

Children, Youth and Environments 13(2), 2003

DEMOCRACY MULTIPLIED IN AN URBAN NEIGHBORHOOD: YOUTH FORCE IN THE SOUTH BRONX

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Citation: Checkoway, Barry, Lisa Figueroa, and Katie Richards-Schuster.
"Democracy Multiplied in an Urban Neighborhood: Youth Force in the South
Bronx." *Children, Youth and Environments* 13(2), 2003. Retrieved [date] from
<http://cye.colorado.edu>.

Abstract

This paper describes Youth Force in New York's South Bronx as an example of young people creating community change. It describes their exceptional efforts to take initiative in one of the nation's most economically-disinvested areas, through creation of a Democracy Multiplied Zone and other efforts to "mobilize a youth-led movement for social change" and "enable young people to develop a united voice and coherent vision" for the future. It analyzes their origins, objectives, activities, accomplishments, facilitating and limiting factors, and lessons learned from experience.

Keywords: Young people, community change, South Bronx, urban poverty, participation

Introduction

Why is it that in some of the nation's most economically-disinvested urban areas, there are young people creating community change? What are some of the strategies they employ, and what lessons can be learned from them?

These questions challenge conventional thinking about underserved urban areas, which are often noted for their deficiencies and needs, and for the services upon

which some residents become dependent. Assets and resources also exist in such areas, and they are available to help people help themselves and build healthier communities. Although urban youth are often portrayed as troubled, troubling, or requiring services themselves, they too have resources on which to build (Finn 2001; Finn and Checkoway 1998). If society was to view these areas and their youth as resourceful rather than as troubled, then people might commit to more assets-based approaches to community development or public policy, rather than the present needs-based services that prevail.

This paper describes the case of Youth Force, a community-based organization in New York City's South Bronx, described wherever possible in the words of its participants. Working in one of the nation's poorest areas, young people have both provided services and organized for social and political action. They have formulated a Democracy Multiplied Zone (DMZ) to "mobilize a youth-led movement for social change" and "enable young people to develop a united voice and coherent vision" for the future of the "boogie down" (McGillicuddy 1999). Their efforts are noteworthy, and a great deal can be learned from them.

Comment [jes1]: This paper appears to promote an organization rather than present it critically for comparison. Adding detail and objective analysis would increase the research value.

Youth and Community

Young people join together and create change in communities nationwide. Their initiatives include youth-led, adult-led, or intergenerational efforts by people to solve community problems, organize action groups, plan local programs, develop neighborhood-based services, and participate in the decisions that affect their lives. They operate in diverse income, racial, ethnic, and gender groups; in education, environment, housing, health, human services, and other issues; and in rural, small town, suburban, and urban areas (Checkoway et al. 2003).

These initiatives represent a "new politics" which is stirring, especially in socially disadvantaged and economically disinvested communities of color that are traditionally underrepresented in voting and other mainstream forms of political participation. As the United States population changes and people of African, Asian, and Hispanic descent become the majority, these initiatives will have significance for a diverse democracy, and will benefit from more systematic study.

These efforts express the view of "youth as resources." This view assumes that young people are positive assets and competent citizens with a right to participate and a responsibility to serve their communities. This view contrasts with the news media portrayal of youth as "victims of poverty" and "problems in society;" social science studies of youth as "alienated from community" and "withdrawn from participation;" and professionals' focus on their deficiencies and service needs. When adults view young people as troubled and troubling, and youth accept adult conceptions of themselves, this weakens rather than strengthens the roles of young people in a democratic society (Checkoway 1993; Finn 2001; Finn and Checkoway 1998; Kurth-Schai 1988).

Community-based organizations are strategically situated to promote youth participation, but the present level of participation is uneven. Some community-based organizations devise programs which promote participation with fervor, their

efforts are exceptional, and a great deal can be learned from them. However, other community-based organizations lack information and ideas about programs that promote youth participation. They have ideas but are unsure how to proceed, or they try to develop programs but face obstacles which frustrate their efforts.

Community-based organizations that implement innovative youth initiatives have received relatively little attention as a systematic subject of study. Much of the existing literature focuses on problems and deficits, rather than on resources and assets, of young people at the individual level. Other literature emphasizes youth as disengaged from democracy or passive recipients of services, rather than as competent citizens or community change agents (Howe and Strauss 2000; Kozol 1996; 2000; Putnam 2000). Studies of youth-serving agencies identify a continuum "from youth services to youth development" activities which also focus more on the problems of young people than on their roles as competent citizens (Nixon 1997; Jarvis et al. 1997).

