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Grassroots Participation from Neighborhood to Nation

Janice E. Perlman

The past decade has witnessed an unprecedented increase in the number, scope, and type of grassroots groups in this country. Building on a neighborhood base reaching all the way to multistate coalitions, and dealing with national issues, these groups are striving to make existing institutions more accountable and to gain increased control over the decisions that affect their lives.

Throughout the country, people are forming and joining grassroots groups, not simply as *ad hoc* defenses against external threats, but as an ongoing effort toward formulating and promoting their own positive agendas and programs. These actions represent bottom-up efforts of people taking collective actions on their own behalf, and they involve the use of a sophisticated blend of confrontation and cooperation in order to achieve their ends. Having arisen precisely because of the failures of both representative democracy and governmentally mandated citizen participation to reflect the needs of low- and moderate-income people, these grassroots groups are an emerging social force with the dynamism and potential to provide a most effective and meaningful form of citizen participation.

The Grassroots Movement in the 1970s

The contemporary grassroots movement is new, growing, diverse, and effective. Although its lineage can be traced back to the social movements of the 1960s, the early Alinsky organizations of the 1950s, and the union struggles of the 1930s and 1940s, in its present form it is not yet a decade old. Most of the groups we shall be describing started in the early 1970s, and many are five years old or less. They are growing in numbers and expanding in size so rapidly that any estimates of their size and numbers are outdated as quickly as they are calculated.

Equally dramatic has been their expansion in scope and their ability to organize simultaneously on multiple levels—from tenants' unions, to block clubs, to neighborhood associations, to city-wide and state-wide coalitions, to multistate and regional alliances, to a national movement. They follow the range of the issues that affect them and move adeptly back and forth from problems on the block to those of federal policy.

To achieve this flexibility, the grassroots groups effectively employ an array of elements, which are combined to meet their specific needs. They draw on traditional neighborhood association models, using local "turf" loyalties; on the direct-action tactics of social protest; on the boycott models of the farmworkers; on the expose methods of the public-interest lobbies; on service-delivery and economic-development skills; on local self-reliance and appropriate technologies; and on the new needs for program design, implementation, and monitoring that have emerged with the decentralization of federal and local government initiatives. In order to do this, they tread an extremely delicate line between conflict and consensus, between protest and partnership, and between principle and pragmatism. Whereas the issue of the 1960s was social justice and the rhetoric was revolutionary, the issue of the 1970s is economic justice and the rhetoric is reformist. The issues are more rooted in the specific facts of people's daily lives. The support base for such groups includes low- and moderate-income people across racial lines who join on issues of common interest and who are more interested in "making life" than "making history."

Citizen Action versus Citizen Involvement

In chapter 2, Stuart Langton distinguished between citizen action, which is citizen-initiated and includes bottom-up grassroots groups, and citizen involvement, which is government-initiated and mandated from the top down. Both are supposedly mechanisms to gain power through participation. It is important to point out, however, the unfortunate paradox of our system: that only those at the lower end of the social hierarchy *need* to participate in order to generate power. Large corporate and banking interests, for example, have ample power without any "participation." They are generally able to promote their self-interest successfully through the use of corporate resources and without the sacrifice of much personal time or energy to hearings, meetings, or demonstrations. Individual citizens, on the other hand, are often asked to participate at considerable personal sacrifice in public hearings or on local boards, only to find themselves as powerless as before. The citizen-action approach, then, is based on a substitution of numbers for monetary resources and of commitment and courage for position and authority.

If previous studies and the history described in other essays of this book have anything to tell us, it is that only an active, well-organized group with its own positive agenda and the ability to mobilize people and resources independently can successfully change the way decisions are made or benefits are allocated in our society.

As Sherry Arnstein concluded in her well-known article on citizen par-

ticipation, "In most cases where power has come to be shared it was *taken* by the citizens, not *given*." She went on to say:

Partnership can work most effectively when there is an organized power-base in the community to which the citizen leaders are accountable; when the citizen group has the financial resources to pay its leaders reasonable honoraria for their time-consuming efforts, and when the group has the resources to hire (and fire) its own technicians, lawyers and community organizers.¹

Since all of these elements are lacking in governmentally mandated citizen involvement, it is not surprising that even as objective a work as the *Encyclopedia of Social Work* concludes that "in general, citizen participation has not been an effective means of achieving social reform."² It cites as evidence Roland Warren's study of 54 agencies involving citizen participation in 6 cities. Although citizens achieved 606 cases of "innovation," they had little impact on agency programs because 559 of these involved superficial modifications of organizational structure or procedures.³

Thus, it becomes even more imperative to examine and understand the evolution of the new grassroots movement and explore its potential as a meaningful form of citizen action toward the redistribution of power and wealth in this society.

How Many Grassroots Groups Are There?

Although the total number of grassroots groups or the memberships they reach are virtually impossible to estimate, a few figures may be useful in providing a sense of magnitude.

