Reflection in Action: Ethics and Responsibility in Community Organizing
by Nina Gregg[1]
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Ethics and Responsibility in Organizing (E&RO) began as an action research project launched at the first US Social Forum in June 2010 by Nina Gregg in the US and at the same time by Diego Escobar in Colombia. The project was part of the international Forum on Ethics and Responsibility (www.etica-respons.net), supported by the Charles Leopold Mayer Foundation for the Progress of Humankind.   This Reflection in Action Document (RAD) offers some limited historical context for understanding social justice organizing in Colombia and the US and summarizes the thinking of action research project participants about the concept of responsibility, its role in organizing, and the potential value of legislative and statutory regulations for ensuring responsible institutions and governments. The RAD concludes with examples of activities initiated by participants after the conclusion of the action research project.

Introduction

People living in proximity to one another have always sought ways to work together to meet their mutual needs: preparation of land to plant crops, creation of dwellings, collection of water, protection from predators, celebration of rituals of the changing seasons and the human life span. In contrast with these necessary and familiar social behaviors, "community organizing" refers to the work of <u>agents of change</u> who are actively involved in promoting social change through different organizational and institutional structures, many of which are non-governmental and voluntary. Around the world we can recognize cultural, historical, and ideological differences in the ways community organizers work to promote social change and also differences in the processes through which change occurs.

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[1] A draft of this report, dated 31 Oct 2011, was written by Nina Gregg and Diego Escobar. This revision (February 2013) was written by Nina Gregg, incorporating responses from North American participants.

Along with these differences in theories of change, practices, and methods, community organizers share a sense of _responsibility_ as described by one participant:

> "I believe our first responsibility is to our vision of what we think the world should be like. . . . Responsible organizers listen to community members and think every day about how to be accountable to the needs and wants of people most often left out of decision making in a community. We organize because most legislators and corporations do not act responsibly to all of their constituents. A responsible organizer must think about this as part of the core of what they do. . . . we must organize to create the world as we want it to be, which means doing it in an ethical way."

Contexts of community organizing in South America and in North America in 2010-2011

Community organizing around the world has both responded to and adapted to four decades of local, national, regional, and global neo-liberal economic and social policies, the influence and dominance of adherents to market capital and the ongoing material impacts of the 2007 global economic crisis. In this context, social and economic justice commitments that have long been the hallmark of community organizing remain and are evident in efforts around the world to address access to land, education, health care, food and water, housing, and employment, and racial/ethnic/gender/class discrimination as well as issues related to immigration, the environment, and global economics. At the same time, the devolution over more than three decades of responsibilities from the public sector (government) to the private sector (for-profit) and third sector (NGO and not-for-profit) has also had an impact on community organizing. One illustration of this combination of response and adaptation is the appearance across the North American continent of community gardens as a partial solution to hunger: along with continuing efforts to change government policies related to food prices and subsidies to make food more affordable, community organizations are promoting community gardens as local food sources.[2]

Examples on both continents (North America and South America) of adaptation of community organizing to the current context include the Right to the City network in the US (with member groups in more than ten states) and the International Alliance of Inhabitants ("a global network of associations and social movements of inhabitants, cooperatives, communities, tenants, house owners, homeless, slum dwellers, indigenous populations and people from working class neighbourhoods"). In both of these networks community organizations combine their activism for social justice -- grounded in the principle that housing is a human right -- with community-based activities of not-for-profit organizations to respond to local needs by becoming providers of housing and fighting evictions and foreclosures.[3]

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[2] See, for example, http://www.grownindetroitmovie.com/ and http://dowser.org/how-food-is-revitalizing-detroit/
[3] See http://www.righttothecity.org/ and www.habitants.org.

Community organizations and community organizing in North and South America share similarities and also reflect their distinct histories, cultures, and contexts as well as their different relations to the global economy.

Community organizations in Colombia and Latin America emerged as a model of resistance to the newly arrived "discoverers," "settlers," explorers, and adventurers who were ignorant of the ancient cultures. The colonizers imposed social and economic practices without approval from long-established communities and with no appreciation of the history, values and diverse logics embedded in and sustained by indigenous cultures. The indigenous peoples had always promoted in their daily activities a sustainable relationship to natural resources as well as forms of political, social, and economic power that were very different from the extractive and accumulative habits of the newcomers who became established in the region.

Community organizations responded, first, to the absence of individual rights and rejection of the practices of established indigenous communities. Second, these efforts took shape in a political, social, and cultural environment that had the potential to result in direct and violent disputes, indirectly providing an impetus to affirm indigenous values and principles of action as well as their potential collective action or inaction.

A third motive for the formation of community organizations was to influence the significance and meaning of territoriality for the general population, and strengthen identification with place through the use of symbols and meanings, as much to sever ties to the land *(desterritorialización)* as to reconstruct those ties *(retorialización)*. And fourth, community organizations should also be seen as a real and constant product of the interactions among diverse peoples and cultures. In many ways these organizations reflect their indigenous and native origins, but also have incorporated the views of those of European and African descent, and among all these influences are found their best aspects as well as their shortcomings.

Just as the Latin American population has gradually become racially and ethnically mixed, so too have community organizations become more heterogeneous. During the mid- to late-nineteenth century and early twentieth century these organizations were identified predominantly with the *campesino*, characterized as a symbiosis between the indigenous peoples and the descendants of Europeans and Africans. Over time the rural population, which was rooted in the earth and the cycles of productivity based in agriculture, developed relationships with the urban population, expressing the new logic of capital accumulation and imitation of capitalist and cultural developments in Europe and North America.

In the early and mid-twentieth century, South American trade unions formed as a result of new industries and also as a reflection of what was happening in the developed world. On the South American continent there were very few organizations that responded specifically to the needs of workers. Most organizations focused on unresolved problems with the indigenous peoples, peasants, workers, the poor

and destitute, who often ended up congregating in urban neighborhoods of large South American cities that had no plans for these residents.