Recent work by McLaughlin (2002) describes young people for whom afterschool programs are havens, sanctuaries, and spaces for youth participation; and Cao Yu (2003), Ginwright (2003), and Sullivan (2003) provide systematic analysis of youth-led organizing as a community force. However, such studies are few in comparison to the literature on problems and deficits. More knowledge of strategies for strengthening youth participation and community change will contribute to its practice.

South Bronx

New York's South Bronx is among America's most economically-disinvested areas. Over several decades, manufacturing firms have closed and jobs have gone elsewhere. The area has the densest concentration of public housing in the nation, only a small fraction of the area's housing is owner-occupied, and this is often substandard. The area has high rates of infant mortality, crime, and violence, although these have declined in recent years (Freudenberg et al. 1999; New York City Department of City Planning 1998).

South Bronx young people are portrayed by news media as criminals, drug takers, school dropouts, or other problems in society (Alicia 1999). When Youth Force members studied how the *New York Times* frames youth, they found that the coverage over-represented youth as perpetrators of crime, and that most Americans believe that juvenile crime is rising at a time when data indicate that it is actually falling (Figueroa et al. 2000).

Comment [jes2]: some data here would add legitimacy

Social scientists reinforce these views of the South Bronx with studies of poverty, racism, and other forces that cause worsening social conditions which result in youth pathologies that require intervention. In his books about the South Bronx, Jonathan Kozol (1996; 2000) describes children from broken families, terrible schools, and poor living conditions. Some of his subjects are resilient, but most of them are not, and his writings have a large readership. His images are paralleled by Robert Putnam (2000), who describes young people as withdrawn from participation and disengaged from democracy.

Despite these images, Youth Force seeks to raise consciousness, develop leadership, and mobilize youth for community change in the Mott Haven and Morrisiana neighborhoods of the South Bronx. Mott Haven is the poorest neighborhood in the city and in one of the nation's lowest-income Congressional districts. 85 percent of the residents receive public assistance, and 35 percent of the area's young men are in prison, detention, or probation.

Youth Force members are aware of neighborhood conditions, but view themselves as fighting back:

Despite the fact that our area was rated the neighborhood with the dirtiest streets, we also have more community gardens than any other community. Despite the fact that the community has the nation's largest concentration of dilapidated or abandoned property, it is also the area with the most grassroots efforts aimed at successful housing development (McGillicuddy 1999, 2).

Youth Force members view their efforts as part of the history of community-building in the South Bronx (Hall 1999; Jonnes 1986; Rooney 1995; Simmon 1997). From Banana Kelly's homesteaders to street organizations such as the Young Lords, Latin Kings, and Zulu Nation to political hip hop and graffiti activism, the South Bronx has been a haven for community organizing and efforts to create change. They boast of the South Bronx as a unique cultural community: "This community and its streets, parks, and playgrounds that we call home have a special place in our hearts," they write. "We are not passing through on our way to somewhere else" (McGillicuddy 1999, 2).

Origins and Activities

Youth Force was established in the South Bronx in 1994. In the words of its founders,

Youth Force was created by and for young people to school each other to the fact that we are not powerless, we should be seen and heard, and we have the ability and right to act for change. We are committed to giving ourselves and other youth the skills and opportunities we need to participate in the running of our schools, the neighborhood, and city. 'Cause until youth act, New York City won't change. 'Nuff said (McGillicuddy 1999, 1).

Youth Force has its roots in a community youth advisory council in Manhattan in the 1980s, whose young people operated out of a van while organizing a successful campaign to reclaim a playground from drug traffickers. They later produced publications that reached more than 50,000 teenagers, started a youth leadership program in Spofford Juvenile Justice Facility, and inspired youth-led community organizing activities that won widespread notice.

In 1994 Youth Force moved into a former crack house and turned it into a vibrant civic space that continues today. In an area of substandard housing and industrial

buildings, Youth Force is easily distinguished by its colorful mural of young people in action. Downstairs has space for meetings and socializing, the library has books on community organizing, and the walls are covered with inspirational sayings and murals which celebrate Frederic Douglass and other historic figures. Upstairs are offices for staff members who operate in collective fashion and move constantly from room to room.

