
Collaborative Community Empowerment: An Illustration of a Six-Step Process

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This article illustrates a method used in a community empowerment project where community members and university facilitators collaborated to increase the capacity of the community. The method may have practical uses in collaborations with community groups. The six-step process enabled the community groups to accomplish their short-term community goals: developing effective after-school programs and resolving problems of damaged homes and blighted properties in a relatively short time and continuing on their collaborative work. Having a social ecological model as a conceptual framework was helpful for the community to assess their status and develop action plans. Consistent community meetings, open communication, focused community leadership, community networking, and collaboration of community organizations and a university were the factors that reinforced the empowerment process. Challenges such as maximizing limited resources and generating more participation from the community need to be resolved while the reinforcing factors are cultivated.

Keywords: *community health; community intervention; community empowerment; collaborative process; community strategy*

Community-level approaches to health promotion have become a common strategy for addressing social and economic factors known to have significant influence on the health of individuals (Baker, Homan, Schonhoff, & Kreuter, 1999; Stokols, 1996). A community-based approach to health education and disease prevention can have profound implications for the practice of public health, as practitioners move

away from focusing solely on individual health behaviors and emphasize the role that the social structure and the environment play in determining health status (Green & Kreuter, 1999). The benefits of focusing on the community as the unit of change include focusing on the assets and resources of a community (Freudenberg, 1978; Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993), empowering the community (Israel, Checkoway, Schulz, & Zimmerman, 1994), and avoiding a victim-blaming orientation (Minkler, 1989; Minkler & Pies, 1997).

A community-level approach becoming more widely used is community empowerment that seeks to enhance a community's ability to identify, mobilize, and address the issues that it faces to improve the overall health of the community (Fawcett et al., 1995; Hawe, 1994). Central to the concept of community empowerment is community capacity—defined as the cultivation and use of transferable knowledge, skills, systems, and resources that affect community- and individual-level changes consistent with public health-related goals and objectives (Goodman et al., 1998). Increased community capacity, in turn, is expected to enhance the health of the individuals within the community and the community as a whole. The process of increasing a community's capacity logically affects the individuals who participate in the process by honing their abilities to network with others, identify resources that will be of benefit, and identify strategies that can be employed by the community.

Communities that have a high level of capacity have been characterized by high levels of civic involvement, safe environments, effective educational systems, stable

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economies, and accountable and competent governmental representation (Goodman et al., 1998). Although most communities strive to be strong and vibrant, poor or marginalized communities often face many challenges to improving social and health conditions. The significance of increased community capacity is that it empowers a community in affecting its destiny. Improved capacity can further enable communities to develop sustainable programs that enhance the overall health of the community. Schulz and colleagues (Schulz et al., 2002) provided an example of strengthened social networks, such as collaboration with local police to address safety in a Detroit community as a result of a community-based participatory research. Schulz and colleagues sought to illustrate social determinants of health, which include community capacity. This article illustrates another case of improved community capacity through a group process in a low-income area in New Orleans. It describes a process for community engagement that involves community members in identifying, prioritizing, and implementing strategies for community betterment. This process is informed by the principles of social ecology by which multiple strategies can be developed with community groups in a relatively short time frame.

► BACKGROUND

Community Participation

Undertaking a community health approach creates a complicated set of challenges for public health practitioners. These challenges include determining the nature of the work a community requires, how to identify issues that are salient to the community that have public health relevance, how to assist a community group in developing strategies to overcome identified concerns, and how to improve the relationship between the community and the institutions for which public health practitioners work.

A review of the literature reveals a need for reliable methods that can be employed by community health facilitators to assist communities in effectively identifying issues, and selecting feasible and appropriate strategies (Clark, 2000). In addition, such methods can be helpful in improving relationships between the facilitator and the community by engaging in a mutual learning process that creates trust. Approaches informed by social ecological principles used in program development enable a community to identify mutually reinforcing strategies at different social levels (McLeroy, Bibeau, Steckler, & Glanz, 1988).

Social Ecological Model

Since 1979, social ecological models have been prevalent in guiding community health promotion (Stokols, 1996). Social ecological models encourage health promotion planners and evaluators to consider how the dif-

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ferent dimensions of an issue influence the community on a number of social levels and choosing intervention strategies for the conditions at each of the levels (McLeroy et al., 1988). As a result, community members may gain a fuller appreciation for the causes of community concerns and strategies that may be empowering in addressing the concerns (Goodman, 1998). Goodman, Wandersman, Chinman, Imm, and Morrissey (1996) illustrated an ecological assessment of a community coalition against substance abuse in South Carolina, which involved coalition members in the evaluation. By involving them in the process, the coalition members were empowered with increased understanding of and confidence in their program and its evaluation.

