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Newsletter of the Anti-Poverty Community Organizing and Learning Project

Learning Changes

Welcome to your first edition of the Anti-Poverty Community Organizing and Learning (APCOL) project newsletter.

Newsletters have long been used as a grassroots tool for information sharing and knowledge brokering. In keeping with that tradition, we in the APCOL project have chosen to incorporate a newsletter as a means of knowledge mobilization and communication. We want to disseminate the what, why, when, who, and how of this action research project. So here goes...

WHAT IS APCOL?

The APCOL project aims to explore and strengthen:

all of us…and it's harder when you don't have the resources," said Ravenna.

This is why FoodShare is advocating for a Minister of Food Security- a position that would bridge the gap between food access- currently, a responsibility of the Ministry of Health, and the increasing cost of food. In addition, FoodShare is also advocating for monthly food vouchers for everybody. Their approach has always been to do universal programming.

in Ontario solution or made in Canada solution," said Ravenna.

Unfortunately, there are "perverse subsidies" that exist in the food system. In this aspect, Ravenna believes that Canada is not as bad as the United States. Their subsidies are going towards foods that need to be processed rather than into sustainable growing. As an organization, FoodShare's focus has always been on fresh fruits and vegetables and on improving health.

An idea that has gained momentum in thefoodmoment is that of food sovereignty. The idea behind food sovereignty is to give people control of the food system so

The idea of food vouchers is not novel to our neighbours to the south. In the U.S., there's the Women, Infant and Children's program (WIC) which has a food voucher for farmers' markets that is working quite well. "We'd love to build on the success of that program and find something that's a made

a crucial part of what FoodShare does. For example, the organization offers direct training for a variety of projects and facilitates discussions so that people can become aware of their own capacities. This is one avenue that FoodShare has created to give people more opportunities to be an active part of their communities.

These responsibilities are shared by Community Animators- whose job is to go to places, particularly low income neighbourhoods, to help those who want to start programs or food projects get started. They will work with that community group to develop the vision for the project and gather the resources needed to make the project successful. Once the projects are up and running, Community Animators provide ongoing support, advice, and consultation.

Amongst those who become involved with FoodShare, Ravenna recognizes that many already have, on some level, an innate sense of leadership in them. This is why it is even more important for the organization to reach out to those who are disengaged. They are always trying to find ways to meet the needs of a diverse group of people. "Part of what we do is connect to local organizations anywhere we work. So, we're not just out there, a voice in Scarborough or North York, but we come

in usually through other community organizations," said Ravenna.

She adds that the organization is conscious of their limitations- not only with language barriers or cultural barriers- but technological ones as well. "We have a website and a Facebook page, but that's really a one way communication. A lot of what we do is around the telephone hotline so if you want to call that a new technology, we could!"

For those who are able to get involved with FoodShare programs, the personal transformation is profound. "People are more fit, they are more articulate, and they are more aware of food, poverty, and empowerment issues. Most importantly, we see lots of people's emerging leadership. They have that latent leadership there and they're just given the opportunity to grow."

I asked Ravenna what she would like to see happen as a result of the APCOL partnership. "I would like to see a group of community leaders that we work with move into a new level of leadership. I hope they become more able to speak on behalf of the issues that are important to their lives and close to their hearts in a much more powerful way. Then they will be capable of training other people and creating the kind of transformation that we as animators seek. And I'd like

to see other cities across the country learn from us as well."

For those who are interested in getting involved in food security issues, Ravenna has this piece of advice for you: start by reading Michael Pollan's book, "The Omnivore's Dilemma". This is a great introduction to the many complexities of food security issues. Then get involved with food security issues for the excitement around it. "People are drawn to this because they see possibility. That's one of the things that I love so much about food as a community organizing tool. It's actually around hope and excitement rather than need and sadness or sense of things not going well. So often, people are drawn to food because they can envision the

SPOTLIGHT ON: DEENA LADD

Deena Ladd of the Workers' Action Centre (WAC) has been using popular education as a technique to advocate with workers for two decades. Naturally, Deena is one of the first people the Anti-Poverty Community Organizing and Learning (APCOL) project approached, to help identify key ways in which anti-poverty organizations engage their members. My interview with Deena illuminated the importance of reciprocity and learning circles to sustaining a vibrant activist organization.

