



Social Service, Social Change: Lessons from Detroit

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In the spring of 2003, the Building Movement Project brought together several nonprofit executive directors in Detroit to talk about the challenges they faced in their work. Their organizations covered a wide span – from health care for low-income children to food for the hungry to youth services for teens – but all had a common interest. They wanted to know how they could look beyond their day-to-day services to address the broader issues affecting their constituents. Despite their different backgrounds and experiences, this group of executive directors all noted a growing demand for services from the poor and working poor with little relief in sight. The number of people in need of services was increasing, and business as usual was no longer working.

Throughout the country, directors and staff of nonprofit groups are interested in how to make more systemic change but often have little training or background on what that means for their organizations. For Building Movement, the Detroit work is part of a national model for how service organizations can integrate social change/justice into their work and to give voice to their constituents. The vast infrastructure of direct service groups could be a powerful force in building the voice of people in the U.S. who have been marginalized. Service delivery organizations have daily contact with poor and working poor residents, and other underserved populations. Right now, many of these groups are reexamining their work as a result of government funding cuts and policy changes that have often had a devastating impact on their constituents. Service groups recognize that they cannot meet the growing needs with fewer resources. At the same time, they acknowledge that even the poorest constituents have something to give.

Based on our work in Detroit, we plan to develop ways that other service groups can implement their service work through a social change/justice lens. Below are some of the signs of change that have surfaced in the Detroit organizations. We hope these observations provide some insight into the process, and some of the transformations and challenges that have occurred up until this point.

Signs of Change

The Building Movement Project entered each organization at the invitation of the executive director. Project Team member Linda Campbell assisted each director in deciding the best place to begin the process. Using the *Features of Movement Capacity Building for Nonprofits*, a tool developed out of meetings with leaders of social change nonprofits across the U.S., each director picked two features that best suited their organization. Then, the directors worked with Linda on a plan for how to introduce this work into their organization. Two directors chose to start with the staff, one decided to begin with the board, and one group was volunteer-based and began the process together.

As the groups in Detroit started to implement the *Features of Movement Capacity Building for Nonprofits*, several similarities arose in the way that change occurred within their organizations. Shifting from a strictly service framework to one that incorporates social justice can be a challenging process. Not everyone sees the importance or understands what it means to view their organization through a social change/justice frame. However, as staff and board members became more engaged in this process, they began to see how the organization could have a larger impact, and began to develop a personal stake in acting as change-makers.

The initial step in this process was to allow for a shift in awareness. By providing a space for learning and reflecting, individuals in an organization can step back from their day-to-day work and begin to look at their personal connection to what they do, as well as to examine some of the deeper systemic patterns that create the need for the services they provide. In Detroit, these sessions included reading and discussion on a variety of books such as *Poverty Knowledge* by Alice O'Connor, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis* by Thomas Sugrue, and *The Miner's Canary* by Lani Guinier and Gerald Torres, which allowed participants to learn more about the history of their communities, as well as the history of race and poverty in the U.S. With this broader framework, they then began to reflect on the specific challenges facing their clients and the deeper causes that existed to create them. Furthermore, they were able to more personally connect to these situations and to their clients.

Perception of the Problem

When asked, most people working in nonprofit organizations can quickly name the specific problems facing their constituencies. Everyday is spent dealing with those problems and looking for solutions. However, without a space for learning and reflecting on these issues, it becomes very difficult to address the root causes of these problems. The philosophy that influences the work and the practice of an organization is often explained through program strategy or a particular model or theory, but in order to get at the true principles influencing their work, the organizations in Detroit went beneath the surface of their programs to reveal assumptions that existed and to understand the lens they looked through in addressing their communities.

In Detroit, individuals in each organization stepped back to analyze how they approached the work. Service providers bring a lot of knowledge specific to their craft, but often need more learning around social justice concepts. This process requires stepping outside of the professional model of service, opening up and being receptive to analysis. In this space of learning and reflecting, staff began to struggle with their own worldviews. They looked at what they bring to the work and how that affects the shift towards a social justice framework.

Staff members were asked to define the problems facing their constituents. One woman quickly responded that some of the major problems her clients faced were hunger, substance abuse, homelessness, unemployment, mental illness and interpersonal violence. When pressed to explore her answer, she realized that she was identifying symptoms of the actual problems of social stress and disorganization facing her entire community. She recognized that she herself was affected by the same circumstances, including the rising cost of living, decrease in affordable housing, and more demands on her limited salary.

Once assumptions were uncovered and recognized, they started to get to the issues and challenges facing constituents. By identifying root causes, the gap or social distance that sometimes exists between “providers” and “clients” began to close. Perceptions of the problem changed once staff members shed some of their distance from their clients, moved beyond their role as professionals, and realized that the problems facing their communities at the core make them all vulnerable. We found that this change in awareness is the point at which a new vision for the work can be crafted. Staff developed a larger view or concept of how their work could be a source of change and how it connected them to a larger movement for change.

