential effectiveness in the United States, particularly in urban areas, has been conspicuously overloaded. Assuming that the case for rural community development has been sufficiently demonstrated, this paper will present some of the advantages of a community development approach in urban areas in this country, proposing that the choice of approach

by social service agencies is a critical factor in determining the success or failure of efforts to alleviate poverty in the United States.

Principles of Community Development

Community development programs are characterized, generally, by a number of interrelated principles. The advantages of community development can be best understood in relation to these principles:

1. The program develops from the "grass-roots" level. Real effort and participation by a large percentage of the indigenous population is considered essential. Some of the advantages of local participation are described by Reid (1946:104) as follows:

When the people . . . assumed responsibility . . . they did an about-face that is one of the most significant things happening in our country today. They were doing what no agency can do—regaining a sense of their basic strength and importance, rebuilding their pride and self-esteem, realizing, many of them for the first time, the sheer ecstasy of self-sufficient citizenship.

Participation by the community also allows the forces of community feeling and group process to come into play. There are many reasons for the strength of group influence in the lives of the individuals identified with a group (see Asch 1957 for a discussion of many of the studies in this area). The importance of the group is summarized by Cartwright (1961:33) as follows:

How aggressive or cooperative a person is, how much self-respect and self-confidence he has, how energetic and productive his work is, what he aspires to, what he believes to be true and good, whom he loves and hates, and what beliefs and prejudices he holds—all these characteristics are highly determined by the individual's group membership. In a real sense, they are properties of groups and of the relationships among people. Whether they change or resist change, therefore, will be greatly influenced by the nature of these groups. Attempts to change them must be concerned with the dynamics of groups.

There is some evidence that the community cohesion gained through community development has the following effects, among others: a. reduction in crime, delinquency and other indices of social disorganization; and b. reduction in mental illness (Cartwright 1961 and Leighton 1965).

2. Professional staff view themselves not as policy makers, but as counselors and advisors to the local population. The professionals must have one or preferably both of the following kinds of skills: a. skill in human relations and organization; and b. skill in a particular field such as education, mental health, etc. The professional staff refrains from "overpowering" the emergent program in terms of numbers, but rather increases together with participation by the indigenous group. To be effective, the community development staff member usually finds it necessary to live in the area in which he is working, as much work can only be done in the evening or on weekends and his chances for acceptance by and understanding of the local population are greatly increased. Also, a case can be made for setting professional

salaries so as to avoid persons who would be attracted to the program on the basis of salary alone.

Professional staff tries not to assume tasks which the local population could assume and seeks to train local workers to eventually take over most or all aspects of the project. In this way, the effort is designed to continue after professional staff and outside support are withdrawn. In other words, a great deal of the work is done by local volunteers and nonprofessional paid staff, and a large emphasis is placed on training local leaders. As stated in a United Nations publication on community development (1955:15): "Progress attained with the participation of the people of the community is much more likely to be maintained and built upon than benefits supplied from without."

3. The community development approach helps assure that the program will be based on an intimate knowledge of the community and its problems. As Reid (1945:112) states, ". . . [local residents] possess more intimate knowledge of the peculiar nature of their problems, [and] have more at stake in determining appropriate solutions to those problems. . . . Nobody else can do these things." Of course, there are obvious dangers in a program dictated solely by members of the local community since, as in the case of individuals who need help, part of the community's predicament may be lack of insight into the bases of its problems. The professional staff should, as do advisors and counselors of individuals, help the community to see the factors underlying its present condition as well as potential solutions. Obviously, such thorough understanding cannot come quickly for either professional staff or community, and launching of a large-scale program in short order can probably be understood as a result of political pressure rather than as a response to demonstrated understanding of need.

Related to a "natural" development of program is the principle that programs cannot be short-term in nature and hope to succeed. A two or three year program, for example, will just barely get off the ground before it is effectively inhibited by the impossibility of adequate planning, lowered morale in the light of cessation of the program, and continual loss of professional staff as they find more stable employment (many probably viewing the job in the first place as temporary stop-gap employment). In brief, the program must start relatively slowly and must be assured ample time in which to develop. On the other hand, due to the participation of the poverty committee the danger of inordinate delay of action is very low.

Acquiring an intimate knowledge of the community will require community development specialists with training in various areas of social research. In fact research, in a broad sense, is a necessary part of the community development approach in providing accurate knowledge of the community, of the bearing of social science knowledge on the program, and of the effectiveness of the program as it progresses.

