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by Jane G. Covey and L. David Brown

Institute for Development Research

44 Farnsworth Street, Boston, MA 02210-1211 USA ◦ tel. (617) 422-0422 ◦ fax (617) 482-0617 ◦ email idr@jsi.com

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Jane G. Covey is the Executive Director of IDR. L. David Brown is President of the Institute for Development Research and Professor of Organizational Behavior at Boston University. This research was supported in part by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. The authors wish to thank the other organizations involved for their comments and corrections on an earlier draft. As participants in the events described, we acknowledge that our account may be biased in spite of our efforts to provide an accurate and balanced view. We are, of course, responsible for errors that remain.

INTRODUCTION

Environmental degradation and impoverishment plague the traditionally oppressed groups in all societies. But around the globe there is local action to create ecologically, culturally, and politically sustainable development while protecting remaining natural resources. In the Summer of 1991, groups of activists and supporting organizations working on environment and sustainable development issues in the Southern U.S., Indonesia, Kenya, and Nicaragua came together with two groups of U.S. researchers to test the idea that direct community-to-community exchange could enhance community action, to explore the potentials of forming an inter-organizational alliance to carry out this process, and to study their experience of joint action.

Cooperation across nations from the wealthy industrialized "North" (North America, Europe and Japan) and the poor, developing "South" (often called the Third World) must deal with the legacy of imperialism and colonialism as well as continuing patterns of exploitation which benefit the few while sinking the majority into ever deeper poverty and degradation. Any attempt to build a coalition that effectively supports grassroots community groups in the South must overcome these traditional power relationships.

The formation of this coalition is characterized by issues and dynamics that we believe can offer insights to others seeking to create organizations that are more inclusive, and to build organizational alliances across ethnic, class, racial and/or national boundaries. Learning how to form inter-organizational relationships based on mutual respect and trust rather than command and control hierarchies is essential, we believe, for building effective alliances in the global environment of the 1990s and beyond. The aspiration of the poor "two thirds" of the world for full participation in decisions that affect their lives and for changes in inter-institutional power relationships is a growing force whether we are seeking cooperation among like minded "social change" organizations or across business, government and voluntary sectors.

THE COMMUNITY PROBLEM SOLVING EXCHANGE PILOT PROGRAM

This project was initiated by a multi-disciplinary university research group (URG) in response to a foundation request for action research proposals on cross-national and cross-organizational collaboration. URG invited a community support organization (CSO) to join the project based on their considerable experience working with activists in poor communities in the U.S. CSO in turn proposed participation of the Institute for Development Research (IDR), which works with non-governmental organizations in developing countries through applied research and education activities.

The principals of these three organizations (white activist-academics) had worked together, respected one another, and shared intellectual and value approaches to social change issues. They readily agreed on the basic parameters for this project and expected it to make both practical and theoretical contributions.

CSO's primary responsibility was to host the exchange, using their strong base of community contacts. URG had responsibility for documentation and research in addition to its role as overall project manager. IDR was to take the lead in identifying and inviting international groups. All three expected to contribute to the exchange and research components.

The project implementation was led by the initiator from URG (white woman professor) and by senior staff persons from the other organizations who were not the initiators (white woman from IDR and a white man from CSO). We agreed to work in a collaborative mode, so planning meetings were structured to maximize participation of each organization in discussions and decisions. Many decisions were made easily, but there were important differences on several issues, including workshop structure and facilitation, staff roles, and level of staff participation. For example, URG and IDR representatives were concerned that the interests of international visitors be included in the workshop design. URG also felt strongly that the facilitation team should be balanced in gender. CSO staff were wary about design changes which they felt might undermine their credibility with their U.S. constituents.

Differences in institutional norms and priorities began to emerge in the planning process as well. URG, for example, preferred to solve problems and make decisions in a collegial process that involved extensive discussion and exploration among their members, which included at least six people for this project. IDR and CSO, with fewer staff resources for this project, tended to delegate decisions to individuals and invest less time and energy in discussion.

The exchange took place at CSO headquarters with visits to communities with which CSO worked. The three-person delegations from Indonesia, Nicaragua and Kenya included representatives of community support organizations and community activists. After an orientation about each other's work and the design of the program, we broke up into three teams for several days of community visits. Each visiting group had CSO staff familiar with the communities as well as URG or IDR researchers.

The community visits provided the opportunity for people to become acquainted as individuals and to learn more about community issues and the political, cultural, economic context surrounding environmental degradation and poverty in each other's countries. The workshop, held over the weekend following community visits, enabled deeper sharing of experience, analysis of strategies and comparison of commonalities and differences among communities in the four countries.