Redefinition of “Civic Engagement”

As the learning and reflecting sessions continued, the focus shifted to include engaging constituents. This is a key piece of the effort in Detroit, and requires organizations to look at the extent to which they are willing to truly include their constituents in the shaping of their work. Opinions and input are often sought from constituents, but true “civic engagement” requires a realignment of power on the part of community-based nonprofits. Recognizing the value and importance of constituents’ voices and analysis leads groups to engage them as partners with organizations to define problems and create change.

At one organization, this process began by creating a space for learning and reflection for constituents themselves, in addition to the staff sessions. Project Team member Linda Campbell facilitated discussion among two client groups. Participants had clarity of insight not only around the challenges facing them in their daily lives, but also around the deeper causes of these issues. They were able to articulate exactly what they needed from the organization, and highlighted the desire and necessity for support in changing the systems around them, not just providing short-term solutions to their most pressing concerns.

Not only do these constituents have an opportunity to define their views of the problems facing their community, but they also have a space in which they can suggest what they need from the organization in order to address these issues. Engagement is not just empowering constituents, it is realigning power to give communities a valuable stake in how community-based nonprofits address issues and influence change.

Characteristics of a Social Change Leader

One clear sign of change that has been emerging throughout this process is the shift that has occurred in the leaders of these service organizations. We are still looking at just what marks this change, but it is evident that these directors have evolved from service leaders to social change agents. To commit to this work, these executive directors immersed themselves in the process and participated in change. As we continue to look at the specific characteristics that have surfaced, we are asking the questions: How does this process change the way a leader behaves? What does it take to build a person’s capacity to become a social change leader? This shift is exciting and parallels what we see among the staff and boards of these organizations as they begin to see themselves not just as providers but as change-makers.

The role of the executive director was crucial in guiding the staff and board through the process of incorporating this vision into the work. The directors assumed leadership for communicating this vision to the board and other stakeholders in the organization. As they filled this role, they had to reexamine their own assumptions about their work and redefine their understanding of social service.

The Challenges

There are several challenges that arise when organizations engage in this process. These challenges vary by organization, but we highlight two below that require some careful consideration when incorporating a social change framework into any organization.

The Role of the Board

While one director in Detroit chose her board as the entry point for the Building Movement work into the organization, the role of the board in this process must be carefully considered.

Generally removed more from the day-to-day operations of the staff and relationships to the clients or constituents, the board may have difficulty broadening a mission to include social justice or even shifting the structure of an organization to include more significant constituent involvement in the decision-making process. A board is charged with safeguarding the organization and any shift in power or structure can be worrisome. While this is again not true of every community-based nonprofit, it is worthwhile to consider some key issues.

One consideration is when to bring a board into the process. It might not always be effective to do it early. Sometimes it's better to start in-depth with the staff, beginning with a space for learning and reflecting to identify specific areas for change that are coming from the people on the ground day-to-day. Once changes start to surface, the board will have more concrete examples of how this process works and some of the benefits that arise.

Another thing to consider when deciding when to bring a board into this process is the composition of the board. Who's there? People with strong ties to the community? Professionals? Activists? By analyzing the make-up of the boards in Detroit, directors could better gauge their receptivity to an involved process for change.

We've seen several challenges in Detroit in approaching a board, including one board that has a strong, clear understanding of how they want the organization to fulfill its mission and who's in charge of implementing it. They continually oppose the director's and the staff's attempts to broaden the work to include stronger advocacy around the policies that directly affect their constituents. While the director continues her attempts to educate the board on what she and her staff see as essential to their work now, she has decided to pull back a little and continue her work with the staff's and constituents' development in this process.

Despite some difficulties, we've also seen some success with boards. One board committed to participate in the Building Movement process, and discovered along the way that in order to fulfill their mission it was essential for them to redefine their programmatic focus and develop a theory of change that addressed the core problems facing their community. While some board members did not agree with the new direction of the organization and chose to resign, the remaining members are more fully committed to the work and have become more issue-focused, assisting the executive director and staff in concentrating on the bigger picture.

Funding Change

Non-programmatic funding or funding for any type of organizational development is notoriously hard to come by, and some of the groups in Detroit have had difficulty convincing their long-time funders to support this work. In addition, groups worry that they will alienate their funding sources by engaging in social change work, especially in places where funds are already scarce. On the one hand, shrinking resources are one of the motivations for looking at issues of larger social change. On the other, funding reductions can create competition and distrust among groups, undermining a larger social change impact.

