

## **Organizing for Community Control of Neighborhood Development**

Imagine that you are on the board of a Community Development Corporation. Your organization has recently purchased a blighted apartment building and is planning to restore it for use as affordable housing. Then, one day you receive a flyer on your doorstep announcing a neighborhood meeting which is being organized to block this very development. Suddenly your city financing is in jeopardy; city staff are saying that they thought *you* represented the neighborhood and now they are confused. You are confused too. You joined this board to improve the area and now people are making it sound like your organization is out to take advantage of the community. This is not what “empowering the community” was supposed to feel like.

### ***Can organizing lead to measurable neighborhood development?***

A lot of community development corporations (CDCs) grew out of community organizing struggles and many have developed into effective organizations with the professional capacity to make a real difference in their neighborhoods, but along the way many have lost some of their connection with those communities. Few CDCs have organizers on their staff and those that do often focus their organizing work on advocacy around public policy issues rather than integrating their organizing with their development work. Part of the problem is that, in spite of the long history of organizing in most low-income communities, it is not entirely obvious how to relate organizing to the day-to-day detailed work of community development. Development professionals are afraid that the community will get in the way of getting things done, and organizers are afraid that professionals won't give community members space to make meaningful contributions. Organizing focused on building power has been very effective in bringing in resources for development of low-income neighborhoods, but it still does not equip the community with a way to exercise ongoing control over that development process.

The East Bay Asian Local Development Corporation (EBALDC) is a 23 year-old community development corporation in Oakland California. EBALDC began in Oakland's Chinatown and has gradually grown in into a citywide nonprofit real estate developer. After many years of growth and increasing professionalization, EBLADC underwent a strategic planning process in 1995. One of the outcomes of this process was the decision to experiment with ways to use some of the organization's capacity to contribute to the economic and social development of the neighborhoods surrounding our real estate developments. We selected one neighborhood in Oakland, the Lower San Antonio, for an intensive community development project that would go beyond bricks and mortar. In the course of this project, we have found organizing to be one

of the most effective ways to achieve measurable change in the neighborhood. Our initial projects have been modest but we feel that we have developed a successful model that will allow us to integrate grassroots organizing into larger scale development projects.

### **Beyond Stop Signs.**

Organizing is used as a tool in a wide variety of different social arenas from workplace struggles to environmental policy and has a different character in each of these arenas. Within community development, many organizations pursue organizing with a model borrows from other types of issue advocacy. This approach tends to build large, diverse coalitions which use direct action, petitions or other means which demonstrate that there is broad support for a set of demands. This approach works extremely well when the demand is simple and the target is clear.

But sometimes the targets are less clear. It is possible for a group to demand improvements like a new stop sign on a specific corner or more police presence in a park but the big victories like better schools or more jobs are inherently hard to *demand*. A city or even a bank can be pressured into making a specific investment. But once the pressure has been successful, can they be trusted to make all the important smaller decisions that still have to be made? Perhaps a developer is brought in to implement the project. If the advocacy campaign has been successful in building momentum, there is a tendency for the campaign's organizer to become sort of a shadow project manager, staying abreast of the details and watching for opportunities for further advocacy. Are local people being hired to work on the project? Is the design consistent with the neighborhood? Etc. But the organizer cannot be involved in all of the decisions and can involve the community in even fewer. *This is the problem that the Community Development Corporation was created to solve.* In the wake of the mistakes of Urban Renewal, people recognized that they could not trust cities and their private developers to put the interests of the neighborhood first even under political pressure. If the community could have its own developer, then it could trust that those small decisions were being made in its best interest.

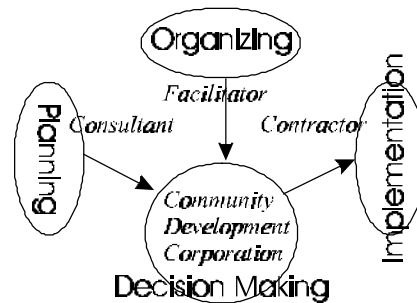
At their best, Community Development Corporations (CDCs) are in close contact with the communities that they serve. Very often their board and staff members are drawn from within their target community and they have deep networks of contacts within the community which can lead them to better and more relevant solutions to community problems. However, the very organizations with the best networks often lack the capacity to professionally implement their community's goals. And when these organizations do succeed, they tend to quickly become more professional, and often (though not always) this distances them from the community that they serve. Many community members with interest and initiative do not feel comfortable or welcome in the technical environment of these boards and choose instead to participate in more grassroots organizations.

The result is that it is not always safe to assume that a community based nonprofit is in close touch with the community that it serves. This "movement" has come a very long way in building professional development capacity but, for the most part, we still lack sustainable models for ongoing community control over that capacity. What is needed is a way to insure that the capacity that professionals provide is placed *at the service of* the community.