However, while the participants were learning from one another, tensions were rising within the facilitation team and among the three sponsoring organizations. Several efforts to clarify the issues and resolve the tensions in the next two days produced at best mixed results. Efforts to address conflicts seemed to escalate them to the point of impasse, with strong feelings on all sides. By the end of the workshop, the U.S. community activists and the Southern participants were excited about the exchange, but there were significant gulfs between URG on one hand and IDR and CSO on the other.

With the completion of the workshop, all six organizations agreed that the exchange had been worthwhile. All six wished to participate in an ongoing program of collaboration and exchange.

The parties spent the next several days discussing how they might work together in the future. The four community support organizations (CSO and three international groups) met separately and then together to develop a shared agenda. Then they presented their ideas, which emphasized participatory research with communities as well as continued exchanges. The two research organizations discussed how they might support these activities. We spent several more days discussing how to develop a proposal to support three more years of work together.

By the end of the planning phase, the configuration of organizational relationships had changed dramatically. The initial structure of three Northern sponsors and three Southern guests had been transformed into four community support organizations and two research organizations. The shift from a geographic (North/South) to a functional (community support/research) differentiation emphasized three important changes: (1) a recognition of CSO as a "Southern" group, fundamentally committed to work with oppressed groups like its peers in Indonesia, Kenya, and Nicaragua, (2) a shift of influence in defining coalition goals and activities from the research organizations to the community support organizations, and (3) more emphasis on community support and less on research.

Over the next several months the coalition developed a proposal for a three year continuation of the project. The foundation agreed to partial funding, but at a level insufficient to permit all the planned activities. Ultimately URG decided to withdraw from the project. The other five organizations are continuing.

THE MAKING OF A MULTI-NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT COALITION

How can we understand these events? What lessons do they offer for building coalitions across differences of power, wealth, occupation, and nation? A short paper cannot do justice to the complexity of the experience, but we believe that two important themes deserve to be explored:

(1) the importance of how key actors frame and interpret events, and (2) the negotiation of shared processes for influence in the coalition.

1. FRAMING AND INTERPRETING EVENTS: THE ROLE OF KEY ACTORS

The project initiators -- with interests in both social activism and academic research -- shared perspectives and previous relationships that enabled quick agreement on general goals and plans for the proposed project. The trust shared by these initiators was not automatically transferred, however, to the people who actually implemented the project. Decisions about the concrete details of how to collaborate, structure learning experiences, and undertake participatory research revealed quite different individual and institutional perspectives in implementation.

The notion of "interpretive schemes" (Bartunek, 1984), which operate as fundamental and often implicit frameworks through which events and actions are given meaning, is helpful in understanding tensions that arose. Problems arise when people from different institutions interpret joint experience through significantly different schemes and attribute different meanings to events. Significant differences in interpretive schemes of CSO, IDR and URG coalesced in conflicts concerning the workshop.

The design and methodology for the workshop were contested from the earliest discussions. Although attempts were made to incorporate the interests of each organization, disagreements continued through its implementation. Facilitators from CSO and URG came to perceive each other as threatening the quality of the workshop itself. The CSO facilitator raised questions about "outside researchers" who have exploited grassroots groups in the past, a concern alive for CSO as well as for the individual. The URG facilitator wondered if she was the victim of gender bias, which is also a theme that has concerned her organization. The IDR representative in the workshop (an observer rather than a facilitator) eventually allied with the CSO representative to alter the workshop design, increasing the tension among the three organizations.

Under the stress of the workshop, the authors (using our own interpretive scheme) believe that the representatives used individual and organizational frameworks emphasizing different forms of oppression to understand events. The combination created a mutually oppressive situation that eroded trust and attention to shared interests.

This experience suggests the importance of attending to differences in interpretive schemes, especially as they are made concrete by the demands of taking joint action. *Conscious efforts to form a shared interpretive scheme can reduce the likelihood of cycles of threat, defensiveness and conflict escalation.*

Creating norms and mechanisms for exploring the meanings of differences may be particularly important when histories of oppression are involved. A first step can be to explore differences as early as possible to *understand rather than change* each other's interpretive schemes. A second step is to recognize the *danger signals sent by the use of oppression frameworks to explain events*. Mechanisms to "stop the action" and discuss perceived oppression can help prevent debilitating conflict while furthering joint understanding.