Social ecology models have been influenced by a number of different disciplines, such as sociology, community psychology, and public health (Stokols, 1996). The models are built around the interactions between people and their environments, the interactions between people and groups within their environment, and interactions between causes and effects within a community (McLeroy, Bibeau, Steckler, & Glanz, 1988; Stokols, 1996). Stokols (1996) noted that the growing emphasis on community-based health approaches in public health has led to increased use of social ecological approaches by public health practitioners. In addition to the increased application of the social ecological model, there has also been a strong drive to increase the amount of community involvement in the development of health programs.

Many groups already employ these concepts by building multilevel interventions that are linked by a common goal. Developing a deeper understanding of the theoretical basis of social ecology may help groups to examine their current activities and make future plans in a broader context. The groups may then develop mutually supportive activities that rely on well-chosen strategies at multiple levels that reflect the social ecology model. Practices such as self-evaluation and strategizing are expected to help community groups develop a strong sense of ownership, thus empowering them in the process. This, in and of itself, can have a positive influence on the community's capacity because the process encourages critical reflection that better prepares the group in continuing to develop more effective strategies over time (Goodman, 1998).

History

This article reports on a participatory process with a community organization (herein Mid-Town Coalition) in New Orleans, Louisiana. It extends from a 3-year study to develop measurement instruments for community capacity, and the ongoing relationships that were cultivated between the research team and the community organization during the study. The capacity research was funded as a Special Interest Project (SIP) grant through the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Prevention Research Centers (PRCs). In the course of the study, the investigators worked locally with eight separate community initiatives in the greater New Orleans metropolitan area including the Mid-Town Coalition. The initiatives all were grassroots in nature and were organized to address community concerns, such as homes situated on environmental waste sites, blighted homes, drugs, HIV/AIDS, and pollution due to local industries.

In June 2001, the Mid-Town Coalition, which is one of the eight community initiatives of the SIP, requested independently of the SIP study that the principal investigators and their students help facilitate four neighborhood groups (herein community groups) under the Mid-Town Coalition in identifying issues of highest concern for the neighborhood. Through the Mid-Town Coalition, four community leaders, each from one of the four Mid-Town neighborhoods, and a member of the research team arranged to colead a series of structured meetings with neighborhood residents. The meeting objectives were to develop, prioritize, and identify strategies for community-identified issues starting in June and continuing through October 2001. The goal for this project was to foster leadership by encouraging meaningful participation from all of the group members.

Participation Between Universities and Communities

The relationships between communities and academic institutions are not always positive. It has often

been asserted that academia wishes to study a community or to test an intervention in a community without offering the community anything in return (CDC, 1998). This often leads to resentment and mistrust of academic institutions by the communities. It is therefore important for any university-initiated work to include the community in meaningful ways (Baker et al., 1999). There should be a reciprocal relationship between the community and the institution. This relationship may have benefits for researchers and practitioners but should have equally significant benefits for the community (CDC, 1997), including the commitment on the part of practitioners and researchers to help communities address and resolve the challenges they face. For instance, if in working with a community the researcher identifies a need that can be met by members of the academic institution, every effort should be made on the part of the researcher or practitioner to assist the community by facilitating connections to those who can assist the community.

In the case of the Mid-Town Coalition, four neighborhood community groups that were funded through the Coalition and operated within the community determined several needs that they believed were salient to the community. Community group participants joined the project on a voluntary basis. To solicit more participation, staff members of the Mid-Town Coalition canvassed the neighborhood area distributing flyers prior to each community group meeting. There was a need to enhance the leadership of each group, to identify an issue in each group that a majority of the participating members wished to address, to identify the causes of the issues selected, and to develop strategies for changing these conditions. Although the pre-existing relationship between the Mid-Town Coalition and the academic institution was fledgling, working with the four community groups offered the university an opportunity to further develop its relationship with the larger community, forming the foundation for an ongoing partnership with the Mid-Town Coalition and the community.

