

NEIGHBORHOOD FOUNDATIONS
MEMORANDUM #13

FROM: MILTON KOTLER, INSTITUTE FOR POLICY STUDIES,
WASHINGTON, D.C.

DATE: OCTOBER 31, 1966

SUBJECT: PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT IN COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION*

It has been the experience of experts in community organization that the most ingenious and popular community programs so often collapse when the organizer leaves the scene. The community is unable to continue the program with any success. This applies to youth, day care, health aid programs, and the range of community social service inventions.

The general explanation of this phenomenon is clear enough: there is no organizational structure of the community to politically sustain these programs as continuing public activities of the community.

In the context of this problem, the ECCO community corporation development has been positively regarded. The community has a strong self-governing organizational structure that can sustain program operation. But the question is then raised as to how the actual program content, which can be sustained, actually does develop. What is the method of service program development within the sustaining corporate structure of the ECCO community?

It is a mistake to state the problem of program development as a process distinct from the political structure of community. It is as wrong to think the development of a political structure should precede program development as it is wrong to develop programs without a political structure to sustain them. The political structure of community organization, which, in the case of ECCO, is a community corporation, is as much a program as is a neighborhood health service or basic education project. The corporate structure is as much a solution of a neighborhood problem as is a health service program. In the case of ECCO, the corporate structure of neighborhood control solved the problem of maintaining a settlement house program of social service which was threatened by loss of funding. The

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community organized to govern the settlement and, under that self-governing concept, was able to gain funding from OEO in order to maintain its operation. The political structure of ECCO was a problem-solving program--just as a neighborhood health service must develop as a structure to solve the health problems of the neighborhood.

The development of the ECCO self-governing structure, its political constitution as such with mixed assembly and executive council government, paid officials, and the general direction of its service program jurisdiction on a territorial basis, responded to a dramatic crisis within the neighborhood. The successful church settlement house, which was eventually transferred to neighborhood control, was an agency widely appreciated and used by the people of the community. That settlement agency was threatened by loss of funds. The plan and efforts to transfer that settlement to neighborhood control was a direct confrontation of this crisis in the community and a very particular solution to the preservation of that settlement. Transfer of the settlement to the neighborhood government and the corporate organization of that community as a new governing authority of that settlement, funded by OEO, solved the problem of continuing social services in the neighborhood. The fact that ECCO was initiated as an undertaking of political organization responded to the actual crisis the settlement faced in trying to preserve its operation. The need was to find an authority that could gain funding for the operation. Since the church authority could no longer do this, the people, organized as a legal community, became the authority which was able to gain funding for its continuing operation under the federal anti-poverty concept of OEO.

The development of the ECCO corporate structure was derived as a solution to the problem of gaining a fundable authority to continue the settlement service, rather than from any abstract notion that political structure precedes program development.

During the many months of constituting the ECCO corporate structure, another local crisis hit the life of the neighborhood: there was considerable violence among the teens and dangerous confrontation between them and the police at the Roller Land Skating Rink, it eventually became clear to the neighborhood people that they as a corporation, could not only represent a community interest and position on the problem of youth violence and police brutality, but could also be a direct instrument of solution. They realized that ECCO, their corporate organization, could buy the Roller Land Skating Rink and run it as a self-governing community agency with a greater involvement of youth in its programs. ECCO then began to negotiate for the lease. When it became clear that the manager had seven years left on his lease, the corporate momentum of problem-solving on this issue continued until an ECCO youth program emerged. An ECCO "Youth in Action" program was written up, submitted and subsequently funded by the Office of Juvenile

Delinquency. That program, which is now in operation, is governed by the ECCO Youth Board and has become a center of involvement and hope for the neighborhood youth.

The Youth In Action program grew out of an actual crisis and community problem-solving process. It developed out of a dramatic event, which is to say, a real community need dramatized by the actual event of violence and intimidation around the Roller Land Skating Rink. It did not grow out of any a priori concept that a community youth program has greater priority than a community health or a community housing program. Its advent does not reflect any rationalistic concept of social priorities, but was a concurrent response to a dramatization of community need.