Deena's day consists of coordinating all activities of WAC and this is no easy feat considering the range of activities the organization undertakes. The organization has worked to improve wages and working conditions for workers of colour, low-wage workers and non-status workers. WAC tries to connect with workers facing violations of their rights on the job by providing educational

workshops, practical information on what to do as well as connecting with people through various community organizations.

WAC believes that the people they work with bring a wealth of experience and knowledge to the table. Deena explains, "We start from that point – workers' experiences on the job, What has that taught them? What changes do they think are needed? What strategies would work to connect with others facing the same issues? We build on their expertise, raise awareness of social justice, the root causes of the systemic inequities we are facing and facilitate conversations on making change."

This approach is exemplified by the way workers connect with WAC through the Workers' Rights Phone Line. The Centre operates a hotline in six languages where people can phone to ask about a problem. WAC workers ask callers to come to an information session. At that session WAC starts off the discussion with people's experiences at work and questions they have about their rights.

The majority of WAC leadership consists of people who made that first call because of an individual violation they experienced. Their development into activism demonstrates the reciprocal relationship WAC develops with its members: people may come to the organization wanting a "fix" to their problem, but through organizing and learning about workers' rights issues they become engaged as long-term members.

One of the goals of WAC is to help members develop into popular educators themselves so that they may organize and lead subsequent mobilizations.

Outreach, skills training, political education and workshops help members learn how to frame issues, hone in on key messages, and develop an understanding of what changes

Our APCOL project is using action research to fill in several important gaps in the existing resources on anti-poverty activity. By doing this, we can deepen and widen our ability to understand ways in which activists and communities take on the challenges of poverty in Toronto and elsewhere.

There is no shortage of excellent research on poverty and anti-poverty in today's societies. Research from around the globe as well as right here in Canada has looked at the multi-dimensional nature of poverty. It has explored who is affected most deeply by poverty. It has investigated how poverty emerges, and how citizens can self-organize, struggle and create positive change in their communities and economies. There is survey style research that has looked at these issues on a broad scale. And, there are also a great number of detailed studies of individual instances of people organizing and responding to challenges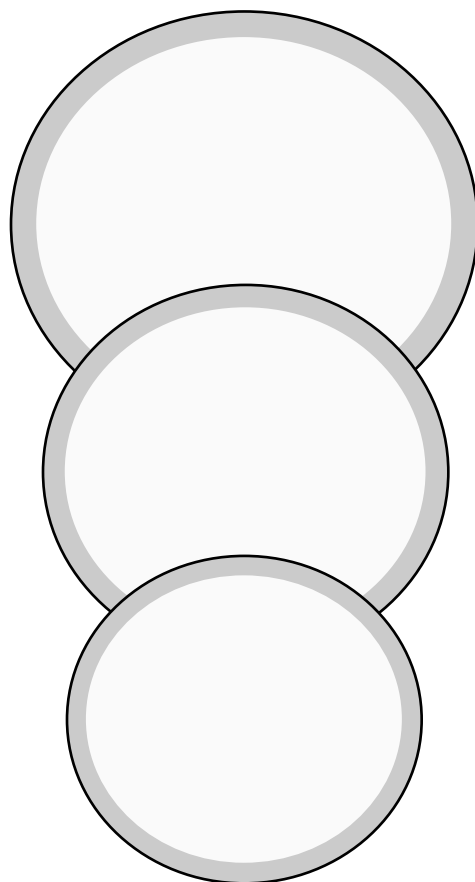 of one type or another. In setting the research goals of the APCOL project we carefully reviewed this research for ideas that were not yet fully understood and applied.