► STRATEGIES

Facilitator Training and Follow-Up Meetings

At the outset of the project, several meetings were held to develop a common understanding of the process and to create a plan. In an initial meeting, four facilitators from the university and several members of the Mid-Town Coalition met to share the goals of this community empowerment project and to assign each facilitator to a community grassroots group. Facilitators individually spoke with the Mid-Town Coalition staff members to be apprised of the current status of their respective community groups and the recent activities of those groups. This step provided the groundwork for developing relationships with community leaders and gaining entrée into the community groups. In addition,

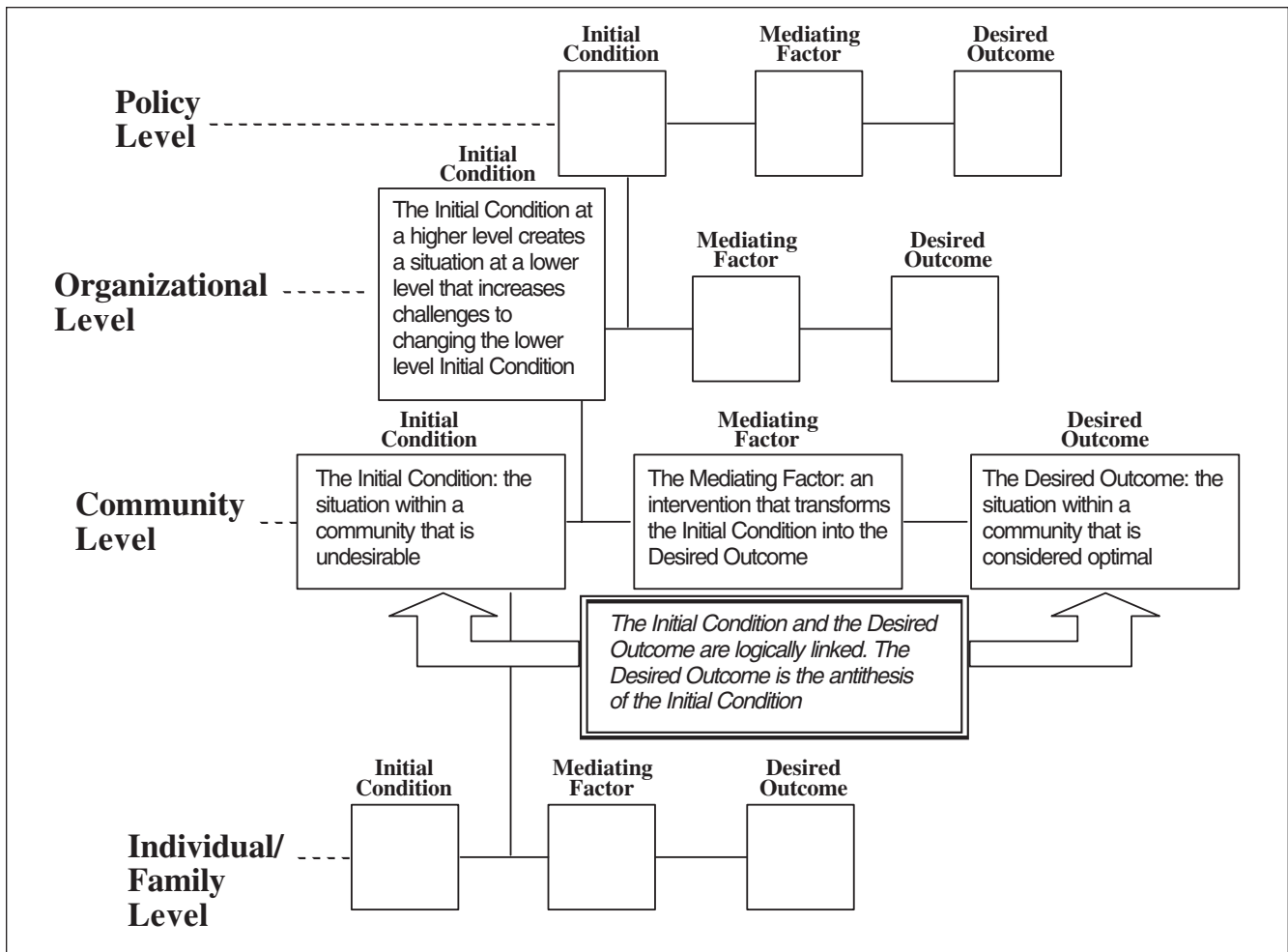


FIGURE 1 Social Ecological Conceptual Model

the facilitators as a group met separately to discuss facilitation methods and to develop a timeline for completing the identification and implementation of strategies for community betterment.