Some practical advice came from Project Team member Kim Klein, of the Grassroots Fundraising Journal who gave a Detroit fundraising training and reminded groups of some ways to approach this issue. The first is to add diversity to funding sources. Diversity means that you have the money you need coming from as many sources as you can manage, raised by as many people as you can coordinate. Most organizations get into trouble because they have only two or three sources of funding, or because they have only two or three people really involved in raising money. If any one of the sources or any of the people go away, the organization is in trouble. Secondly, she stresses flexibility. The key to staying out of a crisis is to have plans that are flexible. You want plans that can easily be changed if external circumstances require it. Another important strategy is to keep donors well-informed of the changes coming out of this process and how that will strengthen not only the organization, but the community as well. Donors are more willing to support an organizational project if they can see clear results and improvements. Finally, get support from a team of people in order to maximize all these elements. This is a great role for the board as well, and can even encourage their backing and understanding of the project as they look for outside support to fund the work.

Despite these challenges, participants in this process continue to work towards what they see as an essential shift in providing security for their constituents and for their organizations. Without changing the way their work gets done, they worry about how much longer they can sustain their organizations and continue to provide needed services in their communities.

The Organizations

Three service organizations – Vanguard Community Development Corporation; Capuchin Soup Kitchen; and Detroit Primary Care Network (DPCN) – have been working with the Building Movement Project. The project has also been involved with the AKIDA network, a leadership development group of African-American women executive directors in Detroit on some of their workshops and plans. In addition, Building Movement has supported a group of service providers and parents from Grand Rapids who wanted to address the high rate of lead poisoning among minority children.

Capuchin Soup Kitchen

This agency was founded 75 years ago by the Capuchin Friars to provide emergency food and shelter to Detroit residents. Lay staffers work with members of the Capuchin Order to provide “guests” with services ranging from meals to food to furniture. Other activities range from counseling to fund development. In the past two years, the Capuchins noted several changes in their work. First, their numbers have increased exponentially – from serving 1,500 meals a day to almost 3,000. Second, people coming for emergency service (meals, food distribution, clothing, furniture, etc.) were coming back on a regular basis. Third, Detroit’s public agencies were the number one referral source for people coming to the Capuchins. These changes indicated that those seeking services were more often chronically poor (even if they had jobs), had few if any alternative sources of support, and were not able to pull themselves out of their desperate financial situation.

The executive director’s interest in social change grew from his determination to avoid becoming the “McDonald’s of soup kitchens.” He invited in the Building Movement Project to meet with six staffers – three religious members and three lay employees – biweekly to discuss what it would mean for the organization to adopt a more social justice orientation. The staff read

together on issues related to social justice, went through exercises and discussed their vision of the agency and its work. In meetings with the executive director and the Capuchin's local advisory board, staff in the Building Movement group began expressing their desire to help the organization think about the role it can play in supporting social justice/change for the people they serve and beyond.

The staff met with the executive director to talk about how the organization can change its work to include constituents – especially the working poor – in discussions on what they need to be able to exit poverty. They start by listening to families who use their services and to help them articulate their own analysis of the problems they face in trying to stabilize their lives. Through a process of meeting and education, the Capuchins are working with the families to identify structural barriers preventing them from leaving poverty, and develop strategies on how to support families in addressing these barriers. The intent is to give voice to those they serve and to help constituents work together on how to make changes on issues that affect their lives.

Detroit Primary Care Network (DPCN)

DPCN started 20 years ago as part of a movement to increase access to health care for elderly and poor families. In the 1990s, drastic cuts in primary care, the introduction of capitated rates, and Michigan's low reimbursement rates limited health care access and services to the poor and uninsured. During that period, the Detroit Primary Care Network decided to focus on direct medical services for poor and homeless children through contracted services. Reduced access to medical care for the city's poor and working poor continued through the millennium. By the time DPCN decided to join the Building Movement project in Detroit, there was almost no resistance to the changes in care that catered to corporate health systems' financial needs and reduced access for the uninsured and the underinsured.

Initially, the executive director of DPCN worked with the Building Movement Project on building a coalition across organizational boundaries. She set up a series of meetings with the few remaining community-based primary health care providers and high level government officials. She also began to present groups with ways to increased citizen participation in funding and policy decisions, such as building a grassroots citizens' movement on health care issues. However, it soon became evident that other health care providers were not interested in building the consumers' voice either because groups were so focused on their own organizational survival and/or they had started partnerships with for-profit providers.