The building has a colorful appearance the tenor and mood of which are upbeat and inviting in comparison with other buildings in the area. It provides a neutral ground and safe haven for young people, where they can expect to feel welcome and comfortable. It provides a place for meeting and discussion- not the kind of formal talking-down that they experience in school or church, but informal interactive dialogue or serious planning around issues which matter to them. There are other meeting places in the South Bronx, but none have the same qualities as Youth Force.

Since 1994, Youth Force has combined youth services and youth organizing. As an initial effort, they helped to establish Ujima Productions, a program in the Spofford Juvenile Detention Center intended to unite young residents and advocate better conditions inside the facility. They created a library, expanded religious services, increased contact with lawyers, and established counseling services for depressed and suicidal youth. These programs strengthened social support for residents, as one young person wrote from prison: "My mother has visited me four times in 33 months, and doesn't have a phone. The only consistent visits and calls I have are from Youth Force, a youth program that's been my family since the beginning" (I Witness 1998, 16).

Youth Force enabled Spofford residents to learn community organizing skills while still institutionalized, and some former residents transitioned into leadership roles at Youth Force, where they worked on reforming the juvenile justice system (James 1999). For example, three Ujima founders were released from Spofford, conducted a research project at Youth Force, and prepared *Jail Logic*, a report on the New York Police Department, youth experiences at Spofford, and conditions facing young people in the schools, streets, and community (Scott et al. 1996).

Youth Force received public funding and established the South Bronx Community Justice Center to divert youth from juvenile and criminal justice systems (Youth Force 1999). The Center provides legal rights education for youth on probation, photo identification to improve interactions with police, and a Youth Court where young people are tried by their peers. The hearings are run by a youth court presider instead of a judge, a youth community impact assessor instead of a prosecutor, a youth advocate instead of a defense attorney, and four youth jurors. If found guilty, youth offenders may receive community service sentences, legal education courses, or other forms of counseling.

The Center provides young people with community-based services which are alternatives to formal interventions by adult agencies, and which also recruit them to become members of Youth Force. These services comprise a caring community

which draws youth toward the organization. For example, one youth who left Spofford and took a staff position at Youth Force, reflected, "The Center is a way for us to give back to our community. It's my payback, so to speak, for my community supporting me when I was in trouble" (Checkoway and Richards-Schuster 2003).

Also, a young man who slept in a homeless shelter took a position in the Center which provided new purpose. He said,

It's a place where you can dream. There are things that you never thought possible that you can do. Windows of opportunity have opened up to me. And I can use my past experiences to help younger youth not fall like I did (Rutherford 1997, 37).

Further, a young woman shuttled from one group home to another, slept in streets and stairwells, and attempted suicide. When she was offered a job at the Center by Youth Force members who saw potential in her future, she said:

I want to devote my life to helping juveniles make it. I've been knocked down and had a lot of setbacks, Without love and support, I wouldn't have made it. But I want to be there for someone else who doesn't have a person to say, you really can make it (Vittorini 1998, 6).

Thus the Center provides Youth Force with a youth services program, an ongoing vehicle for recruitment, and a relatively stable source of funding with which to staff the organization. Its services are essential, although its members often emphasize youth organizing when they describe the organization.

The integration of "youth services" and "youth organizing" is a promising idea, but one which also causes dilemmas for community-based organizations like Youth Force. Youth services such as the South Bronx Community Justice Center can receive relatively stable funding which also promotes youth organizing and community campaigns which themselves are limited in their funding. When services stimulate organizing in an organization that depends heavily or exclusively upon external sources of funding, sustainability becomes an issue and organizational dilemmas arise.

Democracy Multiplied Zone

Youth Force found a vehicle to strengthen its social and political action agenda in the announcement of Lifting New Voices (LNV). A program of the Center for Community Change with funding from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and Ford Foundation, LNV sought proposals from community-based organizations to increase youth participation in organizational development and community change.

In response to this request for proposals, Youth Force formulated the idea of a Democracy Multiplied Zone (DMZ) that would mobilize young people in the South Bronx to lead a movement for social change, and received funding for at least three years of youth organizing (Checkoway and Richards-Schuster 2001; McGillicuddy 1999). They identified a specific area—bordered by the Harlem River on the south,

Jerome Avenue on the west, Bruckner Boulevard on the east, and Fordham Road on the north– and proposed to increase the involvement of young people in organizational development and community change: “Our goal is....to enable young people to develop and promote a united voice and vision for the present and future of the South Bronx” (McGillicuddy 1999, 1).

