

London, UK

The Alinsky Method of Participation and Social Change: The East London Communities Organisation

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Summary

The East London Communities Organisation (TELCO), UK bases its approach to community cohesion and empowerment on the methods developed by Saul Alinsky, an activist working in Chicago, USA in the 1960s. TELCO is an independent community organisation through which citizens can challenge powerful political and economic institutions, requiring them to listen and respond to the concerns of ordinary people who are mobilised and working together. This case study is an example of a 'broad-based community organisation' that enables a wide range of civil society groups to come together around common concerns and to campaign for change. Alice Brickley is a TELCO organiser.

Background

The East London Communities Organisation (TELCO) is part of a city-wide initiative, called London Citizens, which in turn is linked to the UK training institute, the Citizens Organising Foundation (COF). The Foundation seeks to strengthen the capacity of civil society as an independent force for change by bringing together diverse communities around common issues, developing leadership within existing community organisations and enabling them to confront powerful decision-makers and also to create alliances to achieve positive change. This method is based on the work of Saul Alinsky who developed the concept of 'broad-based community organising' in Chicago in the 1960s, and went on to establish the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), the American forerunner of the COF.

The Alinsky method for social change is based on building a strong, independent organisation that has very clear and specific goals. The process is two-fold; the organisation must be financially independent and be rooted in a diverse membership. The funding is based on membership fees and must be sufficient to support the organisation, including employing the necessary staff. The membership is built up through many one-to-one interviews between people from diverse community groups. This builds relationships and creates the sort of solidarity needed to carry out effective campaigns. It also generates the trust needed if groups are to be willing to contribute financially and provides a basis for identifying an agreed agenda for social change. Training in 'the art of politics in action' is provided to member organisations to create individual leaders and to dispel feelings of disempowerment from the political process. Collective action strengthens both individuals and their member organisations and enables their views to be heard by government officials and other powerful interests.

One of Alinsky's fundamental rules was never to do for other people what they can do for themselves. The aim therefore is for the community to be empowered to organise and determine the changes that are needed. The second rule is that 'power comes before programme', meaning that you need to organise the people together first and create a power base before deciding on the programme of action.

In east London, the COF brings together members of local churches, trade unions and schools to form TELCO. These relationships provide a basis from which to identify issues of common concern which are adopted, through a democratic process, as the agenda for action. This agenda, which includes the London Campaign for a Living Wage, is addressed by lobbying political leaders and other institutions, such as Ken Livingstone and the Greater London Authority (GLA). Potential leaders from within TELCO are continuously encouraged and supported through training led by the COF.



TELCO Member communities vote on their top issues at Delegates' Assembly.

What happened and why was it significant?

Between 2003 and 2004 the impending Mayoral Elections created an opportunity for change in the governance of London. At a London Citizens meeting members voted to use this election to achieve change for the better in their communities. To facilitate the process, all member communities carried out an initial 'Listening Campaign' which took into account the views of approximately 10,000 citizens across the 35 – 40 member organisations (varying in size from 600 – 1800+ individuals). This identified a range of problems and concerns and some specific solutions: for example, poverty amongst low-paid workers became a call for a Living Wage across the city. In order to have an effective campaign, it was crucial that major problems such as poverty, housing shortages and low take-up of further education by 16 year olds, were translated into tangible goals that, given the limits of funding, were 'winnable'.

People voted on proposals identified through the Listening Campaign at an assembly of delegates from all member organisations. Four projects were selected as the basis for the Citizens Manifesto. They were:

- a Living Wage for Londoners
- more affordable housing
- a paid summer work experience scheme for youths aged 16+
- a Safer Neighbourhood's scheme.