Multiple and varied conditions have compelled older community organizations to become stronger and new organizations to form. The alarming Unsatisfied Basic Needs Index (UBN), extreme inequity in distribution of the new economic wealth, coupled with new forms of industrialization that are inefficient, weak and transient; anti-democratic and elitist models of governance accompanied by repression, a growing population, and increasing violence and poverty have mobilized groups to address problems inherited from the past and the challenges of this new century.

As with everything in life, community organizations are continually readapting. Throughout the South American continent, organizations attempt to meet the new challenges of education, health, environment, and employment. Other organizations are focused on security, strengthening civic participation, recognition of identity, gender, and youth.

In the history of the United States, the Revolutionary War is perhaps the most obvious example of a people's movement to remove constraints on individual liberty through organized resistance to power. Citizen activism has a very long history in the US, often expressing the self-reliant and individualist ethos of the new nation. What we now call community organizations were recognized by Alexis de Tocqueville as a distinguishing characteristic of community life in early 19th century United States, as he observed the "associations" or a multitude of examples of people coming together voluntarily for a common purpose.[4]

Today, most community organizing in the US begins among people who have a geographic location in common through community of origin, place of residence or employment, and shared concerns or interests. They work together to articulate their concerns, analyze the systems in which their concerns arise, and collaborate to develop and implement solutions. The solutions may be independent of other organizations and institutions, may form partnerships with allies, or may require confrontation with more powerful entities.

The local and regional allegiances that distinguish community organizing from other groups brought together primarily by profession, religion or political affiliation have both practical and strategic value. The linkage of local or regional circumstance to national policy can be seen in movements as diverse as the late 19th century farmer cooperatives that took shape in the era of businesses forming alliances to increase their economic and political advantages; craft trade union organizing in the late 19th century that led decades later to the formation of the first US national trade union federation in 1935; and community actions that provided the foundation for the national civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, resulting in the US Civil Rights Act of 1964.

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[4] De Tocqueville and Gustave de Beaumont traveled in the US for nine months in 1831-32. *De la démocratie en Amérique* (2 volumes, published in 1835 and 1840) is referred to in English as *Democracy in America*. The second volume contains de Tocqueville's observations of civil society.

In the 20th century, studies of US movements for social change and community organizing documented a variety of theories of change and associated methodologies that have been embraced and promoted by community organizations and community organizers. In North America different approaches to community organizing are well represented in institutions and organizations that offer training courses, internships, placements, research and publications. Among the more familiar (in North America as well as influential elsewhere in the world) are approaches credited to Saul Alinksy (direct action organizing; see *Rules for Radicals* and *Reveille for Radicals*) and organizations that support community organizing, such as Highlander Research & Education Center (www.highlandercenter.org); Midwest Academy (www.midwestacademy.com); the Organizing Institute of the AFL-CIO (the US trade union federation http://www.aflcio.org/Get-Involved/Become-a-Union-Organizer/Organizing-Institute); and networks that adopt a particular method or approach to community organizing, such as Industrial Areas Foundation (a network of 63 citizen participation organizations in the U.S., Canada, England and Germany www.industrialareasfoundation.org); PICO (44 affiliated federations and 8 statewide networks working in 150 cities and towns and 17 states, involving more than one million families and one thousand congregations from 40 different denominations and faiths www.piconetwork.org); NPA (National People's Action, with 200 organizers in cities around the US www.npa-us.org); and Western States Center (http://www.westernstatescenter.org/about).[5]   These different approaches to and methods of community organizing have implications for meanings of responsibility and related practices. Indeed, some of the accomplishments as well as conflicts among practitioners of community organizing can be attributed to differences in methodology and meanings of responsibility.

Most community organizing in both Americas is grounded in a commitment to facilitation of people working together to advance the cause of justice. Regardless of whether this activity is a challenge to public and private institutions that serve special interests and therefore have failed in their broader social responsibilities (that is, they are "irresponsible" in some sense) or in alliance with governing bodies or other organizations, the methods of working together, distribution of leadership, authority, decision-making, and transparency are not uniformly defined.

Despite their varied approaches to community organizing, which reflect differences in theories of social change and understandings of system change, human behavior and motivation, the ascendancy of neo-liberal social and economic policies has had an impact on all forms community organizing in the US[6]. In the US there has been a near-total transformation of the social contract that formerly held the public sector (government) responsible for meeting basic human needs into a system that assures residents that the 'market' will meet these needs or, failing that, charitable organizations will meet human needs.

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[5] These are only some of the many organizations and networks supporting and engaging in community organizing in the US.
[6] DeFilippis, James, Robert Fisher and Eric Schragge. 2010. Contesting Community: The Limits and Potential of Local Organizing. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

In this context, community organizing's "dual role" to advance justice through policy change while meeting human needs is undermined, because attending to the material needs of constituencies for housing, food, and health care can consume all available resources. Moreover, many former funders of community-based social change organizing have acceded to the transformation of the social contract and now are more invested in delivery of services by the third sector rather than in holding governments accountable. As DeFilippis, et al. observe, "we had witnessed the marginalization of the longer-term goals of economic and social justice as part of the agenda of community organizing. In its place, we see a narrower focus on much more limited practice. This limited practice is justified because it meets specific needs with a deliberate pragmatism. Further, it is often shaped by the needs of the neoliberal context. . ." (2010, p.1)

One striking example of the neo-liberal devolution of responsibility from the public sector to the third sector occurred in 2011 in the UK. Following the example of the United States, Britain is shedding its historic commitment to social provision by government as part of the Conservative government's vision of "a big society" that relies less on the state and correspondingly shifts more responsibilities to voluntary services and communities. In a move that signals also the contested roles, practices, and meanings of community organizing, the UK government let a £15 million contract for the training of 5000 community organizers (500 full time, 4500 part time). One of the candidates for the training contract was a group with a 25-year history of effective grassroots community organizing to strengthen civil society, but the contract went instead to a group that sees its role not as confrontational but as supporting the voluntary sector and social enterprise in the fulfillment of the government's vision[7] .