The DMZ was rooted in a conscious strategy which Youth Force employs to integrate service and organizing, and which they summarize as follows: First, most young people struggle in silence and start finding their voice by talking to friends or speaking publicly at meetings. Then they see suffering or injustice and try to ease it through community service, legal education, or court support. Then they develop a political analysis– through education and training- and decide that power must be challenged. Then they “rock the system” by increasing the involvement of young people in the issue. Then they build coalitions and alliances with other organizations to build a stronger voice and “make some noise” through rallies or demonstrations. Finally they pressure policy makers to back the demands of campaigns through public hearings, voter registration, and youth action days (Youth Force 2001).

The DMZ was guided by a concept of “youth empowerment” defined as

youth taking an active role in community planning, decision making, program implementation, and education.... It means having the courage and commitment to fight for a youth voice wherever it is absent. It means, most of all, that WE are not powerless, that along with other youth, or in partnership with adults, we can make a difference (Youth Force, n.d.).

The DMZ proposed to integrate youth organizing with youth services in a new combination. For this purpose, Youth Force hired a full-time youth organizer, formed a steering committee, and achieved a level of activism with great potential. The following is a summary of some subsequent activities clustered under the DMZ.

Outreach and Recruitment

Youth Force members reached out and recruited young people to the organization in various ways. Through a program called Street Outreach, for example, Youth Force members approached neighborhood youth and shared information with them in places where they congregated. They went into shelters with information on job training and safety patrols; took information on drug legal education and legal rights to youth in areas of drug activity; and provided youth centers with information on youth employment, recreation, gang prevention, and support groups for ex-offenders.

Outreach teams conducted skits on the streets in order to grab young people’s attention and, once they gathered around, discussed community issues and the need for organized action. For an anti-violence skit on how to avoid physical confrontation, for example, an outreach team started a mock street fight and, as a crowd formed, engaged them in a dialogue. They went to fast food restaurants, shopping centers, and other “hot spots” where youth congregated. They gave out

Comment [jes3]: Confusion is compounded as we learn on the last page that funding for the DMZ no longer exists. Do these projects?

information packets, resource cards, condoms, and schedules for upcoming meetings.

Chapters became special vehicles for involving young people through outreach and organizing. Outreach workers went to high schools and community groups and established youth-led projects to educate and engage young people. They gave talks in high school classes and recruited students to attend meetings of the organization.

Comment [jes4]: Unclear what the definition of a "chapter" is

Youth Force members also recruited young people by building relationships with residents through direct service "Give Backs" to the community. They cleared trash from alleys, painted public housing apartments, and tutored children in reading. However, direct service was part of a strategy of reaching out and building the organization.

Youth Force sought to bring young people together and strengthen their solidarity. They invited individuals to meetings with others who shared similar concerns, and organized rallies and actions that tried to create changes on issues. When individuals came together in these ways, it increased their social interaction and strengthened their social connectedness. They provided young people with a membership card that identified them with a cause that was larger than themselves, and tried to teach them that they could do more together than any individual acting alone.

Education and Training

Youth Force prepared people for social and political action through education and training. For example, they conducted in-house trainings for youth leaders and staff members on "knowledge is power," "youth organizing 101," and "training of trainers," including practical tools on meeting facilitation and group process. A session on "popular education and revolutionary theory" featured the theories of Paolo Freire and Franz Fanon on "indigenous rights movements" and "education for liberation" (Youth Force 2002).

Through an intensive ten-week training program called Boot Camp, Youth Force developed new community organizers. Sixteen neighborhood youth engaged in experiential education designed to provide practical skills in community organizing. Sessions included information on fighting oppression, planning campaigns, and mass mobilization. As part of the program, participants developed plans for a series of forums to be held in the streets, schools youth centers, and public housing projects (Youth Force 2000).

Another program, Street University, was a large-scale effort to prepare young people for active participation through workshops in political theory, organizational development, and community change. Some workshops provided critical analysis of policy issues such as "police and the courts," "criminalization of youth of color," and "unequal education." Others provided practical skills such as "getting your word out" and "planning a campaign." The program included guest speakers, field trips, and "Wouldja Couldja Grants" for which youth could apply for funds for a

project "that will bring justice and progress to the South Bronx" (Youth Force 2001).