First, there are some gross estimates of the number of voluntary associations and volunteers in America today. The Alliance for Volunteerism estimates six million voluntary associations (1975), and a study by ACTION indicates thirty-seven million volunteers, or one-fourth of all Americans over the age of 13 (1974).

Attempting to identify those voluntary associations that are neighborhood-based, the National Commission on Neighborhoods recently compiled a list of about 8,000 groups, and HUD's new Office on Neighborhoods, Voluntary Associations, and Consumer Affairs has begun a clearinghouse with 4,000 groups thus far.

The range in the scope of grassroots groups complicates such estimates considerably. It hardly makes sense to count a block club of a few dozen members as a group on a par with a multistate coalition of tens of thousands of members. In a field study of grassroots groups conducted in 1976, the author identified at least three multistate organizations, a dozen city-wide alliances, and thousands of neighborhood associations.⁴ Given

that there are some 10,000 block clubs in New York City alone, the national estimates would be astronomical. In addition, these groups are expanding at an overwhelming rate. For example:

1. ACORN (Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now) was operating in five states two years ago, at the time of the author's study, and is now in thirteen states with plans to be in two more by December 1978.
2. In 1976, National People's Action had chapters in 104 cities in 30 states and a mailing list of 1,000, and now operates in 116 cities in almost every state of the Union, with 38,000 people on its contact list.
3. Massachusetts Fair Share in 1976 had eight affiliate groups around Boston, with 600 members, and now has 25 groups across the state, with over 13,000 members.

Finally, rather than being limited to certain types of people or neighborhoods, the potential for these groups appears almost unbounded. A recently released Gallup survey sponsored by the Charles F. Kettering and Stuart Mott Foundations (March 1978) shows that a vast majority of urban residents—including a majority of those who wanted to leave their neighborhoods—say they would be willing to volunteer their time and efforts to help solve problems at the neighborhood level. Eighty-nine percent of city dwellers said they would be willing to participate in such activities as signing petitions, attending meetings, writing letters, picketing, and making financial contributions. In fact, 52 percent claimed to have done so already. The study did not specify whether the person was a member of a community organization, but did show that over the past five years, 21 percent had attended at least one meeting concerning a threat to their neighborhood, and 53 percent said they would be willing to do so; and 9 percent had served on a neighborhood committee, with 36 percent saying they would be willing to do so.⁵ Even if only half of these people belong to grassroots groups of some kind, the numbers would be astonishing.

The Evolving Sophistication of the Grassroots Groups

As grassroots groups mature, many tend to evolve from single-issue to multi-issue involvement and from "protest to program." Table 6-1 describes the characteristics of the two major types of grassroots groups as observed in 1976: (1) issue-oriented/direct-action groups, and (2) self-help/alternative institutions. What has happened since then is that many of the more successful groups have combined the two approaches.⁶ As Leon Finney of the Woodlawn Organization (TWO) in Chicago describes it, groups

Table 6-1
Comparison of Direction-Action Groups and Alternative Institutions

	<i>Issue-Oriented/Direct-Action</i>	<i>Self-Help/Alternative Institution</i>
<i>Age</i>	Most began after 1972; many after 1975 Life span generally five years	Most began in late 1960s or early 1970s Many now in second stage of life cycle of "protest to program"
<i>Origins</i>	Alinsky tradition Welfare rights and student movement	Civil rights and labor movement origins for community development corporations that began in protest style War on poverty, model cities, and minority capitalism origins for service delivery and economic development component Tenants and coop movement has indigenous origins
<i>Constituency</i>		
Class	"Mass base" of low- and moderate-income people	Predominantly low-income base, with middle-income leadership
Race	Working-class whites and racial minorities united on same side of issues	Mostly black and latino, with some new white ethnic groups
<i>Leadership</i>	Leaders are better educated, younger, more often male, and from higher class background than base Distinction between paid organizer (and staff) and local leaders (and board) on question of accountability Secondary leadership often weak	Leaders are better educated, younger, more often male, and from higher class background than base Problem of charismatic founder not being best institutional administrator has led to organizational splits Secondary leadership often weak
<i>Size</i>		
Membership	Range from tenants union of six members to block clubs of dozens to neighborhood organization of hundreds to state-wide coalition of thousands to multi-state organizations with tens of thousands	Range from no membership at all to 115 affiliate organizations to 14 counties (with 12,000 members) to 120 coops (with 3,000 families)
Staff	Staff size ranges from 1 to 50	Staff size ranges from 10 to 500
<i>Funding</i>	Church contributions Membership dues by individuals or associated groups Local fund-raising (bake sales, fairs, picnics, dances, etc.)	Private foundations, primarily the Ford Foundation Government, primarily through CSA, but increasingly through HUD, Labor, (CETA), Commerce (EDA, OMBE), and Justice (LEAA)

Table 6-1 (cont.)