Into this environment in the late summer of 2011 appeared the Occupy Wall Street movement, emerging in the US first as an expression of frustration with continuing unethical actions of the financial sector, the absence of accountability or responsibility in financial institutions, and the impact of both on the general population. The focus on Wall Street soon extended to inequities in economic and fiscal policy, the income gap, the paralysis of the US Congress and its failure to act on a wide range of concerns: unemployment, climate change, home foreclosures, regulation of the financial sector, education, and immigration reform. Diminished opportunities and reduced quality of life for all but the wealthiest residents of the US mobilized people in hundreds of cities as the economic crisis and the inability of federal and state governments to temper its impacts revealed the fiction of the so-called American Dream. As the OWS movement has become global, so does the opportunity for and role of community organizing for economic and social justice and co-responsibility.

Across both Americas there is a connection that links community organizing that is more profound than may be apparent at first. Citizens in the US mobilized to elevate and consolidate respect

[7] "Analysis: Why Alinsky's supporters lost out." Third Sector, 8 March 2011
http://thirdsector.co.uk/news/Article/1058293/analysis-why-alinskys-supporters-lost-out/ Accessed 25 October 2011

for human rights and ensuring these rights are guaranteed under rule of law. Latin America followed later, when community organizations influenced by North America urged governments to adopt similar commitments. As social movements strengthened against military dictatorships, so did the movements for democracy grow stronger with the assertion of new constitutional charters expressing human rights as well as economic, social, and cultural rights. In the 21st century we now see successful organizing in South American countries to institutionalize rights that remain beyond regulation in the U.S., and organizing in many countries as the force of national regulations is undermined by global institutions like the World Trade Organization.

In both North American and South American contexts the rule of law has failed to fulfill its promise. People live with varying degrees of uncertainty regarding their living conditions, security, and personal liberty. If we consider the challenges communities experience today – whether these are epidemics, home foreclosures, de-funding pensions, unemployment, layoffs, resource depletion, industrial contamination, and other consequences of 21st century development – we can see that the need to resolve issues of human rights still defines quality of life and the potential for peace in many places.

Some community organizations in South America have gradually moved from a local focus seeking recognition of human, economic, and cultural rights to develop platforms with broader geographic reach, such as PIDHDD with over 100 community and civic organizations (www.piddhdd.org); ALOP promoting land rights from Mexico through the Andean region to the Southern Cone (http://www.landcoalition.org/); an alliance of groups building local power and community action in Central FCOC-LA ; and CHOIKE Southern Cone promoting new thinking on civil society (www.choike.org).

Even for community organizations that promote the exercise of citizenship, uncertainties about the conditions of personal life often mean this exercise will take a minimalist form: responsibility is understood first as fulfilling one's duties and obligations and accepting the consequences (reward or sanction) of one's actions. Transforming the individual sense of responsibility into a more communitarian commitment (co-responsibility) has both practical and cultural dimensions. For example, along with many sectors and community organizations encouraging a more complex understanding of and commitment to civic responsibility, the Secretary General of the Coordination of Indigenous Organizations of the Amazon Basin (www.coica.org.ec) expressed the tensions: ""The value of respect is the linchpin. We need to respect our cultures and beliefs, our rituals and our choices, we need to be heard and treated equally, and to allow us a say in decisions that affect us. On the other hand, we live as we choose, not as others think we should."

Organizing around interests and organizing around values

The diversity of approaches to community organizing and the range of ideologies, pedagogies, methods, and accomplishments have been studied, documented, and analyzed by other writers. Here we

offer one framework that is significant for responsibility as a cultural value, for the notion of co-responsibility and for the entire Ethics and Responsibility program.

In a detailed and instructive study of civic action in six cities (in the US, Brazil, South Africa and India) sociologist Xavier de Souza Briggs analyzed civic capacity, which is the capacity to create and sustain collective action.[8] This is the challenge for many community organizers and community organizations: how to build effective power to address the concerns of ordinary people, not only for one issue but to alter the relations of power for justice and equity.

De Souza Briggs presents a provocative framework for thinking about organizing with implications for responsibility. He notes the importance of distinguishing values from interests. Interests represent _what we want_ (or what we think we want). Organizing around interests is often focused on a concrete objective (access to land; fair wages; housing; clean drinking water). If the organizing is successful and the objective is met, motivation for continuing to work together has diminished and whatever civic capacity was created may dissipate. The larger systems of finance and governance usually remain intact.

Values are abstract principles that help define _who we are_. Organizing around values has the potential to attract allies with whom a range of interests can be pursued. The potential for sustained civic capacity seems to be greater when organizing around values like responsibility.

Further, if substantive change for justice is the goal, organizing around interests is unlikely to be sufficient. What then constitutes responsible organizing practice? In terms of interests and values, responsible organizing would require the articulation of both interests _and_ values: interests (_what we want_) as well as values (_who we are_). In the US, where values-talk among powerful elites is often a disguise for interests, organizing around values illuminates the masquerade. To focus on responsibility (as exemplified by Occupy Wall Street) -- whether the focus is one's own responsibility as an individual, as a collective, co-responsibility with others, or the responsibility of others -- is to focus on values.

Responsible community organizing, and organizing to promote responsibility, seem to require identification of shared values. Community organizing across the Americas does invoke values, as in efforts to eliminate the death penalty, ensure human rights are protected, assertion of cultural values of harmony, and so on. In communities and regions populated by people from countless different ancestries and cultures, identification of shared values is a time consuming and sometimes contentious process. It is no wonder that organizing around interests rather than values is more prevalent. We can more readily understand and evaluate the implications of an appeal for housing or water than an appeal for equity or fairness. Indeed, news reporting on Occupy Wall Street around the world persisted in asking 'what do

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[8] De Souza Briggs, Xavier. 2008. Democracy as Problem Solving. Civic Capacity in Communities Across the Globe. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

they want?' and judged the movement deficient when the demonstrators expressed values instead of interests.