Facilitator meetings continued biweekly throughout the project period to provide each other with an update of each community group's process. A supervising professor provided oversight and technical advice. These meetings served as an opportunity to discuss appropriate activities and to determine when each of the four community groups met specific milestones.

Strategy

The model used in this project is based on a social ecology evaluation model developed by Goodman (2000). This model consists of identifying mediating, modifying, and outcome conditions across multiple social levels, such as the individual, organizational, community and macro-policy. In addition, it provides a framework that can easily depict the complexity of a health concern. This valuable feature of the social ecological model allows it to be used in a community forum

for identifying appropriate goals and strategies that interact synergistically.

For an identified community concern, programmatic interventions are mediating conditions between the community concern and the desired outcome. Such mediating programs are possible at multiple levels, which are individual/family level, organizational level, community level, and policy level. For example, Figure 1 depicts a generic social ecological model that illustrates and explains the constructs within the social ecological model. Applying the model to an issue requires that the community identify an undesirable situation existing within the community. The selected issue must be categorized as occurring at a specific social level. This creates a starting point for developing the remainder of the model. In Figure 1, imagine that an issue at the community level is identified, as they were among most of the groups in this project. The pertinent issue is the initial condition that exists at the community level. To identify the desired outcome, the community members select the antithesis of the initial condition. The mediating factor is the intervention that would transform the initial condition into the desired outcome. The

initial condition at the next higher social level is determined by identifying factors that create a challenge at the beginning social level. The reciprocal interactions that occur between each of the social levels and the constructs within the level should be logically connected to one another. To complete the model, the preceding process is reiterated on all levels until the model is complete. Suggested programmatic interventions are intended to mediate the community selected issue at each of the different levels. Key to this is that the overall intervention synergistically combines the programmatic interventions developed at each of the levels to form a strategy designed to address each of the initial conditions across the social ecological framework.

Figure 1 was presented to all of the four community groups in this project, stressing that the greater the occurrence of program elements and supportive activities that are logically linked across levels, the more comprehensive the community approach. Each community group agreed to develop a strategic model similar to Figure 1 by the end of the project. The priority concerns that each community group raised were noted, and then each group and its facilitators developed the social ecology maps of strategies through community meetings.

► PROCESS SUMMARY

The Process

The process that was employed in this project consisted of six major components. Table 1 introduces the process with description of steps taken per each component.

The first component was to rapidly gain entrée into the community group. As outsiders to the community there was, initially, some inherent uneasiness with participation of the facilitators. The uneasiness decreased as it became clear that the process, the strategies, and the outcomes of each group's plan were developed by the community and not imposed from the outside. As relationships began to develop between the facilitators and the community group members the process became more trusting and more constructive in most cases.

The second component of the project was to identify issues that affected the community. These issues were identified early in working with the community groups. In the first meeting with the community groups, facilitators used a modified nominal group process technique, which employed a brainstorming method to surface community issues of high concern.

TABLE 1
Six-Step Facilitation Process

1. Entrée into the community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meetings with community leaders and community organization staff • Facilitator training: Review of minutes and logs of previous community meetings and plans for strategies • Introduction of facilitators and facilitation process to the community • Discussion of mission and goals by facilitators and the community
2. Issue identification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brainstorming of existing and new community concerns • Free listing of the identified issues • Identification of community leaders
3. Prioritization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hand votes on the identified issues to prioritize • Group agreement on the top priority issue selected by the votes
4. Strategy development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Further discussion on the top priority issue to elaborate how it affects the community and what has been done to resolve the situation • Introduction of a social ecology model • Group discussion: how the community perceives and understands the model and whether to use the model in the process • Construction of the community's own model: involves networking, information sharing, and collaboration • Review of the constructed model
5. Implementation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Setup of action plans for each modifying actions • Task assignment among the community members • Timeline for the action plan • Resource utilization of community resources with facilitation of the community organization • Step-by-step execution of the action plan and status check • Debriefing after each action step among facilitators, community members, and community organization staff
6. Transition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussion of the results and/or progress of the first action taken by referring to the model • Decision making of the next action steps • Transitioning of facilitation responsibility from the facilitators to the community leaders

