The Paradoxes and Promise of Community Coalitions

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

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

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

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3 Community coalitions in this article refer to all formal multisectoral collaborations (e.g., partnerships, collaboratives, etc.) that involve representatives of diverse community institutions working within an organizational structure to improve community conditions.
have been able to engage representatives from nonprofit/community agencies, government, with businesses and philanthropy, in planning and resource development. Over the past decade, formal collaboration has probably become the most common key element of all social problem-solving efforts.

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

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

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