The action-research project "Ethics and responsibility in organizing"

Ethics & Responsibility in Organizing began as an action-research project engaging community organizers in reflection on responsibility in their work. These reflections included consideration of meanings of responsibility, how the concept of responsibility arises in community organizing, how community organizers learn what responsibility action is, and what community organizers can learn from each other about ethical and responsible practices. In addition to individual deliberations, participants were encouraged to bring these issues into their organizations. We aimed to make explicit the implicit knowledge of these organizers and to affirm, strengthen, and advance ethical practices in community organizing.

The design of the action research project had four phases:

- In the initial phase, participants were asked to respond to a survey via e-mail. The survey requested answers to questions that were asked of every participant. The survey also invited participants to propose questions to be introduced in the second phase of the project. The first phase was completed in January 2011.

- In the second phase, preliminary results of the survey (without identification of sources) were distributed to participants for additional comment and reflection. The second phase concluded in September 2011. An English language blog was created as a resource for participants to communicate directly with each other.

- In the third phase, a draft report (again without identification of sources) was circulated to all participants for comments. In this phase participants brought the discussion into their organizations. This was done in ways appropriate to each context, such as formally using the draft report for internal discussion and deliberation, by integrating the topic of responsibility into ongoing activities, or by informally sharing the participant's experiences of the action research project with co-workers. The report was distributed at the end of 2011.

- In the last phase, the final report was distributed to all participants for organizational development, planning, policy, and training purposes.

Description of participants (positioning the network) and different approaches to mobilizing around responsibility

The North and South American participants in Ethics & Responsibility in Organizing (E&RO) are not members of a single organization, institution or network about which general statements can be made. Each of the participants is employed by a different entity (community organization, association, trade union, agency, local or regional or national government) or is a volunteer affiliated with a group

which may be informal or may be an established organization. [9] This means that there is no unified institutional position on ethics and responsibility or responsible action that is held by every participant, nor is there a unified position that is held by the organizations that employ these participants. If we focused our attention on this issue, we would be able to identify some similarities in the values expressed by participants and some similarities in principles held by some of the organizations.

Even so, there are commonalities in an analysis that organizing is necessary because leaders and institutions are not responsible (are not fulfilling their obligations to individuals and communities). If institutions/agencies, governments and individuals were responsible (in the terms of the Charter of Human Responsibilities), there would be less need for community organizing as a strategy to promote, encourage or force greater responsibility. Even in such an (unlikely) idealized scenario, community organizing would still be useful and necessary to create collective awareness, determine community interests, and develop community resources and community solidarity, power, and solutions.

Many of the community organizers taking part in E&RO expressed a commitment to individual responsibility and indeed this awareness may be credited as the motivation for their choice of this kind of work (community organizing, social change, social justice). Individual responsibility is often but not always a component of the strategies used to achieve their goals. For example, trade unions mobilize workers by appealing to their sense of responsibility for fellow workers; community organizers may identify individuals who have benefited from organizing and recruit them to help organize more individuals; a community crisis can bring people together with a new sense of collective identity.

Although North American participants in the project (and the groups/organizations with which they work) do not use the term 'co-responsibility', they would recognize the concept. There are many examples of community organizing strategies that in slogans can be seen as expressions of 'co-responsibility': "An injury to one is an injury to all"; "united we stand, divided we fall"; "each one reach one" are slogans that express mutual obligations and shared destinies. Other significant examples of 'co-responsibility' are alliances among different constituencies or organizations formed to achieve the organizers' shared aims. Mobilizing voters, preparing testimony for public hearings, defending immigrant rights, and legal action can all be seen as co-responsibility strategies.

The South American participants have more experience explicitly using the concept of 'co-responsibility' as a component of methodology. Specific examples include the Citizens' Pacts for the

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[9] Participants in North America represented most of the continent, and work in both rural and urban areas on a wide range of social issues. Some work in a community or region, and others work nationally. These organizers live and work in the Pacific US, midwestern US, central Canada, mid-Atlantic US, southwest US, mid-south US and the Appalachian South. The issues they address include housing, economic justice, military spending, hunger/food security, workers and trade unions, death penalty, health and safety of community, environment, immigrant rights, energy, fair taxation, and jobs. They have from two to more than twenty years experience as organizers paid to do this work. They also have experience as unpaid organizers (two to 15 years). In the North American group are eight women and three men from 29 to 63 years of age. The twelve participants in South America come from four countries (Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, and Peru).

management of territories, the responsible participation of youth in local elections on the Caribbean coast, and a series of initiatives in which co-responsibility is essential to realize their proposals. These include (for example) new legislation on land restitution, work on media coverage, education of adolescents, participatory democracy, participatory budgeting, and citizen monitoring.

Community organizing focused on the responsibilities of others takes many forms, from educating the general population about the duties of government to pressuring institutions and governments to fulfil their obligations. For example, South American respondents identified lack of knowledge about the legal responsibilities of government as a problem for organizing. In this context, increasing community awareness about government responsibilities is an example of focusing on the responsibilities of others; with this awareness people are better equipped to insist that the government fulfil its duties. Direct confrontation is also an example of focusing on the responsibilities of others. In both North and South America confrontations such as demonstrations and disrupting official meetings have the potential to be effective in raising awareness and mobilizing others, and also carry risks (popular backlash, arrests).

Challenges to responsible practice

For community organizers, challenges to responsible practices and action are both internal and external. Within organizations, most of the problems mentioned in North America are structural, such as insufficient resources to act with total transparency, to ensure thorough communication and participation, to overcome barriers to participation such as need for transportation to meetings and events, to provide childcare to allow parents of young children to participate, to offer simultaneous interpretation to allow speakers of different languages to participate. Others mentioned challenges related to organizational strategy or policy that privileges one group over another; or difference expectations about the roles of paid staff (employees) vs. the roles of members of the community; or distribution of power within the organization. Whereas the North American community organizers are very clear about the ethics of their practices, this individual clarity rarely takes the form of institutionalized commitments like a code of ethics.