The sudden launch of a new health authority to provide care for thousands of uninsured and underinsured residents prompted DPCN – with the help of Building Movement – to recognize the importance of mobilizing citizens to become engaged in decision-making and influencing policy. DPCN then took a radical step. The Board and Executive Director, after several facilitated discussions made a critical decision to stop providing direct services and concentrate instead on including citizen voices into health care policy. More specifically, DPCN is now the *Center for Health Education and Advocacy (CHEA)* and will focus on how poverty impacts on the health outcomes of children and families. The executive director asked to work with the Building Movement Project so she could learn from others around the country on how to build a citizen voice that would begin to address some of the root cause of the health care crisis in Detroit.

Vanguard Community Development Corporation

Vanguard is a five year old faith-based community development corporation associated with the Ebenezer Baptist Church, one of the largest and most influential churches in Detroit with a membership of over 5,000. Working in a low-income African-American community where the church is currently located, Vanguard was established to provide housing, economic development and programs to strengthen the capacity of youth and families. The executive director and the Building Movement team member decided to focus on educating staff. Five staff members met biweekly over the past year to discuss selected readings, conduct analysis, and participate in group discussions about their work. The first task of the staff group was to examine how race, class, economics, gender and power impact community building in Detroit. They read and discussed books to understand the history of their community and to learn about the role and theory behind community organizing.

Through this work, Vanguard decided that it needed to involve community constituents in a more meaningful way in setting the direction of the agency. First they secured the support of the organization's Board of Directors including the Chair, who is the pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church. Now the staff is making plans to work with community residents to find out *their* vision of the community. Through this process, they plan to assess Vanguard's relationship to the community to see how they can develop a full partnership where community self-determination is primary. Learning from groups around the country, the staff is modeling how faith-based CDCs can work in partnership with their constituents in building communities.

Our Kitchen Table

A volunteer group of health care providers and parents worried about the high levels of lead paint poisoning among minority children in Grand Rapids (infancy to six poison rates are up to 46%) began meeting with the Building Movement Project to discuss how they could address this issue. Frustrated by the lack of involvement of the families affected, the group started to read and discuss how race and power serve as barriers to citizen activism in their area. They decided to apply for a federal grant that would allow them to explore the environmental impact of lead poisoning on the African American and Latino communities in Grand Rapids using the Western Michigan Environmental Action Council as their fiscal sponsor. To their surprise, they were awarded funds of \$100,000 over three years.

Now they are working to develop women's leadership and to build a cross-race coalition with Latino and African-American mothers to address the issue of lead poisoning. One method will be a peer focused train-the-trainers program, modeled on work being done in California. Using a social change/justice framework, Our Kitchen Table is looking at issues such as how to work in an area where there has been little cross-race organizing, reach across the professional/parent divide in a meaningful way giving voice to those traditionally disenfranchised, and negotiate with a mainstream white-led environmental group with their own models of how to do the work. They are looking to the Building Movement Project for models and support for their work in this area.

AKIDA Network

The AKIDA Network is a group of African American women executive directors in Detroit area nonprofit organizations. Some members of AKIDA have expressed interest in using the Features of Movement Capacity Building as part of enhancing their leadership capacity. They are

particularly interested in how African American women leaders can move beyond individual agency management and embrace a shared vision for community change. The Network is working with the Building Movement Project in Detroit as they explore how to integrate the project's work into their own. The Building Movement Project is continuing its work with AKIDA with a focus on transformational leadership and its link to systemic change. The women are now in the process of learning and reflecting and are focusing on building networks between their organizations and working across boundaries.

Executive Directors Group

The Executive Directors from these agencies including some members of the AKIDA Network meet monthly to discuss the impact the Building Movement activities are having on their agencies. Through these discussions the executive directors identify strategies that can improve their capacity to work as effective social change leaders within the community. They also address how they can represent the work of the Building Movement Project in their individual agencies and in the broader community. Discussions are facilitated and often based on selected readings. The group is now focused on changing their organizational practices based on what they have learned and discussed. Implementing these changes, including engaging boards and staff, will be the focus of the group moving forward.

Building Movement Project

The goal of the Building Movement Project is to build a strong social justice ethos into the nonprofit sector, strengthen the role of US nonprofit organizations as sites of democratic practice and promote nonprofit groups as sites of movement building for progressive social change.

Many working in the nonprofit sector are strongly motivated by the desire to address injustices and to promote fairness, equality, and sustainability. The Building Movement Project supports nonprofit organizations to work towards social change by integrating movement building strategies into their work.

Building Movement engages four strategies to accomplish its goals. These include:

- Changing the discourse and practice within the nonprofit sector to endorse values of social change and social justice.
- Identifying and working with social service organizations as neglected sites for social change/justice activities where staff and constituencies can be engaged as participants in movement building.
- Supporting young leaders who bring new ideas and energy to social change work.
- Listening to and engaging people working in social change organizations – especially grassroots and community-based groups – and to strengthen their ability to have an impact on policies that affect their work.