3-21-2010

Nonprofits and Social Change. Introduction: An Anchor. Reshaping the Relationship

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Introduction:
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> Nonprofits encourage dialogue between citizens and institutions in democracies. . . . Although it is not always evident in the debate, we know that small grassroots groups and community-based organizations are essential to the preservation of those opposing voices necessary for a democracy.[1]
>
> — *Eleanor Brilliant*

In response to a variety of internal and external forces, including the recent economic downturn, nonprofit organizations in both Israel and the United States have increasingly been called upon to provide a safety net and serve as central players in the development, strengthening, and maintenance of civil society.[2] These shifts include the privatization of services, blurring of the sectors and their traditional roles in providing services, reduced funding from traditional sources, welfare reforms including devolution, opening of new markets, enhanced role of faith-based people and organizations in service provision, intensified dependency and connectedness of policy makers and stakeholders, and the subsequent change in the relationship between citizens and institutions. These and other trends have led organizations to seek and create ways to restructure their internal and external roles and relationships with societal institutions.

Nonprofits in both the United States and Israel are responding to current changes in ways that challenge their traditional missions and practices. A growing number of nonprofit service organizations are intentionally integrating social change principles and activities into their work in an attempt to expand their focus

A community social worker, Jen Cohen has been involved in the Learning Exchange as a practitioner, planner, and researcher since 2005. She has practiced and grown in the world of community-based social-change organizations in the United States and Israel since 1984 and continues to be regularly inspired by nonprofit leaders, professional and volunteer, including those whose voices are heard in this volume. Jen is a doctoral candidate at the University of Massachusetts Boston, where she is currently using participatory action and case study methods to research community-based social-change organizations in Boston and Haifa.

from solely individual-level change to include larger systemic issues. At the same time, conventional policy advocacy organizations have been called upon to respond to the emergency basic needs of their constituencies, especially in times of crisis. In general, wherever they fall on the service/advocacy spectrum, nonprofits have increasingly begun to adopt organizational strategies that strengthen their ability and commitment to empowerment, engagement, and partnerships.

In the context of the ongoing Boston–Haifa Learning Exchange Network (LEN) project, social change has meant transformation on the individual, community, organizational, and public policy levels, which can lead to the reduction of social and economic gaps and improved social and economic security for marginalized people, groups, and society at large. A working definition of social change has involved a shift toward increased civic participation and democratic processes.[3] In addition, the new definition goes beyond traditional assumptions about growth and scale (namely, that more is better) to strive for outcomes that are valuable as measured by depth, authenticity, flexibility, and diversity.

"This new era of possibility is also one of accountability."[4] In the United States, President Obama has made a point of prioritizing the active search for "solutions to our nation's challenges that have resisted traditional approaches and support innovation that is working in communities across the country."[5] In Israel the government has, for the first time in the history of the state, made formal recognition of the critical role of nonprofits. This shift has come largely in response to the role filled by nonprofits in providing emergency aid and support to individuals and communities, underserved by the government during the 2006 war with Lebanon.[6] In both countries, the response of nonprofit organizations to new challenges and opportunities, and to their evolving roles in society as mediators of social justice and service provision, is significant, not only to the organizations themselves but to national and municipal officials and policy makers, as well as to advocates, low-income households, and the public at large.[7]

Academic and practitioner literature from the United States and Israel recognizes that nonprofit organizations are tools for and agents of social change. Nonprofits function through a variety of avenues that are related to their roles in advancing democracy, many of which are explored in greater depth in other sections of this journal: by partnering with and/or challenging government to meet the needs of individuals, families, and communities; by creating, facilitating, and maintaining cross-sector partnerships; by encouraging and facilitating engagement; by creating social capital; by facilitating social entrepreneurship; and by surfacing voices of the constituents most directly affected by public policies. Public policy outcomes, interdisciplinary by nature, can be stronger when created and evaluated by teams of people that have the capacity to look at the issues through a variety of lenses, a model embodied by successful and ambidextrous nonprofits.

A particuar subgroup of nonprofits, which are often referred to as community-based organizations (CBOs), have a central role to play in creating and affecting public policies that contribute to social change, especially in diverse democracies, and especially for disenfranchised populations and communities. CBOs, like other nonprofits, use organizational strategies to achieve their social change missions. Grounded in communities, CBOs employ strategies related to shared leadership, innovation, the ability to create, facilitate, and maintain relationships among diverse groups of stakeholders, and to further adaptability, learning, and balancing between seemingly opposing forces. These opposing forces — and the need to maneuver and balance on continua between them — may include service provision and advocacy; an instrumental vs. expressive societal role; grassroots engagement and professionalism; individual transformation and community/policy change; and expansion for broader impact while maintaining loyalty to core values, including community empowerment.