Street University also featured workshops on electoral participation. Sessions included techniques to register voters, educate them on the candidates and their positions on public policies, and get them to the polls on election day. They included sessions on political systems, legislative advocacy, and practical politics for empowering young people. Youth Force members gained a reputation for training, and that their services were sought by grassroots groups, non-profit organizations, and government agencies.

Youth Force organized arts and cultural activities which enabled young people to promote public awareness and critical consciousness. In partnership with *Stress Magazine*, for example, they sponsored Tag Up Here, a project for them to produce graffiti art and public murals portraying prison conditions and other issues from their own lives.

They also produced Park Avenue Reality Check, a video which compared Park Avenue in the South Bronx and in Manhattan, a street which exemplified extreme economic inequalities.

Youth Force challenged the criminalization of youth in the media, by involving youth in a project to study the *New York Times*. In collaboration with We Interrupt this Message, a national advocacy organization, they trained young people in research methods and conducted a content analysis which resulted in *In Between the Lines: How the New York Times Frames Youth*, a report that the newspaper portrayed youth of color as criminals, whereas white youth appeared in suit-and-tie school yearbook photos or in smiling poses aside their parents. When youth researchers met with a *Times* editor, he challenged its methodology and dismissed its findings. Nonetheless, the researchers sent the report to other newspapers and conducted workshops on its findings in community meetings (Figueroa et al. 2000).

"The way young people are treated and the way they're portrayed in the media, the negative stereotypes - it just makes me want to stay in there and be part of the struggle," said one Youth Force member. "Adults need to realize that young people are really intelligent and have important things to say" (Rakoff 2001, 2).

Politrix

In Youth Force, Politrix refers to the active political participation of youth in issue-based campaigns. Young people learn about issues in which they have a stake, attend political meetings and rallies, form coalitions with organizational allies, contact elected officials and political leaders, and try to influence the outcomes of policy decisions. For example, Peoples Justice 2000 enabled them to engage young people in Youth Action Days and press public policy demands on youth issues in the state legislature.

Politrix enables Youth Force members to collaborate with organizational allies. For example, Youth Agenda is a coalition of 120 community organizations to advocate for public policies that promote education, employment, housing and health care

services that benefit young people. They sponsor marches, rallies, letter-writing campaigns, and advocacy days at city hall and the state house.

Youth Force has also involved young people in several issue-based campaigns, such as:

Teens and Tenants

In response to residents' complaints about inadequate housing, young people have served as tenant organizers. They have established tenant associations in public housing, conducted tenant surveys, and prepared renovation plans for unsafe housing. They have helped tenants get needed repairs, held police accountable for compliance with regulations, and brought suits against landlords for lead paint poisoning violations. They have promoted drug-free environments, increased resident control over community spaces, and advocated new tenant laws and public housing policies (Youth Force, n.d.).

No New Beds

In response to conditions in Spofford Juvenile Detention Center, young people have conducted an extensive campaign to monitor the facility, address a wide range of violations, improve living conditions, and finally close the facility. They have fought to reduce the number of youth detention and prison beds in the city and state, expand alternatives to detention and to court programs, and challenge the criminalization of youth in society (Youth Force, n.d.).

In 2001, Youth Force members helped to organize speak outs at a detention center and city hall against a proposed increase in funding for juvenile detention centers. They rallied against a proposed plan to add \$65 million to the city budget to create 2000 new juvenile beds in the system.

Cops Outta Schools

When the New York Board of Education transferred school security to the New York Police Department, young people campaigned against the decision. They conducted surveys in the schools, in youth centers, in community rallies, and in the streets to document youth experiences with police in the schools. One young organizer (Negron 1999, 12) explained:

This is definitely just the beginning. Putting cops in our schools is just another step toward our preparation as inmates to fill the cells. The more our schools look and act like prisons, the better prepared we'll be for a life behind bars.

100 Homes for 100 Youth

Youth Force has challenged housing development corporations to set aside apartments for youth who are growing too old for foster care and who are returning from prison.

Organizational Changes

DMZ activities were accompanied by organizational developments during this time. Youth Force had a lead organizer with special skills for youth participation and community organization. She brought together a core group of young people and created a support system around their common cause. She expressed strong values of youth organizing and contributed to an organizational culture which reflected these values. She built positive relationships with funders, served as their primary contact, and authored several successful proposals which furthered the vision. She maintained communications with funding agencies and the board of directors, who traditionally had remained behind the scenes. She was a bridging person who helped cohere the organization and connect it outside the neighborhood (McGillicuddy 1997).