### Building capacity for community control over development: Our evolving strategy

For the past four years, EBALDC's has been working on a comprehensive community development initiative in the Lower San Antonio Neighborhood in Oakland. Our work has led us to sponsor several new grassroots organizations including a merchants association and a parents council for the local park. Through this work, we have developed a framework that provides a central place for independent, democratic organizations whose efforts are supplemented and magnified by professionals in a way that extends rather than limits the reach of the grassroots organization.

Any community development project, whether it is an affordable housing project which takes several years to build or a one time clean up event at a local park, involves a number of different functions including planning, organizing, decision making and implementation. A community development corporation can perform all of these functions itself or they can be split up into four or more different roles. Involving the community in a development project means giving community members full responsibility for one or more of these functions.



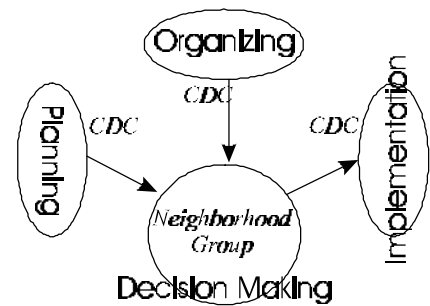
Four functions can occur within one organization or they can be split up between several organizations.

Some examples:

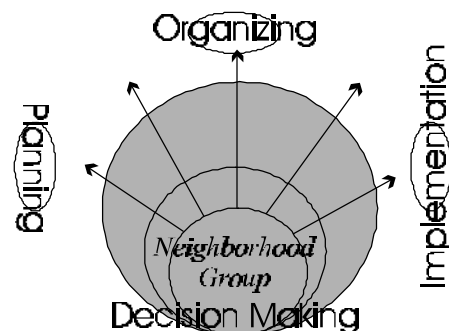
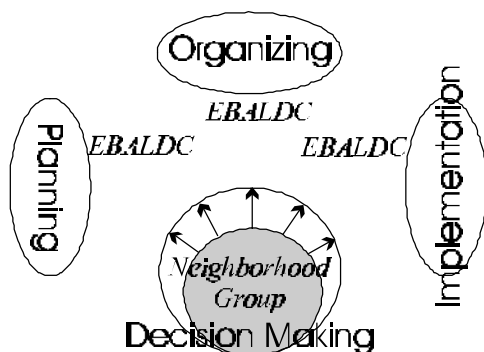
Planning	Organizing	Decision Making	Implementation
Framing the issue	Door knocking, Petition Gathering	Voting on position	Writing a letter to the mayor
identifying service needs	Meeting Facilitation	Prioritizing service needs	Providing a service
job skills survey	Outreach to unemployed	Selecting partners	New business venture

The community could be organized around an action (implementation) project like tree planting or a planning project like surveying. Many organizers prefer to engage people in the process of organizing itself through door-knocking or petition campaigns. EBALDC chose to start with decision making and in hindsight it seems like a good choice. Development scares people because they feel like it is beyond their control. We needed a way to give people real control. So we began by creating democratic organizations that could make decisions, even if they began as relatively small organizations making relatively small decisions.

But we realized that we could not stop with decision making; that community members could not really lead the development process if they were not involved in at least some of the other functions. One option was for EBALDC to provide planning and research but to expect them to take full responsibility for implementing their decisions. An almost opposite approach would have been to offer our support as project managers to implement projects that they had researched, planned and decided on. Ultimately, we settled on the realization that for the groups to be strong and independent they would need to grow in all of these directions eventually. An organization that relied on EBALDC to implement all of its decisions or facilitate all of its meetings could not be fully effective.

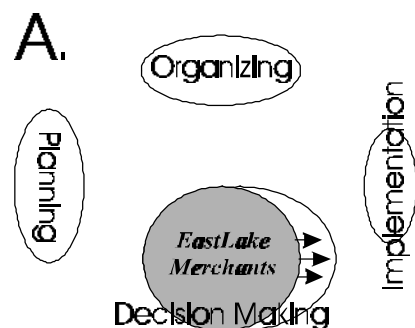


*A grassroots organization can be the decision maker even while a CDC performs all of the other 3 functions*



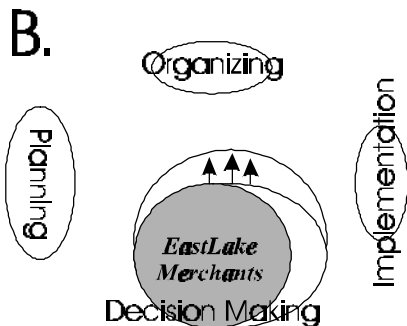
*Starting from a base as a decision making body, a fledgling organization has to grow into the planning, organizing and implementing functions.*