The third component of the process was to prioritize the issues that surfaced in each of the groups. Each of the four community groups ranked the issues in order of priority. The criteria for prioritizing the issues was up to the discretion of each of the groups; however, all of the groups tried to identify priorities based on the number of people who were affected by the problem and how closely linked the problem was to other problems affecting the community. For example, in one group, the members perceived that blighted buildings offered a venue for illegal activities, therefore blighted buildings and crime were associated. Recognizing that all priority issues could not be addressed simultaneously, each group narrowed its focus to a single issue. The process of determining the top priority was accomplished in

one or two meetings during which the community members discussed their reasons for selecting one issue over another. The priority concerns selected by the four community groups in the early phase of the project were the need for supplemental tutorial programs, drugs in the community, damaged homes, and blighted property. This selection approach involved a nominal group process, allowing each participant to contribute and a democratic decision-making process about the issue. The final result, in most of the community groups, was reaching consensus on which issue was most pertinent.

The fourth component of the project was to develop strategies for addressing the primary issue. In most of the community groups, the facilitators presented the social ecological model as a tool to identify strategies that worked together synergistically. With the assistance of facilitators, each group then had a number of meetings to develop a strategic plan using the social ecology model on the selected concern. The majority of the meetings focused on developing a diagram that depicts the logical links between the factors at each of the social levels. This technique was the substance of the approach in that the community groups and the facilitators were able to explore and better understand the issues. Consequently, there was a great deal of discussion and learning among all the participants. The increase in discussion and learning strengthened many of the relationships among group members and between the group members and the facilitators. In addition, many of the resources that the participants had unknowingly brought to the table could be identified and used by the group.

The fifth component of the process was to implement the strategies. Each of the groups had different strategies and different levels of success in implementing the strategies. However, some common activities were observed across the groups in strategy implementation. For example, the groups discussed step-by-step action plans for the implementation, task assignment among the community members, and timeline for the implementation plan. The Mid-Town Coalition provided assistance in terms of locating and accessing available community resources and sharing its experience and expertise at civil and administrative levels.

When strategy implementation began, the facilitators agreed to transition leadership to members of the community groups. Thus, as the sixth component, each group had a meeting with its facilitator to bring the facilitators' engagement to closure. Because most of the groups had developed sound strategies and because those community groups had developed a sense of cohesiveness, it was appropriate that the facilitators move away from the program to allow the community groups to have unshared success. At the outset of this relationship, the facilitators explicitly stated that they were not developing a program to help the community. Rather, this relationship was an opportunity to guide the community in learning a strategic planning process

that they could use to address any complex issue affecting their community.

The Community Groups

Although each community group identified a different issue as its priority concern and had unique group-specific situations to deal with, the six-step process was completed in most of the groups. The community group with the need for supplemental tutorial programs (Group 1) concluded that such programs linked with guidance may improve children's grades and confidence and that such programs will be more effective when they are reinforced by family support. The group indicated a need for family support programs and for such programs to be funded and monitored through political and community support. As a part of the action plan, Group 1 collectively decided to develop a directory of existing school-based tutoring programs in the community. Group members volunteered to take responsibility for the activity. The activity progressed slowly, yet the participants consistently exerted efforts and broadened their networks in the process. The combined strategy and action plan produced a synergy that may increase the likelihood of developing adequate and effective tutorial programs that could help children fare better in school.

Group 3 ranked "the repair of homes damaged by the Sewage and Water Board" as its top priority concern. Pile driving during a major construction project caused structural damage to nearby residences and businesses. Generally, the group went through a similar process to Group 1, based on the six-step strategy. One additional effort was to set ground rules for strategy development, which particularly stressed encouraging other community members to join the group and express their interests but to stay committed to a single issue. The initial action plan devised by the group resulted in a representative from the Sewage and Water Board attending a community forum where all four groups discussed their issues. After receiving no formal response to a letter sent to the Sewage and Water Board, the group decided to take additional action steps in the form of holding a press conference and attending an upcoming city council meeting. The group also increased its network and included a nearby neighborhood in its activities. Members of Group 3 met with an advocacy team composed of representatives from the Mid-Town Coalition to ensure that they had done everything they could before proceeding with the press conference and city council meeting. The advocacy team not only agreed that Group 3 had done all they could do to resolve the issue but also felt that the Mid-Town Coalition's board approval was not required to proceed. The advocacy team played an instrumental role in preparing Group 3 for the planned activities.