The lead organizer was joined by a management staff of young adults who had grown up in the neighborhood and participated in the organization. Team members met biweekly for planning and implementation of their specific activities. They prepared written guidelines about behavior in meetings, interpersonal interactions, and mutual respect.

Management team members formed committees which expressed the organizational philosophy:

- Vision- ensured that the activities corresponded with the overall mission;
- Voice- ensured that the public image reflected the mission and promoted the views of youth;
- Spirit- ensured that individual rights were respected; and
- Strength- ensured that the organization had the resources required to do its work.

The team members' focus was largely on internal planning and program implementation, and less on communications with the board of directors or funding agencies.

These structures provided a vehicle for organizational development. They included forms of problem-solving and program planning, goal-setting and decision-making, participation and leadership, and other organizational elements. In contrast to individuals whose isolation keeps them from getting organized or acting collectively, Youth Force developed organizational capacity. This was especially important for people who lack similar structured opportunities elsewhere.

Youth Force increased its number of members through Street Outreach, Chapters, and other activities which provided prospective participants with information about meetings and events. All youth between the ages of 8 and 24 who lived, worked, or attended school in the South Bronx were eligible for membership. Membership meetings were held weekly, many decisions were made in the meetings, and all members below the age of 22 were eligible to vote. Meetings strengthened social interaction and relationship-building among members.

Starting in 2000, management team members met to reorganize their work and prepare changes in by-laws for presentation to the board of directors. The Board of Directors traditionally had adult and youth members, and the proposed changes promised to strengthen youth representation and leadership. A decision-making guide was written and distributed to members to help clarify the decision-making process. The guide caused tensions among youth, sympathetic adults, and adults who felt disrespected by the process.

Staff reorganization and by-laws changes are a normal phase of development, but at Youth Force they raised questions about the future of youth services and youth organizing, about the role of the board of directors who held legal responsibility, and the roles of the young people who viewed themselves as responsible leaders of the organization. The situation was compounded by impending changes in staff leadership, which is also normal in youth organizations but which was especially difficult here because of their role in bridging the inherent tensions between services and organizing, and between adult responsibility and youth empowerment.

In 2001, the lead organizer left her position. Initially, her place was taken by the co-lead organizer who had entered the organization through one of its programs. This individual had extensive knowledge of juvenile justice issues and practical skills in community organizing, but lacked the same relationships with funding agencies and the board members of his predecessor. He himself resigned and soon the board of directors selected a new executive director who had experience in nonprofit management and social services. She came from outside the organization, found it difficult to adapt to its special culture, and also resigned her position, after which the board of directors appointed one of its members to the position.

At this writing, the South Bronx Community Justice Center continues to provide needed youth services and a source of funding with which to staff the organization. The Democracy Multiplied Zone continues as a vehicle to involve young people in organizing for social and political action around issues that affect them. Management team members continue to combine services and organizing, and the future of the organization is uncertain.

Opportunities and Obstacles

Youth Force demonstrates that young people can join together and take initiative at the community level. In contrast to mass media, social science, and professional practice views of youth as “problems in society” or “withdrawn from participation,” these youth were active participants and community builders.

Various factors facilitated these initiatives. First, young people arose as active participants and local leaders. These youth— including youth who had personal experience with poverty, racism, and juvenile and criminal justice systems— were advanced in their awareness of community problems and their ability to articulate alternative solutions. They were strong in their belief that young people have a right to participate in the institutions that affect their lives, and that Youth Force is a vehicle to create community change.

Comment [jes5]: This is definitely the strongest section of the paper.

Adults worked closely with young people and served as their allies. These adults included a lead organizer who had career commitment to youth empowerment, who mobilized outside resources for youth services and youth organizing, and who was a “bridging person” between local youth and adult authorities. A youth organizer was employed by Lifting New Voices with specific responsibility for involving young people in social and political action. A management team of young adults included individuals who had grown up in the neighborhood and who facilitated youth participation in the daily programs and activities of the organization.

Together these youth and adults developed institutional structures and built organizational capacity for both youth services and youth organizing. They devised recruitment methods to increase involvement, by both going to the schools and making presentations in classrooms, and also by going into the streets and approaching young people in shelters, shopping centers, and street corners where they conducted skits to grab their attention and get them into the organization. They also employed education and training to prepare young people for participation, including intensive summer programs, street university, and other forms of political education and organizer training.