Most South American respondents think their community organizations are far from having an ethics in relation to their practices. For example, one South American respondent gave the example (of a problem) that the role of community leader is attractive because it concentrates power and provides privileges to those who wield it. This also was mentioned by US respondents as a challenge, particularly when the mass media or other entities identify a 'leader' or spokesperson that has not been selected by the community. Another South American participant mentioned the contradiction between national policy to expand access to formal education by increasing the number of students per course and ignoring the minimum conditions required for the educational activity to be a quality learning experience and without providing resources for the increased responsibilities of the instructors.

People in both North and South America are unaware to varying degrees of the legal aspects of their relationship to land, education, poverty, employment, equality, and so on. As a result they lose out to other (better informed) actors and interests in their region or the country. In Colombia in particular access to information is very limited, so another major challenge for organizers committed to responsible action is to have the capacity to disseminate information in accessible languages.

External barriers to responsible action include historic irresponsibility and corruption of employers, regulatory agencies, governments, and organizations with the power to alter circumstances. One South American who works for a government agency emphasized the importance of transparency and of not generating false expectations among the public through community organizing for desired but at times elusive outcomes.

In South America there are not many efforts to promote the exercise of responsibilities as a collaborative activity across different sectors of society, such as joint processes to promote community responsibilities by the popular sectors, the businesses and the government all working together. More often, ethical and responsible actions are promoted by one or another sector or entity, without consultation with the people and the community that will be affected. These appeals arise to promote 'values that society has lost,' which at times is sincere and at other times is an attempt to legitimize the actions of one group.

Interpersonal dynamics of race, class, and gender hierarchies sometimes intervene both internally and externally to shape authority and processes in ways that are inconsistent with responsible practices. For example, in the US "institutional racism" -- organizational structures and procedures that privilege the dominant (white European) culture's assumptions about organizing and social change as well as norms of interpersonal communication and decision-making -- create barriers to participation and inclusion.

Other problems encountered by organizers in acting responsibly are attributed to inadequate time and other resources, lack of power to change systems, organizational structures that make responsible practices like consultation cumbersome, competing definitions of success or goals, leadership prioritizing 'success' above the process used to achieve success, and shifting demands and needs. These problems reflect material constraints on organizational structures, capacities, and resources, and latent conflicts over whether the process or the outcome is more important.

In Colombia, many project oversight committees are co-opted. Some are co-opted by those they are supposed to control. Moreover, the activities of social control are instruments of the Colombian Constitution. Social organizations engaged in promoting the public interest demonstrate the difficulty of defending the public good as opposed to particular interests. One respondent gave an example of placing principles above funding: "In a sense we have given up applying for resources and projects, maintaining a critical view on the source of the funds. We have been chastised for keeping our vision on issues of corruption and not agreeing to pay to receive contracts. "

There is a long history deeply rooted in the practices of all social sectors in Colombia that unfortunately is also evident in community organizations. The situation has more to do with corruption and irresponsible practices promoted by national and international powers. Another respondent explained, "For example, when resources were available through Plan Colombia, we decided not to participate despite having our financial stability at risk. We made an exception in a year when social organizations in 10 municipalities in Cauca department were invited to participate on the theme of the Exercise of Social Control. We decided to participate after an internal discussion, which concluded that participation in this particular project was not contrary to fundamental principles." Organizations in the US face similar issues about funding and the expectations and constraints imposed directly or indirectly by funding sources. Organizations devote time and energy to securing funds that are not tied to one particular issue so that they are not restricted in the organizing work they do.

Other examples of problems or barriers to responsible action illustrate a particular meaning of conflict of interest. Instead of the conventional concern about decision-makers benefitting at the expense of others, these are conflicts over _definitions of interests_: are the values and the process (democratic, participatory, egalitarian, transparent) dispensable if the goal can be reached otherwise? If the parties with the power to redress the issue offer to meet only with the leadership, would this be responsible action by an organization committed to democratic participation and inclusion?

Many of the participants agree that being responsible means being answerable to others who are not always in the room or directly involved in the advocacy -- that is, not to treat anyone like objects to which one is not accountable and not to disregard their human dignity, as mutual recognition increases one's own freedom and dignity.

Participants in the action research project are all familiar with habits and behaviour that are barriers to responsible action, including the following that appear in different forms in different cultures:

- There is the religious or political leader who believes that he or she must account for decisions only to their god or to the ideology of their party or to an abstract ideal, rather than to their fellow citizens today. This is typical of political totalitarianism and a common individual type is the irresponsible bureaucrat.

- There is the "passive citizen" who expresses a kind of reckless indifference, ignoring his fellows beyond the inner circle of his own family. "I pay taxes and do not hurt anyone; others should fix their problems between themselves and stop bothering me."

- A third group answers for their actions only to those whom they consider worthy of such regard, often a closed and exclusive group chosen by their own personal criteria. They may be intolerant, touting all sorts of racism, xenophobia, extreme nationalism, or an ideology of hatred towards any people who differ from them and from the dominant culture. At times their irresponsibility extends to provocation and violence.

All three types exhibit irresponsibility in their disregard for the dignity and humanity of every individual.

Diversity in cultures, geography, and other factors

There are many similarities in general responsibilities identified and assumed by community organizers who participated in the action research project, regardless of their different locations, experiences, and social positions. There are also differences in specific responsibilities that reflect region and geography (urban/rural and different areas of the continents); sectors in which the organizers are working (labor, community, basic needs; government, legislative or other agendas); organizational structure (elected leadership in labor unions and some other organizations, traditional employer-employee relationships in others, paid staff or volunteers); whether the organizational structure is a hierarchy or a collective and the degrees of bureaucracy; geographic proximity to/distance from stakeholders; as well as differences reflecting social and economic class, education, life experience, race, gender, and age.

One example of cultural attitudes that determine priorities with respect to responsibilities was suggested by a South American respondent who described the situation when a community lacks social organization and a 'leader' has not done enough organizing, and so responds in ways that are not relevant to the local situation in which the people are living. He suggested what is needed is more self-reflection by leaders about their roles in the community and a longer-term view about the transition that will be necessary beginning from where they are now to where they are going.