The first gap we found is perhaps so basic that researchers do not give it a second thought. Research has seldom if ever looked closely at how social changes ultimately depend upon how people – individually and collectively – undergo change themselves, or   . In fact, very few researchers have combined studies

A second gap that was revealed in our review of research was that studies often focused on a single issue (e.g. housing, school completion, living wage, health/nutrition) rather than seeing these as inter-linked in a broader perspective on poverty and anti-poverty action. Our response was to look at how these are (or could be) related to each other as a comprehensive effort undertaken across an entire metropolitan area.

A third gap we identified was that survey and focused case study research were seldom combined to answer questions. Each of these research methods has its own unique strengths. Survey research allows us to see the effects of broader conditions and patterns of activity. Detailed studies of individual campaigns on the other hand help us see in greater detail how individuals and groups are seeking to bring about positive changes. In response to this, the APCOL project is using both large-scale surveying of anti-poverty action/conditions combined with a series of eight detailed case studies. All of these are used within a framework of 'action research'.

The fourth and final gap in the research is that it usually explores a small number of isolated factors affecting the organizing process. Part of the problem here is that individual researchers work on the basis of a specific field or research discipline. Yet the boundaries between academic disciplines often hinder rather than help us take on real-world social problems. We believe that research that asks and answers questions across different research fields has an important role to play. For this reason, the APCOL project has

brought together researchers from a variety of academic disciplines – social movement studies, sociology, political science, political economy, policy studies, labour studies, anti-racism, feminist studies and educational studies – in order to ask and answer important questions about the nature of poverty, anti-poverty and activism.

The combination of research ideas is an important strength of the APCOL approach. The following are the four sets of research ideas at the centre of our collective efforts.

IDEA 1 – POPULAR EDUCATION/INFORMAL LEARNING

Very little detailed analysis of how learning takes place in anti-poverty campaigns is found in the research literature to date. The APCOL project will focus on individual and collective learning processes. Specifically we investigate   efforts which can be used to develop activists and campaigns. We also investigate   efforts by activists, community participants and those in the community that may not be actively participating in a campaign.

IDEA 2 – SOCIAL NETWORKS

Every campaign or effort at social change depends on   whether this involves friends, family, or other campaign participants. These social networks are complex and overlapping. Social networks research is well developed in relation to social change efforts of many different kinds. The APCOL project will link social network research to understanding how people come to participate in campaigns with specific learning outcomes for seasoned, emerging and potential participants.

IDEA 3 – CONDITIONS OF ACTIVISM

Both learning processes and social networks, of course, take place within
           . These conditions play a fundamental role in defining strategy, and influence the success or failure of organizing efforts. How is campaign success or failure influenced by cultural differences; economic and local labour market conditions; local, municipal, provincial and even national political conditions? While many previous studies have highlighted the role of one set of conditions or another, few combine them.
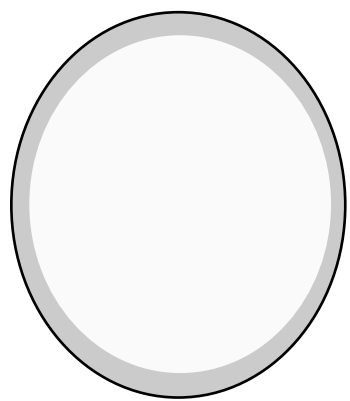
IDEA 4 – EQUITY & BIOGRAPHY

Who becomes engaged in different forms of anti-poverty campaigns? How does who they are affect their participation and learning? And, how do their different social networks and conditions shape who becomes an activist or leader, and who remains excluded from participation?

Research on learning in anti-poverty campaigns and social movement development has rarely addressed such questions together. Anti-poverty activity itself often shows very uneven attention to such matters, and in so doing can result in exclusions. The APCOL project undertakes the study of equity, inequity and biography within anti-poverty organizing and activist development as a matter of learning, un-learning and breaking down barriers.   a

by D'Arcy Martin

Through the fall and winter 2009-2010, the project's in-depth interviewing and recording will concentrate in two locations – Foodshare and the community organizations in Kingston-Galloway, while also completing a historical review of the campaign for a $10 Minimum Wage in Toronto. The following year, we plan to add two more locations, to do a background survey on all four locations, and to have our first full-scale knowledge exchange among the project participants in all locations. Whew!