As with other groups, Group 4 went through a pattern of using the first several meetings to identify and

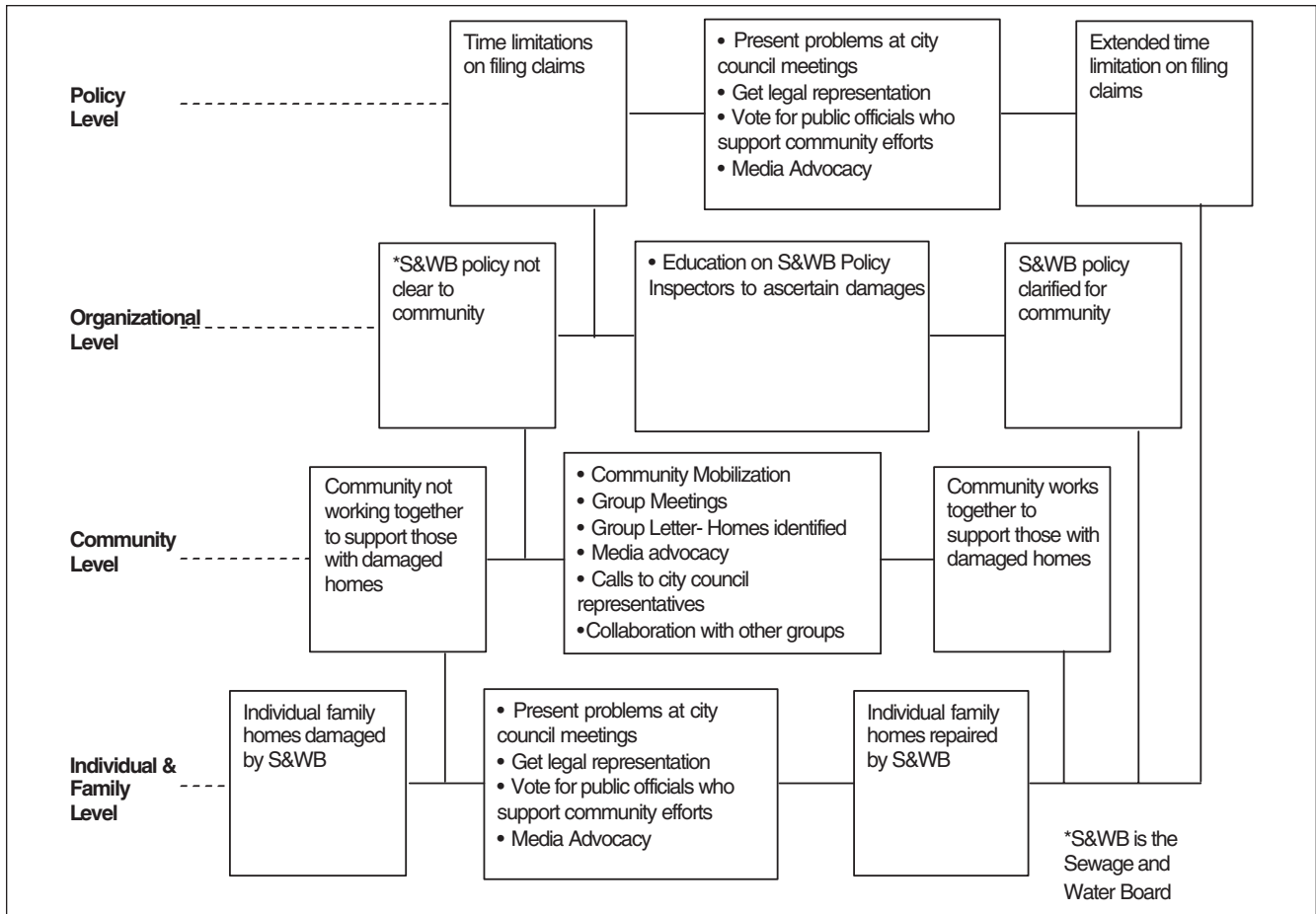


FIGURE 2 Social Ecology Model for Group 3—Damaged Homes

prioritize issues. Blighted housing was the most important concern for this group. With small but consistent participation, Group 4 had a number of meetings to generate ideas regarding action plans to deal with the blighted housing issue. The group leader joined the process irregularly and seemed to distract from the momentum in building strategies by diverting the direction to other issues. Although discouraged by the distraction, the group was soon re-energized by a meeting with a representative from the city redevelopment authority as a result of the group's action plan.