And as noted earlier about conflicts of interest, cultural and political contexts can produce different priorities regarding what is responsible action. One example was maintaining a critical perspective on the source of funding. The organization was chastised for remaining consistent on the issue of corruption and not making payments in order to receive contracts. Another example is determining whether achieving the desired outcome is more important than maintaining a commitment to a consultative or democratic process.

An interviewee who worked with his organization in the process of the Charter of Human Responsibilities said, "From the work of the Charter of Responsibilities, always put to the social organizations the issue of human responsibilities. Although it is clear that it is not enough to raise the issue because it involves complicated elements of political culture and institutional culture. "

Organizers also know that cultural heritage is often an asset, not a barrier to responsibility. A Filipina organizer living in Hawai'i talked about _kuleana_ -- which she explained as responsibility greater than that to one's self, to take care of the place you live and work and collectively to do right for other people as well – and _pono_, which means living a life of integrity. She also described how co-responsibility is a necessity when living on an island.

Practices that promote responsibility and cultures of responsibility

Different organizations adopt different practices, reflecting both their theories of change (how best to organize to fulfil their objectives) and the resources available. If the objective is to build

community integration, they are more focused on supporting community solidarity, shared leadership, and awareness. If the objective is to compel government responsibility, the practices may be different.

One example is how community organizers who are paid employees (staff) take great care to remain in the background, to put community people forward as spokespeople, and not to be perceived as speaking for the community. This requires encouraging and cultivating other people to take on leadership responsibilities that are unfamiliar and sometimes unwelcome. A culture of shared responsibility is created by demonstrating that the paid staff will refuse the spotlight even if an important communication opportunity may not recur.

When community organizing is successful in holding irresponsible organizations and institutions to account, then the community organizing commitments to transparency, participation, democracy, accountability and responsibility are affirmed. When community organizing is not successful, it becomes increasingly difficult to keep to the 'high road'. For example, a recent ruling in the US Supreme Court allows large political campaign contributions to be made without requiring disclosure of the sources of funds, even when the contributors are businesses and corporations. Disclosure is entirely voluntary. Responsible action would be to disclose all funding sources, but to do so will expose the parties that are acting responsibly to political disadvantage when their opponents do not disclose their sources. The choice is not easy: should community organizations act responsibly and disclose funding sources and lose on principle? Or should they not disclose and maybe win and be able to change the law?

An institutional example of building a culture of responsibility in the US is www.Buildthewheel.org, a collaborative initiative to strengthen community empowerment efforts across the US. The aim of www.BuildtheWheel.org is "to provide a space where community educators and organizers can build upon each other's practice, experiences and reflections in popular education and leadership development to strengthen the movement for social justice." On this website are curricula and resource materials for workshops on youth organizing, solidarity economy, ecological justice, immigration, and many other topics.

Other examples of building cultures of responsibility in US institutions and communities include the scholar-economists who have proposed a Code of Ethics for academic economists, and the Network of Spiritual Progressives which launched a campaign to add the Environmental and Social Responsibility Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Jobs with Justice, a national organization composed of state-based affiliates, works to develop community and national solidarity on economic and political issues (www.jwj.org). PICO is a national organization with local affiliates that brings together community activists, clergy, and others to address local and regional issues of human rights and human dignity. Gamaliel Foundation is a grassroots network of non-partisan, faith-based organizations in 17 US states, South Africa and the United Kingdom, that organizes to empower ordinary people to effectively participate in the political, environmental, social and economic decisions affecting their lives

(www.gamaliel.org). SURJ (Showing Up for Racial Justice) is a national network of groups and individuals using community organizing, mobilizing, and education to move white people to act as part of a multi-racial majority for justice with passion and accountability (http://www.showingupforracialjustice.org/).

In Colombia, a concrete example is the Bank of Best Practices that structured and systematized UNDP (www.pnud.buenaspracticas). The goal was to support construction of peace and social equity: "Best practices are driven by specific actions by communities, social organizations, churches, government agencies or the international community, or the sum of several of these efforts, which, according to the above criteria, contribute to:

   a. Take care of people. Strengthen the security system and Penal Justice so that it offers the maximum of quality and cover so that their benefits and costs are distributed equitably between the citizens.

   b. To humanize the conflict through a process aimed at changing the attitudes of stakeholders towards the subject and remove obstacles to the implementation of international humanitarian law.

   c. To treat victims by adopting rights which apply the principles of solidarity, equality, prevention, and protection.

   d. Transforming thousands of individuals unrelated to illegal armed groups in civic peace force. Good practice in this area contributes to implement a sustainable reintegration scheme, ensuring life to those who leave their weapons, prevent rotation between illegal armed groups or their income to organized crime networks, restore all their rights and assist them as appropriate.

   e. Preventing recruitment is crucial. Prevent the illegal armed groups from continuing to recruit young people in camps and cities.

   f. Defunding the war through actions aimed at preventing the illegal armed groups access to economic resources through extortion, kidnapping, armed clientelism, theft and smuggling of oil or precious minerals and prevent their infiltration into the legal economy by laundering assets.

   g. Remove the connection between drugs and conflict with actions addressing the drug problem in terms of its impact on conflict.   Create markets, business arrangements, environmental compensation, provision of social services and manual eradication to reduce the incentives for entry into the illegal drug economy.

   h. Strengthen the local state through initiatives aimed at fostering closer cooperation between citizens and the democratic state.   To bring peace, foster communication for peace, among other things."

Some of the South American participants in the action research project are part of this initiative and also contribute to "the rights of communities, democratic rule and principles such as participation, the exercise of freedoms, the issue of public interest, and one of the weakest elements in the promotion of responsibilities: how to distinguish the public good from private interests. " Others assert that their organizations have made "important advances in practices that seek greater equity . . . and developed interesting manuals that may be useful for other community organizations."