SUPPORT FOR ORGANIZING

Community activists will co-design and help to carry out the research in each of the campaigns, guided by a coordinating community partner and an academic researcher. Participatory action research methods will ensure not only that the most relevant data are produced for the study, but that opportunities are created at the grassroots level to support and enhance innovative organizing strategies. Among these opportunities will be the support of a network of organizations and groups, which has been a key attraction

come to the fore. By the end of this initiative, we hope to have a richer understanding and recognition of the knowledge and skills participants have developed and to have influenced the community services provided to support that learning.

SHARING RESULTS

APCOL has ambitious plans to communicate the results of the study, reaching all the way from the grassroots to national and international gatherings. These include:

- Speaker series in Toronto neighbourhoods as well as at college and university campuses;
- A newsletter;
- Hosting two conferences;
- Scholarly works including peer-reviewed papers to be presented at national or international conferences, and for publication; and,
- Engagement with all levels of government on policy issues stemming from the research. a

HOUSING POLITICS

By Yutaka Dirks and the Housing Network of Ontario (HNO)

On, September 30th, the final official public affordable housing strategy consultation was held in Thunder Bay. Low-income tenants, agencies, social housing advocates and others closed out the round of official public consultation with calls for a bold long-term affordable housing strategy which meaningfully addresses the deep housing needs in Ontario.

But the official consultation meetings are not the end of HNO's work, and there are many opportunities to build the movement for affordable housing.

On Tuesday, November 3rd, members of HNO met with Minister of Housing Jim Watson to press for a comprehensive, fully-funded housing strategy with bold targets. We emphasized that the plan must ensure

Ontarians can live poverty-free and with dignity in housing that is stable, adequate, equitably accessible and affordable. Watson promised that the long-term affordable housing strategy would be released by June 2010.

THE HNO PROPOSAL

On Monday, November 16, HNO released

. The report reflects government-led consultations held between June and November with housing providers, tenants, agency staff, private landlords, and low-income people in housing need. Ontarians were clear: we need a comprehensive, long-term affordable housing strategy with bold targets to improve the housing situation of low-income Ontarians.

The report summarizes core conclusions of the consultations with 40 recommendations

for the provincial government to enact. You can view the report by visiting: http://www.stableandaffordable.com/content/communities-speak. It is available in both English and French and is downloadable as a pdf.

MAKE A WRITTEN SUBMISSION TO THE PROVINCIAL CONSULTATION

At our meeting with Minister Watson we learned that while many hundreds of people have participated in the consultations, he has not received many formal written submissions. It is imperative that he hear from you – both because the long-term affordable housing strategy must be responsive to community needs, but also to underscore that housing is a priority in every community.

If you haven't done so already, please make a written submission to the Provincial consultation process, highlighting the housing needs and solutions in your community.

Written submissions are being accepted until December 31, 2009. The mailing address is Housing Policy Branch, 14th Floor, 777 Bay St., Toronto ON M5G 2E5.

HNO has created an on-line hub at http://stableandaffordable.com/ that is regularly being updated with the latest news, reports from community meetings, tips for actions and plenty of other resources.

Also on the HNO web site:

• tell us your housing story (http://www.stableandaffordable.com/content/tell-us-your-story-0);

• find plenty of helpful resources (http://www.stableandaffordable.com/content/helpful-resources);

• tell us what's happening in your community (http://www.stableandaffordable.com/content/whats-happening-your-community)

and you will find out what is happening in other places and learn more about the Housing Network of Ontario.   a

FURTHER READINGS OF INTEREST

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The APCOL Speaker Series was inaugu-
rated on September 17 by Wade Rathke, co-
founder of the Association of Community
Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN).
Rathke was ACORN's chief organizer from
its founding in 1970 until 2008. He is the
publisher and editor-in-chief of   ,
a quarterly magazine for scholars and activ-
ists, and the author of two recently published