The youth program development corresponded in method to the ECCO political development of its corporate structure out of the need for services, dramatized by the threatened termination of the neighborhood settlement. The dramatic event of community need, that is, the neighborhood crisis as expressed in the communally-shared event, must be the foundation of all program development, rather than any scheme of priorities derived from a theory of social causation.*

When community programs grow from the found of dramatic crisis in the neighborhood, the content of that program will reflect the widest dimensions of community need as it can only be discerned in the critical drama. The occasion of youth violence and police brutality at the Rink started a process of community discussion in which great numbers of people participated, as they expressed what they thought the youth problem was, what they thought the police problem was, what they thought the problem of recreation was and what they thought the community could do about these problems. The dramatic crisis opened the widest and deepest dimensions of the reality of youth and the reality of effective community. Ideas which had feeling were exposed by the event as they can never be expressed when program development issues from an academic structuring of priorities. Furthermore, the wide opening of ideas about the youth, and their public expression in forum, generated a community commitment to the best expressions of the problem and how to solve it. The subsequent program, based on these expressions, points to a realistic solution. A program cannot practically solve a community problem unless the people affected by the problem express and believe the program to be a solution.

*For example, a given social theory might suggest that poor housing is a principal cause for poor education. Hence, some would argue that social action in community should be organized to improve housing before changing the educational structure.

The ECCO community came out of these discussions with fifteen elements of a solution. The people and committees of the community were committed to those fifteen points. No program writing and processing by professionals could get away with omitting any of these cardinal expectations of community solution. Professionals were then called in to write up these fifteen points in the proposal form necessary for funding. They found themselves involved in the exciting task of critique and exchange on these fifteen points with the ECCO community.

When the youth program began months later, it had the same wide and intensive participation as was present in the community during the originating dramatic event. The program memorialized the event. This is the key to the question of program participation by the people. The reason that participation is so often poor in a professionally designed program, developed on the basis of a deduced need, is simply that there is no community involvement in that deduction. The foundation of such a "deduced" program rests in the mind of the analyst rather than in the mind of the community. Program development must have a foundation in the consciousness of the community.

Programs which grow out of the critical need exposed by a dramatic event in the community will gain as heavy a participation as the community was involved in that event. The current housing rehabilitation program of ECCO grew out of the crisis of threatened land clearance of fifty-three homes in the ECCO territory for the sake of a city recreation facility. The threat of land clearance brought the people together to save their homes. In the situation of that dramatic event a community process developed in which the idea of housing was exposed as well as the idea of creation itself as a concept that cannot be fulfilled upon the destruction of people's homes. The community then realized it could do something to protect housing against land clearance. This required a housing rehabilitation program governed by the community. While that program has not yet been federally processed, its proposed content again reflects the dramatic event in which community expression about housing unfolded. The same thing can be said of our developing health program which sprang from the event of a child's death when the Health Department failed to send an ambulance in time. That death dramatized the health needs of the community. ECCO, its block clubs and committees, met and talked about this problem of health and medical care. Different parts of the program grew out of that issue's wide-ranging expression.

ECCO's program development is a concurrent process of building the ECCO structure funded by OEO, the Youth in Action program funded by the Office of Juvenile Delinquency, and the Housing and Health programs now in the mill. We can discern in this no logical pattern of priorities. The ordering reflects only the concurrence of many needs and the several dramatic events of these needs which were the spring of program development. The ECCO

corporate structure, continuing in its development today, was initiated before the youth program only because the crisis of the settlement house was dramatized earlier than the crisis of youth violence and police brutality. It was dramatized first and pragmatically resolved through the corporate structure of ECCO. The fact that it was initiated first does not reflect any theory that political structure and constitution must precede the content of youth programming.

With respect to community program planning and development, the proper perspective which leadership must assume is its closest attention to dramatic event, its human crisis, and its collective expression and judgment.

Community leaders must sniff the ground of events and sense social crisis in the neighborhood. When those leaders are professionally trained, their first need is to shake their heads clear of any notion of social causality and any certainty about priorities. They must look with their eyes, hear with their ears, and smell the scent of events of social need in the community. If a child dies because of inadequate attention from Public Health authorities and people gather around that sorrow, that is the moment--whatever other program may be in the mill--to build a health program, because that is the moment when the total dimension of health needs and its thousand elements of solution are expressed and discussed. If the program content of health service reflects the great expectations of that expression, as decided in the widest participation and deepest commitment of the people, the program will work because it will be as a memorial to that child. The community will see to it that it works. Its content and operation will be the community's celebration of its ability to transcend a sorrow with constructive solution.

The social programs of the community must have a sensual rather than a rationalistic foundation. The time to start a program of housing is at the time of the drama of its collective crisis: it must begin with the dramatic event. If, while the momentum and development of a housing program starts, a child dies from inadequate medical attention and the community grieves, that is the time and place to start the health program--even though the housing program has not been finalized. There are as many priorities as there are dramas of social crisis in the community. Both programs must then grow at their different stages. The worst thing that community leadership can do is to let the drama of crisis, like the death of a child, pass without founding a solution upon it. The community will never forgive the passage of that event without a memorial of its solution.

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