Because they are closer than any other social institution to the people who are most directly affected by particular public policies, CBOs are strategically situated, although often under-recognized, to reveal knowledge that is critical for finding sustainable solutions to poverty and other inequalities that perpetuate social and economic gaps. Often (but not always) smaller than other types of nonprofits, even when this type of organization does manage to "scale up,"[8] the CBO stays intentionally grounded in the community. Explanations of organizational success, especially in the field of poverty solutions, seem to include CBO flexibility and talent for simultaneously relating to a wide range of policy makers including a complex mix of constituents, community leaders, appointed and elected officials, practitioners, academics, and others. The existence and active involvement of these organizations increases the effectiveness of public policy development and implementation.

The power of CBOs to affect public policy and social change is related to their emphasis on individual, group, and community empowerment and the advancement of constituent participation in democracy, especially constituents who are most marginalized in society and whose voices are theoretically and practically critical to legitimate civic involvement in democratic societies. Successful CBOs perceive and treat their constituents and communities as assets and holders of knowledge that the organization needs to do its work. Successful CBOs seem to have a heightened sense of constituent accountability, which is "a source of connection that breaks down isolation and increases effectiveness."[9] These organizations recognize and practice the "strength of frailty," which refers to the recognition of the power and shortcomings of both citizens *and* institutions in society, as a step toward the transformation of both, toward social change.[10]

Related to this, CBOs facilitate "participatory policy making," a strategy that requires involving the individuals most directly affected by a policy in its development and implementation.[11] This ability to engage people from whom the most authentic

knowledge[12] can be obtained, allows organizations to foster and take advantage of "new interdependencies" among diverse groups of stakeholders.[13] Successful CBOs are not only able to hear that knowledge and respect it, but also to translate it into terms that can be understood and used in decision making and program development by those stakeholders who are currently recognized as having power. This, the ability to bring forth knowledge that would otherwise remain elusive to policy makers, is one of the most compelling reasons for having CBOs at the public policy table.

Marina, Claudio, and Miriam, authors whose organizations are highlighted in this section of the journal, can be heard in the following pages, sharing honest stories of struggle and success. These essays chronicle precisely the types of strategies and practices that exemplify intentional social change work being coordinated by community-based organizations in Boston and Haifa. Core questions that have been posed and documented by these and other LEN members over the last few years include the following:

- How, in a current policy and funding environment that increasingly expects quick and easy returns on investments, do nonprofits measure and explain their particular social-change achievements?

- How, and at what cost, do CBOs maintain an equilibrium between diverse partners and stakeholders?

- How do successful CBOs maintain or challenge traditional models of power in working to affect change?

- Is public policy work necessarily the best avenue through which nonprofits can affect social change?

- How can we, as social change activists and institutions, sustain ourselves?

- What role does spirit play in social change work?

These are only a few of the fascinating issues, related to the role of nonprofits in advancing social change and social justice, that have emerged over the last few years through the LEN project.

I'd like to close with an anecdote, a personal experience I had during the initial years of the learning exchange. Living in Haifa at the time, I accompanied my young daughter on a play date. As her friend grabbed a toy from her, Keddy looked at me and said, "Mommy, *zeh lo hogen*," which means, in colloquial Hebrew, "that's not fair." The word *hogen* in Hebrew is quite a sophisticated way of saying fair (often we just say "fair" with an Israeli accent). Like many new mothers, I deliberated about how best to respond, and I tried to understand what she really needed and wanted from me. My instinctual response was to encourage her to tell the friend how she felt and to suggest they share the toy, take turns, and/or find a way to enjoy it together. Not exactly rocket-science parenting, but it seemed to work.

As Hebrew phonetics lends itself to word play, my daughter's words echoed in

my mind on the drive home. *Hogen* morphed into *haganah* ("defense" in Hebrew), and then *ogen*, ("anchor"). Keddy had turned to me for protection from unfairness; we were each other's anchors, as mother and daughter, and there seemed to be a broader life lesson embedded in there too. How we negotiate relationships is at the core of who we are in the world, both professionally and personally. Perhaps from childhood and all the way through to adult-social-change-activist-hood, we link equity and protection. I wondered, then and now, how our sense of these concepts, practically and theoretically, keeps us grounded in the world. During the last five years of the LEN, I have witnessed the profound impact of openness to sharing, assumption of good will, and freedom from defensiveness. I have been fortunate to witness, learn, and (strive to) integrate how such a stance with others provides a powerful and grounding anchor for safety, fairness, partnership, and (dare I say) love.
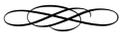
Notes

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