Youth and adults also identified issues and conducted community campaigns, including housing, juvenile justice, police brutality, and portrayal of youth in the media. They formulated alternatives to inadequate housing, police presence in schools, and increases in prison beds and juvenile detention facilities. They attended political meetings, mobilized marches and demonstrations, and joined with others in coalitions to pressure elected officials at city hall and state legislature.

External funding facilitated their efforts, secured as a collaboration of the lead organizer and organizational allies in public agencies and private foundations. Youth services received stable funding from public agencies, and youth organizing got a boost from Lifting New Voices. Human resources were essential to the work, but the significance of external funding cannot be overlooked.

However, there also were factors which limited these initiatives. Some young people arose as active participants and local leaders, for example, but other youth were unable or unwilling to participate in organizational activities, either because they faced problems in their personal lives which left little time, lacked confidence in their ability to create change, or tried to participate but felt frustrated by poverty, racism, or other forces that seemed beyond their control.

Some adults were allies of young people and provided them with a sense of “organization as family” that was unavailable elsewhere, but every young person did not realize its benefits, and those that did realized some of its limitations. For example, management team members contributed mightily to the organization, but were unable to control the resources needed to sustain the effort over the long haul. The lead organizer was highly effective in empowering others, bridging relationships with adult authorities, and bringing resources into the organization.

But her impending transition was especially difficult for those who had come to depend upon her, and her actual departure destabilized internal relationships and weakened ties with external allies and funders for whom she was their primary contact.

Youth Force was affected by phenomena which often affect organizations and which are especially problematic for those that promote youth participation. Milofsky (1987) observes that when the charter members of an organization no longer participate, an organizational crisis tends to result that causes a change in central characters, a shift in administrative form, or the death of the movement. Organizations that promote youth participation are particularly susceptible to crisis, because the transition in which youth “age out” of the organization can cause constant questions about authority in the absence of continuous transference and training of leadership to the contrary.

External funding for youth services remained relatively stable, but Lifting New Voices’ funding for youth organizing was limited in time and eventually ended and, when it did, dilemmas arose. The South Bronx Community Justice Center was a stable service whose funding was sustained, but funding for the Democracy Multiplied Zone – whose youth organizing activities earned widespread recognition – was not. Loss of these resources raised questions of identity inside and outside the organization, the future of which is uncertain.

McLaughlin (2002, 200) describes after school programs whose activities are affected by unpredictable levels of funding support, and concludes: “The secure and nurturing organizations that embrace some inner-city youth are fragile, vulnerable, and dependent organizations.” Something similar can be concluded about Youth Force, whose youth organizing was dependent upon limited funding whose loss caused them to rely upon a youth services program whose funding was more secure. The effect on the organization was profound.

Youth Force is “fighting back” in the poorest neighborhood in the city, one of the lowest-income areas in the nation, and an area from which private institutions and public agencies have disinvested for years. Youth and adults have a lengthy list of activities and accomplishments, to be sure, but these are limited by the larger context in which they operate.

Conclusion

Youth Force is an example of young people creating community change. Despite difficult conditions, the organization has established the South Bronx Community Justice Center whose supportive services offer alternatives to established juvenile and criminal justice institutions. They have also formulated the Democracy Multiplied Zone as a strategy for youth-led social change, by recruiting, training, and engaging young people in organizing around housing, juvenile justice, police in schools, and other issues.

Youth Force has activities and accomplishments from which a great deal can be learned. There are various factors that facilitate their efforts, including youth

leadership, adult allies, issue-based campaigns, and external funding for youth services and youth organizing. There also are obstacles to their efforts, including their position in one of the nation's most economically-disadvantaged areas. If some of their aspirations are unfulfilled because of the conditions they face, they are no less significant. Indeed, these obstacles only amplify their accomplishments.

Acknowledgements

This paper draws upon information from Lifting New Voices (LNV), a project of the Center for Community Change with funding from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation and Ford Foundation (Checkoway and Richards-Schuster 2001; 2003). The authors are national and community-based evaluators of this project, and much of the reported information draws upon a series of quarterly reports which were prepared by the community-based evaluator in collaboration with a youth-adult evaluation team formed by Youth Force.

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