4. Since the various segments and the various problems of the community are interrelated, an attack on a few symptoms is avoided in preference to a broad attack on underlying conditions. The dangers of boomerang effects from attacking only one problem and ignoring related ones (as in the case of training workers for nonexistent jobs) are recognized. Obviously, an extensive

attack is more difficult than a limited one, but the predominant use of indigenous staff and volunteers effectively multiplies the impact of each professional staff member and each dollar spent. Also, the involvement of the range of local groups and organizations in working toward common goals has the potential effect of uniting previously divided and perhaps antagonistic factions.

Urban Community Development

Let us now consider some important characteristics of urban areas which, in addition to the principles mentioned above, necessarily prescribe some of the features of a successful urban community development program.

1. A marginal (poverty) community may not consider itself a community in any real sense. The lack of interdependency (among relatives, generations, neighbors) is related to high mobility and specialization in pursuits and is a well-known feature of cities in general. Instead of tapping community feeling already present, an urban community development staff may find that they must first generate a sense of community through the potential of the community development program. To accomplish this, the community must perceive that the program holds real promise of attacking some of their basic problems; to the extent that this is true they will probably participate and feel a sense of community. A major hurdle in this respect may be overcoming skepticism fostered by their prior experience with social services.

As one consequence of this initial lack of community feeling, community development staff should be aware that "leaders" who come forward may be "self-appointed" and lack popular support, a situation which a more highly developed community is less likely to tolerate.

2. Another important characteristic of marginal urban communities is that they do not typically have control over many of the important factors underlying their problems. In contrast to relatively self-sufficient communities, the urban marginal community is usually extremely dependent on, and even subservient to, the dominant (external) community in critical areas such as employment, education, and legal process. Those with an acquaintance with marginal urban communities will agree with Spergel and Mundy (1963:49-50) who state that, "One hears, in different keys and tempos, variations on the theme: 'All the decisions are made downtown' . . . [and] resentment and the conviction that the neighborhood is powerless to participate in efforts to solve its . . . problems." From interviews with 200 welfare recipients in California, Raab (1964:3) found a similar prevailing sentiment: "These people feel helpless because they feel, above all, that they are on the outside looking in . . . feel themselves to be recipients, never participants. It is the recipient status which makes them feel deprived and hopelessly cut off from that part of society which is powerful and prosperous" (author's italics).

Because of the interdependency of the marginal and dominant communities, both must be worked with as a single interdependent whole in order to improve many conditions. In particular, great effort must be spent in bringing the dominant community to realize the necessity for changing its own structure and institutions insofar as these create the problems confronting it in the marginal communities.

At the same time, it is no contradiction for development to proceed in the marginal community in those areas where local initiative can be effective. With respect to combating poverty, for example, a marginal urban community collectively represents a large pool of needs for goods and services which can support cooperative efforts in marketing, housing, production, etc., thus providing training and employment for local residents instead of flowing to outside entrepreneurs. Political education and get-out-the-vote campaigns; day care, preschool, and tutorial programs; local homemaker services and job placement services; local cultural events; and so on and on. The list is practically endless of potentially successful self-help activities in an urban community development program which would provide training and employment while meeting needs.

The particular characteristics of the urban condition as discussed above may partially account for the neglect of community development in urban areas of the United States. However, since urban community development is accepted and successful in other countries and since urban areas in many parts of the world share similar general features (Anderson 1959), the urban condition per se is probably not the critical factor.

Social Services and Community Development

If a good case can be made for the potential effectiveness of community development in urban areas in the United States, why hasn't it found favor with social service agencies in this country? When reasons are sought within the social service agencies themselves, the following factors emerge:

The various social service agencies (public welfare, public housing, community chest, etc., as well as many private agencies) are highly developed, traditional, and bureaucratic, particularly in the urban areas in this country. They have dictated social service programs for many years, will thus find it difficult to relinquish power in this area, and cannot easily see that this very fact may be a hindrance to achieving the goals they profess. To the extent that they identify with either, these agencies usually identify with the dominant rather than the marginal community and in many respects serve as an arm of the dominant community. Consequently, they often perceive the problems as existing "over there" in the marginal community and almost all efforts at change are directed accordingly. That these problems may to a large extent exist because of the actions and attitudes of the dominant community, they find little expression. Furthermore, the problems dealt with are often mainly the ones that happen to affect the dominant community (these are not necessarily the most serious problems of the marginal community). Related to the social distance between agency and clients is a lack of intimate understanding of the real problems of the marginal community as well as a tendency to see the marginal community as "bad" (the terms "lower-class," "culturally-deprived," etc., all imply inferiority).

The general emphasis in the social services on administrative efficiency, expertism, professionalism, and rationality is likewise antagonistic to a community development approach, which is inefficient at first (as is a pupil attempting a task which the teacher could more easily do for him, and as a democratic system is usually less efficient than a totalitarian one), which advocates a preponderance of nonprofessional workers as well as

commitment and "nonprofessional" involvement of professional staff, and which utilizes emotional appeals when necessary to reach the community in question.