Analysis

In the second round of the Ethics & Responsibility in Organizing project (in which participants responded to a summary of first round comments and also answered new questions) we observed three tendencies:

First, there is a general recognition of the absence of formal codes of ethical action or agreements about the meanings of responsible practices and co-responsibility in community organizations. In South America in particular respondents noted the fragility of relationships at the community level. The structural weakness of society is reflected in the weakness of community practices. Strengthening relationships at the community level will also strengthen community practices. One North American organizer noted, "we must constantly be working within our organizations to grapple with ethics and responsibility and not just assume we are always operating ethically and responsibly."

At the same time there is an abundance of action and initiative directed towards responsible practices, grounded in values and principles. The organizations all express values and responsibilities, but not always in formal statements. One US organizer shared the three goals of his organization's work:

- Winning real improvement in people's lives
- Working with people to get a sense of their own power
- Altering relationships of power

He remarked that the second goal is most likely to be achieved when the organizing process takes responsibility into account and does not focus only on winning an issue. This can mean taking the time to have conversations about what is happening even if this slows the process, and if the situation dictates that a group is unable to take the time to talk about what is happening, discussion around responsibility should occur while debriefing.

Second, in the US as in Colombia (and probably elsewhere) when people talk about ethics and responsibility, they are reflecting primarily about their own integrity, not about coordinated social action. And following from this focus on the self, individuals are more likely to monitor their own attitudes and behaviors and relationships rather than attempt to achieve an ideal that doesn't correspond to their own experience, resources, and context. One respondent suggested that with more concerted attention to ethics and responsibility in the early stages of planning any activity, the relationship between responsibility and social action will become more familiar.

Third, given regional and national histories, the orientation towards the individual along with local and regional commitments of community organizers and organizations, there is little enthusiasm at the moment for mobilizing for a Universal Declaration of Human Responsibilities. Although a Universal Declaration of Human Responsibilities seems "remote" to many of the US organizers, they see value in statutes or regulations outlining responsibilities at the local and regional level. "It would be nice if the US would follow existing UN Declarations," one organizer remarked. As an educator she regards international agreements "as a touchstone to be able to articulate things" and mentioned the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples as an empowering document. She is considering using the International Youth Charter of Responsibilities for the Environment as an educational and motivational tool with youth in her organization.

Within the material conditions of the communities that shape their work, mobilizing for local (and occasionally regional) responsibility is a commitment and a concern for community organizers. In the next section we describe activities that can contribute to a foundation of co-responsibility in communities and regions.

Prospects for the future

Next steps for participants in the action research project

The capacity of Ethics &Responsibility in Organizing participants to promote responsible practices, 'cultures of responsibility' and 'co-responsibility' depends on the resources and positions of their organizations and their positions within those organizations.   The organizers are positioned at different levels within a variety of organizations and structures. In the action research project from 2010-2012 they speak for themselves and not for their organizations or institutions. Engagement of the organizations would require a formal deliberative process within each organization.

To understand the range of organizational relations, Diego Escobar proposed a typology of networks:

> **First level network:** these are people who form a relational community, between friends, between neighbors, with local movements, between people and authorities, etc. All are marked by solidarity actions and immediate assistance.

> **Second level network:** those that organize as a community, gather and represent their feelings, are visible to local power and also are known beyond their locality.

> **Third level network**: these are dynamically organized groups that represent and take action in towns and cities. Structured networks of influence that engage in basic but effective political action.

> **Fourth level network:** Those with ties to others in the regional and national arenas are focused groups with some ability to influence decisions regarding the construction of public policies.

> **Fifth level network:** Those that have international dialogue, are capable of documenting the

basic needs of communities, organizations that are recognized at the local, regional and national levels and are able to establish supportive links between bodies that determine the course of public policies and institutions and people demonstrating their ability to act locally.

Almost all South American participants are located in third and fourth levels, but can only attempt to influence the fifth level. However, participants were insistent that they were speaking as individuals and not for their organizations. North American participants work with and for organizations active at levels one through four, with most in third and fourth levels. These respondents cannot represent their organizations or take positions in behalf of their organizations without going through internal procedures of review and approval.

<u>Proposals for responsible practices, cultures of responsibility, and co-responsibility</u>

At the conclusion of the action research project, which involved individuals in reflection and analysis, it was premature to expect proposals that went beyond specific practices. There is strong sentiment for the necessity of promoting principles – such as treating others the way you would like to be treated – and values such as transparency. "All actions of leaders must be transparent for the entire community," one respondent said, "and their actions must be based on solidarity with all their community, and always able to distinguish their personal interests; and above all else to act with love." Community organizers agree they must respond to the problems and challenges of the community with which they are working and work with the people in that community to identify the problems and solutions that are consistent with the values and principles of the community.

In the process of addressing in a responsible manner the most pressing problems of a particular community or region, organizers attempt to create the conditions in which ethical principles can be agreed upon and incorporated into the actions to be taken. Responsible practice integrates diverse groups and their different approaches into the paths identified for co-creating solutions to shared problems. Social renewal in cities as well as neighborhoods depends on this integration.

Another South American participant said the community members must be informed and must participate and discover together the solutions to the problems they have, and insist on solidarity and a 'union of communities' to transform the conditions of daily life. In North America these are basic components of many approaches to community organizing committed to building consensus and collective power.

The organizers in the Ethics & Responsibility in Organizing action research project also emphasized the importance of integrating principles and values into social action and the strategies necessary to involve people and organizations: "The principles and values that must prevail in the communitarian social action must be governed by human rights and human dignity, understanding that as well as there are rights also there are duties that must be promoted and be implemented from the

organizations. To accomplish this requires an important support of a communication strategy and sensitization that helps to involve many people and organizations."

Individual organizers made a number of proposals for promoting and encouraging responsible practices in community organizing. Some of the proposals have considerable potential for strengthening practices as well as networks.

One proposal from the South American context (which is relevant also for North America) is to address the role of community leadership and the objective of an increasing number of citizens ready to build at the community level a more democratic and participatory exercise of ethics and community responsibilities. This is an implicit goal of much community organizing in the US through training and workshops – to build a strong foundation of responsible practice at the community level.