Unlike the other groups, Group 2 faced difficulties from the very start of the process. It took more than a month for a community meeting to occur after the facilitator was assigned. In the first meeting, the group identified drugs in the community as their priority concern and decided to use the social ecology model to develop strategic plans to address the issue. However, the group continued to experience challenges, such as cancellation of meetings due to lack of consistent and convenient meeting facilities and no electricity at the alternative meeting location, which resulted in the attrition of group members. To secure a consistent meeting environment, the group established action plans to help

resolve the facility issue by meeting with housing authorities in charge of the community center located in the public housing complex in the area where Group 2 operated. In the end, the group was able to gain access to the facility closer to their homes. When the meeting facility issue was settled, the facilitator introduced the social ecological model in detail and led discussions to develop community strategies to deal with drug dealing and drug abuse. Then, the group identified a need to change the priority issue from drugs to relocation of public housing residents who, through extenuating circumstances, were forced to move months ahead of a scheduled relocation. An action plan was developed, and duties were distributed among group members. However, later meetings during the facilitator's involvement were cancelled again due to inaccessibility of the meeting space.

Social Ecology Model Developed in the Project

Figure 2 is the model structured by Group 3 on the issue of "the repair of damaged homes by the Sewage and Water Board." The model indicates that at the indi-

vidual level, strategies included obtaining legal representation and writing a letter to the Sewage and Water Board seeking funds for repairs. At the community level, the individual strategies could be reinforced by community organizing for wider support of the issue of damaged homes. Organizing techniques suggested included group meetings, media advocacy, collaboration with other groups, collectively identifying all the group homes in the community that need repair, and avoiding approaching the Sewage and Water Board individually. Policies that could support this include a clear understanding from the Sewage and Water Board about policies concerning repairing damaged homes and ensuring that the inspectors accurately assessed damage. One organizational problem was the lack of time allotted for residents to file claims. Suggested strategies included presenting problems in council meetings, obtaining legal representation, voting for public officials who support the community's efforts, and media advocacy.

► DISCUSSION

The findings can be summarized and discussed with respect to the way they influenced the community empowerment project. Table 2 presents a summary of the factors that influenced the community process.

Reinforcing Factors

For all four groups, priorities were set either in the first or second meetings with the facilitators. When priority concerns were identified, introduction of the social ecology model had a pivotal impact on strategy development for the groups, especially Groups 3 and 4. Community members responded positively to the concept and structure of the model and actively utilized the model to develop comprehensive strategies. The comprehensive nature of the model presented some complications for the community groups at times. This was especially evident when influential external factors emerged, such as relocation of the public housing residents, as it took some time to reconfigure the action plans in these circumstances. As important as having a sound conceptual base for strategic planning, community members' comprehension of such a model must be emphasized.

When work for action steps was required between meetings on the part of community members, generally two meetings occurred before the steps were taken (e.g., developing lists of existing tutoring programs, blighted houses, and damaged homes). Progress in goal setting and strategy development was more effective when attendance of the community leaders, location of the meeting, and meeting intervals were consistent.

TABLE 2
Reinforcing Factors and Challenging Factors
for Community Empowerment Facilitation

<i>Reinforcing Factors</i>	<i>Challenging Factors</i>
Sound conceptual framework	Limited resources: Space, money, time, data
Clear understanding of the framework and its application	Slow process: Limited progress of action steps between meetings
Consistency of the community meetings: Attendance, location, schedule	Attracting participation from the community: limited resources and safety concerns
Supporting staff of the community organization	Promotion of the project in the community
Open communication	Need for the ability to respond to situational factors midcourse in the process
Focused community leaders	
Community network	
Regular debriefing among facilitators	

Coordination support from the Mid-Town Coalition helped with facilitating the meetings and encouraging community participation. Open and ongoing communication among the community organization, community members, and university facilitators reinforced connectiveness.

Facilitating responsibilities were transitioned to group leaders at the last meetings of the facilitators' engagement, except for Group 2 for which the last scheduled meeting was cancelled without notice. In the case of Group 4, the previously identified leader participated inconsistently. Therefore, facilitating responsibilities were transitioned to a newly emergent leader from the group. In their last meetings with the groups, facilitators assisted the group leaders in leading a discussion using the social ecology model as a guiding map for the next action plan. The groups seemed interested in the continuation of the project and began discussing additional action steps. Four months after the leadership transitions, three of four community groups were continuing their meetings and making progress. The exception is Group 2, which had struggled throughout the facilitation process.