In looking at the projects that we had been working on or were considering working on with these groups, we recognized that each project presented an opportunity for growth in a different direction. Take for example our work with the EastLake Merchants Association. We have worked on planning, organizing and implementation projects with them. But they have not taken every role in every project. Some projects involved merchants in implementation while we did all the planning and organizing. Early in our merchant organizing work, we put together a neighborhood clean up event. The fledgling Merchants Association agreed to sponsor the event and individual businesses provided food for volunteers and many merchants came out to clean up the neighborhood. For this type of event EBALDC staff, with help from the city, planned the



*(A) ELMA members volunteer on a neighborhood clean-up...*

project and performed all the outreach necessary to get people there and merchants simply participated. But this active participation was a necessary first step for many of the merchants.

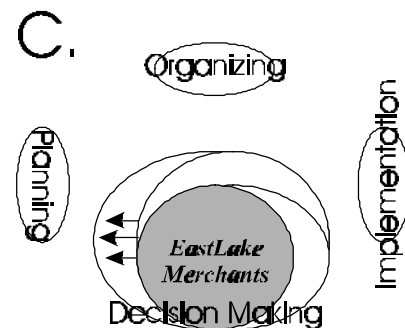


*(B) then circulate safety petitions...*

At another time, EBALDC might take responsibility for planning and implementation while merchants grow into the role of organizing. One example came in the aftermath of a string of arson fires that burned 5 of the district's Asian-owned grocery stores to the ground. Merchants were extremely concerned about the fires and the slow response from the city. EBALDC researched some of the options available to the Association and recommended a short list of possible responses. The Association decided on priorities for response and, for the most part EBALDC implemented that response.

However, in this instance, merchants took responsibility for organizing and outreach. They circulated a petition with 9 demands and collected \$15,000 in donations for a reward. EBALDC established the bank account and record keeping system for the reward money and invited the mayor, chief of police and fire investigators to a forum at which merchants could present their petition and demands.

On other projects, the merchants take the planning role while we focus on organizing and implementation. In a multiracial neighborhood one of the challenges facing merchants is how to craft a neighborhood character which is not ethnically exclusive. The neighborhood where EBALDC began our merchant organizing work had been a Latino and African American neighborhood before a large influx of Southeast Asian immigrants in the 1980s. By 1995 many people were calling the area New Chinatown, in spite of the fact that Chinese were a minority of the area's population. One of the first tasks facing the new Merchants Association was to create a new identity for the commercial district that was more inclusive. The merchants who came together to found the Association represented the full diversity of the neighborhood and wanted to create an identity that included everyone. They selected the name 'EastLake' for their association and began to promote the new name for the area. The Association prioritized street banners as a means to further promote this multicultural identity for the district. EBALDC staff helped them to prepare a successful grant application and develop a community design process which involved merchants as well as local youth. Two merchant leaders helped coordinate the process and collected feedback from others on their goals for the banner project through one-to-one discussions and two community meetings. For this project merchant leaders not only participated in planning but also had a chance to coordinate that effort while EBALDC staff, together with the professional artists, will take responsibility for implementing the group's decision.



*(C) later they plan street banners.*

In each project, the grassroots organization has the decision-making role, then takes on various parts of planning, organizing and implementing. In this way, we allow them to lead projects that are much larger in scope than what they could undertake alone. At the same time, by mixing the types of projects, we avoid pigeonholing the organizations into any one role that would limit their leadership development. Our joint projects provide opportunity for the organization and its leaders to grow in each of these important directions. The result is that real change is beginning to happen in the neighborhood and community residents are engaged in leading that change and using the process as an opportunity to build their own leadership.

### ***Organizing for Control***

When change happens in low-income neighborhoods it is generally driven by forces far outside the community. This can make people feel powerless and irrelevant. The response, naturally enough, is often to organize for power. In one sense, power is the ability to make the political and economic institutions pay attention to you and to your needs. Power brings resources to the table and often is the only way for communities to avoid the worst abuses of urban development. But power is just a beginning. Beyond power there is control.

Community control means that the people who will be most directly effected by the development process are sitting at the table making real contributions to the ongoing process. It means a large number of people understanding the process, articulating its goals, weighing the alternatives, and struggling with some of the hard decisions that accompany any community development project. Control takes more time. People have to grow into the role slowly through experience. To control an ongoing development process, people have to feel they have something valuable to contribute. This means building an 'infrastructure' of grassroots organizations that give community members a chance to provide real leadership and direction and to work with professionals to tackle community problems. Our hope is that if we can create real mechanisms for control, we might be able to avoid some of the struggles for power that so often stand in the way of neighborhood development.