In the US these strong community foundations are most often built by community organizers through one-to-one conversations and relationships, which more than one organizer says are essential even though "painstakingly slow, but that is because you are talking with each person about their own responsibilities to themselves and the community and how people in power are not meeting their responsibilities to community members. You are talking to people about 'co-responsibility' and how this is the whole reason for organizing to improve our communities." "Even if it takes longer," said another organizer, "we can't leave out the people most directly affected by the work we are trying to do."

In North America, where the sense of individual responsibility is far stronger than communal or collective responsibility, there are occasional well-publicized attempts to form community-wide (multi-stakeholder) relationships with only limited success. Power differentials or hidden agendas (economic and political) often undermine the process. As with the example above of community leadership, early attention to integrating commitments to shared responsibilities could improve the outcomes of these endeavors.

In both North American and South American contexts, though, instrumental logic dominates. Responsibility as a value is not an objective in itself. Instead, the goal or objective is what responsible action would ensure: the interest in safe neighbourhoods, fair treatment, educational opportunity, employment, clean water, good schools, access to health care, and so on. The desired end is what compels action, not the means (responsible action is the means to the desired end). "Truly empowering people who have been oppressed is the best way to create a culture of responsibility, if we do it in a way that talks deliberately and specifically about being responsible from the beginning of the process," one organizer explained. Another proposal would be to incorporate consideration of ethics and responsibility at the outset of every organizing endeavour.

Several respondents in North America expressed interest in exploring organizational codes of ethics. This would have to be an inclusive participatory activity, so that the process of creating and adopting a code of ethics is itself an exercise in ethical and responsible practice among the stakeholders in the organization. This was regarded as more valuable than an external code, ordinance or regulation

because the outcome – an organizational code of ethics -- would result from deliberations by the people who would use the code of ethics.

<u>Considerations of local, state, regional, national, and international regulations</u>

In North America, a number of community organizations are occupied with ensuring that existing laws are enforced (addressing the irresponsibility of others, for example companies that abuse workers or pollute the air, water, and land) or with attempting to have laws overturned (as is the case with very inhumane laws about immigrants in the US and barriers to voting). At the same time "There are great laws already on the books, and organizers from the right wing are focused on eliminating these," one veteran organizer noted. Another organizer explained that in some US communities, the right to speak at meetings of their local governments has been lost; this was formerly a routine democratic practice eliminated by conservative legislators opposed to transparency and alternative viewpoints.

Depending on the issue, proposing new regulations at the local level may be a viable strategy, but these organizations usually do not have the resources or political leverage themselves to promote new laws at the state or national level.   In the US, national legislative campaigns take shape over many years and often experience many failures before a marginal success. The new federal health care law, which still does not guarantee health care for everyone, is an example. And the opposition is already having success overturning parts of this law.   Another factor in consideration of new regulations or legislation in the US is the restriction on the kinds of organizing for political and legislative goals that can be done by non-governmental and not-for-profit organizations.

Organizers' degree of interest in or belief in the value any new legislation, whether national or international, about responsibility is tied directly to whether such legislation will be useful for the organizations' missions and objectives. In the US, a series of high court rulings have given to corporations many of the rights and privileges of 'natural persons'.   In this context, the value of an enforceable statute that articulates human co-responsibilities to one another "would be most useful if people were truly a part of creating it and if it really drew distinctions between people and corporations and entities that act with responsibility and those that do not."

Another US organizer described an experience bringing together a coalition of very different stakeholders to support a city-wide ordinance protecting equal opportunities and prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. The lengthy process of working to reach agreement across different constituencies and stakeholders built understanding, solidarity, and co-responsibility around values as well as interests. Organizers later were able to invoke those shared values to mobilize people to come together around other issues. Another organizer asserted "Yes, we could use a statute about responsibility, but it would need to be framed and resourced as a community campaign, not a UN campaign." Several US organizations have used a strategy of developing community and city legislation over decades to build a base of support and momentum for new legislation at the state level on issues as

different as the elimination of the death penalty, reducing violence against women, and workers' right to know about chemical hazards in the workplace.

The South American participants agreed that proposals of responsibility and co-responsibility must be established clearly in the laws and visible constitutionally, but the process for achieving this is not clear. Development of public policies is necessary at the local, regional, national, and international levels so that they are seen as legitimate elements of the communitarian work. When/if a UDHR exists, community organizing will be necessary to educate people about the Declaration and assess its relation to the issues around which community organizing is occurring.

Two US participants suggested that the next step for E&RO could be a facilitated conversation among organizers about ethics and responsibility. This would be a constructive way to deepen reflection and promote action on ethics and responsibility in organizing. In North America, there are several national networks of community organizers that could be approached to participate if resources could be found to support such a project.

Ethics and Responsibility in Organizing 2012 and following

After the conclusion in 2012 of the Ethics and Responsibility in Organizing action research project, several participants initiated activities in their organizations and networks to promote ethics and responsibility in organizing. The forms of these activities were appropriate to each context, such as formally using the draft report for internal discussion and deliberation, integrating the topic of responsibility into ongoing activities, or by informally sharing the participant's experiences of the action research project with co-workers. Building on experiences with the action research project, one participant arranged for staff discussion of the draft Reflection in Action document and attention to ethics and responsibility during an annual staff retreat. This organization, a state-wide network of community-based chapters, is continuing to explore whether a Code of Ethics would be useful and if so, how to design a process to create a Code of Ethics that will reflect the organization's values and demonstrate ethics and responsibility. Another participant designed a leadership conference with a plenary session and workshops on ethics and responsibility. This organization, a trade union council, is developing a training module on ethics and responsibility and sharing its efforts with national staff. A third participant is convening a day-long event for advocacy groups in one state, offering practical workshops on ethical and responsible practices in organizing. These initiatives, all of which are happening as a direct consequence of the action research project, are continuing with active support from the US coordinator of Ethics & Responsibility in Organizing. We are beginning preliminary conversations about hosting a face-to-face conversation among organizers interested in deepening the discussion, learning together and extending the impact of their efforts.

Acknowledgements

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