London Citizens then held an Assembly at the Methodist Central Hall in London to which all Mayoral candidates were invited. 2000 London citizens attended. They put questions to the candidates and requested that they sign up to the manifesto. This deliberative process created a certain consensus within London Citizens and strengthened support for the projects which members wanted the Mayor to deliver. It strengthened relationships and facilitated mutual accountability between members, and also between London Citizens and the Mayor. This democratic and transparent method of agreeing the Citizens' Manifesto was important in sustaining the diverse alliance of organisations that make up London Citizens.

Once elected as mayor, Ken Livingstone, worked with the GLA and the London Development Agency to deliver on the commitments he had made to London Citizens including the Living Wage which is currently set at £7.20¹. The campaign, which began at grassroots level, now has the backing of the GLA and has succeeded in placing the concerns of London communities on the political agenda. It is a good example of the Alinsky model, where citizens consult each other to define their own agenda then build relationships with local government to achieve positive change.

What were the challenges?

1. Training requires a large investment of time.

The initial Listening Campaign required the development of new, ongoing training of member organisations. This was used to inspire potential leaders from within these organisations who could then build up teams of individuals to carry out one-to-one meetings within their communities on the issues that most concerned them. Though time-consuming, this process significantly improved the quality of the work by helping to build networks of relationships within communities and organisations. This in turn helped organise members throughout the period of voting on the manifesto and led to larger numbers of active citizens on the day of the Mayoral assembly, who could then seize the opportunity to question the candidates.

2. Being recognised and taken seriously as a diverse community.

London Citizens' power lies in its ability to bring together so many different groups, but other organisations often do not recognise that such a diverse group of people can act together as a 'community'. At a meeting with one London borough to discuss the Living Wage campaign, London Citizens was represented by members of the Anglican and Catholic Churches and a Somali Community Consortium. They were met with suspicion and quizzed by the council members who wondered what organisation or community they represented. Even when the leaders explained that they belonged to a broad alliance, that they were volunteers not workers and that they were delegated by their

communities, the council nevertheless still did not see them as a 'community'.

3. Producing a common agenda among diverse alliances.

The size and diversity of London Citizens can make it difficult to form alliances and agree an agenda for action. The cohesion of the alliance depends on conducting all business democratically, using open assemblies that can have 1000 members present. This sort of debate and deliberation maintains a stable alliance which is essential in achieving social change.

4. Maintaining the interest of decision-makers.

After the election it was hard to maintain the GLA's interest in the London Citizens agenda, since the mayor's own manifesto was prioritised. This meant that London Citizens had to keep building the organisation, stay actively involved in the campaign and raise new issues such as the London Olympics.

What were the lessons?

1. Adopt targets that are 'winnable'.

Issues of poverty and housing shortage are huge and complex and it would be difficult to define a realistic, achievable outcome. But translating them into specific targets creates tangible outcomes that are more likely to be adopted and implemented by decision-makers. This builds a powerful sense of achievement among members and reinforces their commitment to collective action.

2. Deliberative, democratic processes create a stronger organisation.

By using the Alinsky method of deliberation in the Listening Campaign and the Mayoral Assembly, a consensus among members was gradually built up and the overall organisation was strengthened as a result.

3. The value of making the alliance a meaningful 'community'.

The power and legitimacy of London Citizens rests on its ability to act as a single community, albeit made up of 'the most diverse alliance of faith and civic communities in the UK'. The term London Citizens refers to the collection of different communities that make up the alliance and also the collective membership, based on strong relationships, between these diverse

1. Compared with the government's minimum wage of £5.52 per hour for workers over 22 years (£4.60 for 18-21 year olds).

groups. This sense of community has grown with each shared experience and campaign. Regular events celebrating this unique membership help create a strong identity for London Citizens as a community.

4. Building a community takes time, but is a worthwhile process.

Some time after London Citizens had held a forum in one London borough, a young teenager was killed. Members of the local forum were struggling to establish links with the community he came from and they turned to London Citizens for help. This signalled recognition of the slow and painstaking work by London Citizens to build relations between different groups in order to form a community. The council has realised that amongst the network of local groups, they may find 'community' leaders.