Obviously, social service agencies are not more responsible than other institutions of the dominant culture for reinforcement of class divisions. However, in a consideration of solutions, it appears that social services in this country could, if firmly committed to a fundamental change in approach, successfully apply community development in attacking the problems of urban poverty. The critical nature of this choice of approach is emphasized by the fact that traditional social services may seriously undermine a community development program inasmuch as clients may continue to "let the agency do it" if this is a habit of long duration. Raab (1964:3, 5, 8) states the choice clearly:

> Participation [by the poor] means . . . structural participation . . . it is a matter of placing them in some formal active role in the doing. . . . In short, we can't say on the one hand: "Why don't these people help themselves"; and on the other hand, we don't trust these people to run their own affairs. We can't have it both ways. . . . The "handout" period, the "relief" concept must finally come to a close. And the alternative . . . is not so much a matter of individual therapy or casework as of an organizational reconstruction of welfare services. (Author's italics.)

Summary

This paper has tried to establish three points: 1. The community development approach seems, both in theory and in practice, to have much greater potential for success in combatting poverty, in urban as well as rural areas, than the traditional dole and service approaches. 2. Since the urban condition per se does not seem to preclude the use of community development, social service agencies should give serious consideration to the community development approach, realizing that many of the barriers to such a change in approach exist within the social service agencies themselves. 3. Because the traditional dole and service approaches are, theoretically and in practice, antagonistic to community development in many respects, a change to a community development approach would require not just the addition of community development on top of existing approaches, but a large shift in emphasis away from the dole and service approaches and toward community development.

Will the present nationwide poverty program introduce notable changes as outlined above in the social service approach? Unfortunately, probably not. The poverty program represents an additional few percent of funds, much of which will be consumed in new administrative procedures, above present expenditures for traditional social services. Furthermore, only one portion of the poverty program (community action programs) makes provision for active participation of the poor. Finally, involvement of local "leaders" has been generally interpreted as satisfying the provision for ". . . maximum feasible participation of residents of the area and members of the groups served." The final degree of active participation of indigenous persons in social service programs is so fractional as to be practically insignificant.

In conclusion, a quote from Ogden and Ogden (1947:87) appropriately sums up the decision facing the social services: "These [approaches] can be broadly grouped as the doing-for and the doing-with philosophies. In the former is a survival of the powerful tradition of noblesse oblige; in the latter are the seeds of democracy."

ENDNOTE

REFERENCES

ADAMS, H. S., G. FOSTER, and P. TAYLOR
    1955   Report on community development programs in India, Pakistan, and the Philippines. International Cooperation Administration, Washington, D.C.

ANDERSON, N.
    1959   The urban community: a world perspective. New York, Holt.

ASCH, S. E.
    1957   Social psychology. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, Prentice-Hall.

BIDDLE, W.
    1957   Growth toward freedom. New York, Harpers.

BROWNELL, B.
    1952   The college and the community. New York, Harpers.

CARTWRIGHT, D. P.
    1961   Achieving change in people: some applications of group dynamics theory. In Forces in Community Development. Washington, D.C., National Educational Association.

DU SAUTOY, P.
    1961   Community development and adult education in urban areas. Community Development No. 8.

GOODENOUGH, W. H.
    1963   Cooperation in change: an anthropological approach to community development. New York, Russell Sage Foundation.

LEIGHTON, A. H.
    1965   Poverty and social change. Scientific American 212:21-27.

MAY, E.
    1964   The wasted Americans. New York, Harper Row.

MEDSKER, L.
    1960   The junior college: progress and prospect. New York, McGraw-Hill.

MINICLIER, L.
    1960   Social group work in community development programs. In Community Organization, 1960. National Conference on Social Welfare. New York, Columbia University.

OGDEN, JEAN and J. OGDEN
    1947   These things we tried. Charlottesville, University of Virginia.

POSTON, R. W.
    1950   Small town renaissance. New York, Harpers.

RAAB, E.
    1964   The "X" factor: one key to a new welfare approach. Sacramento,
            California State Department of Social Welfare (discussion material).

REID, J. T.
    1946   It happened in Taos. Albuquerque, University of New Mexico.

ROSS, M. G.
    1955   Community organization, theory and principles. New York, Harper
            & Bros.

SPERGEL, I. A. and R. E. MUNDY
    1963   A community study. East Woodlawn: problems, programs, proposals.
            Chicago, University of Chicago.

UNITED NATIONS
    1955   Social progress through community development.

    1961   Community development in urban areas. New York.