2. RENOGIATING THE NATURE OF THE COALITION

The challenge of building shared perspectives and negotiating the bases for collaboration is not small, even when organizations share common cultures, ideologies, and professional experience -- as was largely true for URG, CSO, and IDR. It is even more complicated when the coalition spans the huge differences in wealth, power, and culture that separated URG, CSO and IDR from the Kenyan, Indonesian, and Nicaraguan participants.

"Negotiated order" theory suggests that the terms under which individuals and organizations interact are socially constructed -- the "rules of the game" are negotiated and renegotiated in the process of interaction (Nathan and Mitroff, 1991). Negotiated orders are often partial, with gaps or inconsistencies. They evolve as events change the coalition, new actors join it, or debates over implementation are resolved.

The initial agreements among URG, IDR and CSO emphasized full participation of all three organizations in decision-making and implementation of each aspect of the project. The constraints on resources and the emergence of differing expectations and interpretations of key concepts (e.g., the nature of "collaboration") undermined these initial assumptions. While URG remained committed to a collegial process of conflict management that involved extensive exploration of differences, CSO and IDR allied to impose decisions in the course of the workshop that URG staff interpreted as serious violations of initial agreements about collaboration.

A second major shift in the coalition's initial order emerged as the initiative for defining future collaboration shifted from the three Northern sponsors to the four Southern community support organizations. At issue in this shift was the balance between community support and re-search activities as well as the relative influence of Northern and Southern participants. URG and IDR as research organizations became resources to the community support organizations, and the initial emphasis on research gave way to more emphasis on community action projects.

As the planning phase proceeded, the emergent negotiated order explicitly recognized organizational differences in roles and competencies, reallocated resources to emphasize community capacity-building, and delegated tasks to specific actors with provisions for widespread influence (e.g., IDR would draft a proposal to be amended by others). Much of the planning meeting was spent spelling out roles, responsibilities and accountabilities among the parties for future work. Principles for decision-making and controls on IDR as coordinating agency were discussed in detail. Thus, a new negotiated order was created -- part implicit and part explicit -- grounded in the experience and interests of the larger coalition.

Coalition building requires negotiating and renegotiating the "rules of the game" that govern the interactions of the parties. *Renegotiations that challenge the distribution and use of power may strike at the heart of personal and organizational identity.* Strong feelings of hurt, anger and dismay accompanied efforts by the sponsoring organizations to deal with their differences and negotiate a mutually acceptable order for the coalition.

Negotiations that tap values, ideologies, and core identity issues are notoriously difficult

-- but they are probably inevitable in building coalitions across great diversity. One principle suggested by the events in this coalition is to *be sensitive to negotiations that tap core concerns*, such as the importance of shared influence to Southern participants. All three sponsoring organizations recognized that power needed to be shared with the Southern organizations, and so actively facilitated restructuring the coalition for greater influence and ownership by Southern organizations.

A second principle is to *respect the value while challenging the application*. It is easier to negotiate constructively over a specific application of a value than it is to accept implicit or explicit dismissal of its importance. The community support organizations respected the importance of research even as they pressed for more emphasis on community capacity building, and so did not drive away the research organizations. Recognition and respect do not remove differences, but they make the renegotiation of decision-making less threatening.

BUILDING COALITIONS ACROSS DIFFERENCES

The coalition sought to build collaboration across gaps of wealth, power, culture, nationality, gender and race. Ironically, the failure to form a shared interpretive scheme and successfully negotiate a new set of rules among the Northern sponsors of the pilot project may have helped span the differences among the Northern and Southern participants. The four Southern support organizations became "owners" of the second stage, and invited IDR and URG to propose useful roles for themselves. This change reordered the coalition so that Southern interests were more influential, and it might not have happened if the sponsoring organizations had not been in difficulty with each other.

We believe that this configuration holds promise for the evolution of a "development partnership," in which parties agree to decisions contrary to their immediate self-interest in order to pursue a shared vision for the future (Brown & Tandon, 1993). It is not a configuration that will be without conflict. Stresses will continue to evolve from different interpretive schemes, and needs for renegotiating rules and influence patterns will continue to emerge from changing circumstances.

Is such a configuration desirable? Some would argue that acting contrary to self-interest is abdicating one's identity and role. We believe that institutions of the "North" must take the risk of looking through the eyes of those less wealthy and powerful if they are not to perpetuate oppression and its associated violence and degradation. Redefining our interpretive frameworks and renegotiating the rules that shape decision making are prerequisites to building effective South-North coalitions, just societies, and a sustainable world system.

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