Facilitators had debriefings with their supervisor on a regular basis throughout the project period. These meetings served as a forum to discuss achievements and challenges. When one group faced challenges, the facilitators collectively brainstormed how to resolve them. These meetings also provided the facilitators an opportunity to share helpful techniques and approaches that could be applied to the other groups accordingly.

Community groups experienced success in attracting key officials and other influentials to speak at the community forums and neighborhood meetings regarding high-priority community concerns. In addition to aforementioned meetings with key officials (e.g., representatives from Sewage and Water Board, city redevelopment

authority, and housing authority), community groups met with the district police chief, a representative of the area's city councilman, and a parent liaison of the school district, to express concerns and receive feedback. Group 1 also had an opportunity to network with the Social Apostolate, a Catholic organization in New Orleans that has an educational mission. An opportunity to build a connection with such a significant local organization encouraged the group members to pursue their goal.

Challenging Factors

One major challenge was related to the lack of resources, financial and nonfinancial. Although the available resources were helpful in many ways, facilitators found the groups challenged in terms of soliciting participation, expediting processes, maintaining the consistency of the meetings, having time to carry out activities, accessing an available network, and obtaining community data in the manner that they wanted. Particularly for the systemically organized community indices of interest, Groups 1 and 4 experienced challenges in getting needed information for the project because of lack of updated data compiled in the format the community wanted. Limited resources also affected the speed of the process, which might have discouraged the community members.

Staff members of the community organization posted flyers and sent out letters to increase participation of community members in the group meetings. Often, flyers were not well distributed or were damaged, and letters were not received in time. Staff members tried door-to-door visits to inform residents about the meetings, however, sometimes they encountered physical safety issues. Given these challenges in recruitment, community meetings and actions were carried out by small yet consistent groups of people.

As mentioned earlier in this section, an unexpected situation can influence the process in various ways. It can cause delay in action or require alteration of a certain tactic. Sometimes, however, it may force larger changes, such as in priority or strategy. The capability to respond to such situational factors during the process requires a well-organized community, strong and focused leadership, a sound framework to which the groups can adhere, and consistent participation from the community.

Aforementioned challenges are commonly encountered in community empowerment projects and should be considered in project planning. Practitioners should be prepared to offer technical assistance in locating and utilizing the resources needed. One of the great challenges in this project was encouraging participation beyond the small core groups. Potential strategies to minimize the impact of this challenge include developing a phone tree and using existing social networks, such as churches and schools, to solicit more participation from the community. It is also important that pub-

lic health practitioners, funding agencies, and community members understand that community empowerment is a process that requires time and flexibility.

► CONCLUSION

The method employed in this project is recommended as an effective approach to community group facilitation in an empowerment project for the following reasons. First and foremost, the process of "entrée—issue identification—prioritization—strategy development—implementation—transition" seems to be effective for addressing and resolving community concerns in a community setting. In other words, the ability of a community group to organize, set priorities, and identify strategies within a short period of time is indicative of effective group functioning and facilitation. Having a concrete and visual conceptual model is helpful in facilitating the strategic planning. When the method was introduced, community members agreed to its logic and followed the steps with an understanding that it takes a process to build up capacity, which prepared them to continue the efforts on their own. The introduction of the social ecology model was well received by community members in the present project and left a significant impact in terms of developing comprehensive and systematic strategies. The process evolves with close communication among the community organization, community members (especially group leaders), and facilitators, record keeping of meeting logs, agenda, and secondary materials, and networking with other community groups, organizations, and key officials. Results of such connections might not always have been encouraging, yet networking opportunities generated a sense of ownership and activism among the community members.

Second, the strong emphasis on participant involvement and group process in this method increases the continuity of the community process. Using this method, the facilitators' role is to provide assistance and guidance while maintaining close relationships with the community yet not to lead or influence the group's decision in any direction. Three out of four community groups in this project demonstrated sustainability of their individual group projects with the help of leadership developed and solidified with such emphasis.

Another advantage of this method is that it can produce outcomes in a relatively short period of time, which can encourage and motivate the community. In the illustrated project, much was accomplished through prioritization and strategic planning within the 4-month period for coordinating efforts among the community organizations, the community members, and facilitators. Although meeting schedules were often disrupted and community issues did not emerge in any one way with the expected realities of community development, community members were able to reach their short-term goals of community action plans.

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