	<i>Issue-Oriented/Direct-Action</i>	<i>Self-Help/Alternative Institution</i>
<i>Funding (cont.)</i>	Foundations (Stern Fund, John Hay Whitney, Rockefeller Brothers, Laras, New World Foundation, D.J.B. Norman, etc.) Door-to-door canvassing	
<i>Issues</i>	Redlining, tenants' rights, neighborhood preservation, utility-rate structure, property-tax assessments, transportation, budget monitoring, generic drugs, zoning and land use, crime and safety, senior citizens, environmental quality, plant siting and location, commercial revitalization, etc.	Appropriate technology, provision of services, manpower training, economic development, land acquisition and development; provision of credit, construction, large-scale planning, technical assistance, commercial revitalization, etc.
<i>Achievements</i>	Growing astronomically; increased memberships, new chapters and new groups Specific victories mounting up toward increased equity and accountability Issues clarified, power structure understood, sense of collective competence felt, leadership skills developed	Leadership development More and better local service delivery Economic development and job creation, though small, can help improve neighborhood image
<i>Problems</i>	People become "burned out" Local victories can't sustain interest Increasing scope takes best leadership to top levels	Loss of membership base and participatory structure; lack of accountability or community control New forms of dependency Incompatibility of private profit and public welfare
<i>Ideology</i>	Reformist: want to make system work better for the little guy Generally progressive, pluralist, and populist Tend to anticorporate, anti-bureaucratic sentiments Membership more conservative than leadership	Reformist: want to make system work better for the little guy Local self-reliance, decentralization, small-is-beautiful mentality Sometimes adopt entrepreneurial mentality Membership more conservative than leadership
<i>Media Profile</i>	Cultivate good relations with the working press; use the media	Generally seek low profile

go through a cycle of four stages: (1) credibility; (2) representation; (3) negotiation; and (4) institutionalization. They gain initial credibility through winning a victory on an issue of immediate concern to their constituency; and with the potential clout of their members, they negotiate or bargain for further gains on other issues. Then, often to meet the needs of their constituents even further, they begin to deliver direct services and job opportunities, frequently through local economic development or self-help technologies. This institutionalization can only remain viable if the cycle is repeated from the start, with increased credibility, a wider base of representation, and so on.

The grassroots groups of today are increasingly sophisticated in this evolutionary process—and in all the possible combinations and permutations thereof. What makes them uniquely effective in comparison with their predecessors is not only this maturation process but a number of key components that have gone along with that. These are shown in table 6-2.

The single most important factor accounting for the differential effectiveness of grassroots groups is the presence of a full-time, paid, professional staff. There is no way that groups relying entirely on voluntary labor can compete successfully in the complex arena of power politics. And it is this need that raises the issue of fund-raising to critical importance. A recent book describes the various techniques used by grassroots groups, from dues and discounts to potlucks; from direct mail to canvassing; and from concerts to corporate donations.⁷

The second most important factor is the ability to relate local issues to national ones and to maintain active organizations at the community level

Table 6-2

Characteristics of Successful Grassroots Groups

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1. Full-time, paid, professional staff
 2. Well-developed fund-raising capacity
 3. Sophisticated mode of operation, including:
 - a. Neighborhood street organizing
 - b. Advanced issue-research capacity
 - c. Information dissemination and exposé techniques
 - d. Negotiation and confrontation skills
 - e. Management capability in the service delivery and economic development areas
 - f. Policy and planning skills
 - g. Lobbying skills
 - h. Experience in monitoring and evaluating government programs
 4. Issue growth from the neighborhood to the nation
 5. A support network of umbrella groups, technical assistants, action-research projects, organizer-training schools
 6. Expanding coalition building with one another, with public-interest groups, and with labor
-

while building toward a national political force. A recent publication of the National Training and Information Center in Chicago stated:

As the debate has grown, so have the issues. From being denied a \$3,000 home improvement loan to the net losses of banks on Real Estate Investment Trusts (REITs) and speculative foreign loans. From that abandoned building on this block to HUD's inability to regulate mortgage bankers. From the home burglary last night to the allocation of funds for the criminal justice system. From an increase in this month's utility bill to fighting the deregulation of the energy industry. From streets and sidewalks in disrepair to how the overall Community Development Act is implemented. The 1970's have seen community organizing go from block issues to federal policy and back again. From testifying against pro-industry legislation on Capitol Hill on getting stray dogs picked up.⁸

The growth of an array of support networks for grassroots organizations is both an indicator of the new level of sophistication and professionalism and a contributing factor to it. The umbrella organizations, clearinghouses, action-research projects, resources, and organizer-training schools help to develop issues, devise strategies, train organizers and leaders, devise policy, promote fund-raising, recruit staff, and facilitate communications between the groups and their constituencies and among the groups themselves. Many groups have newsletters, which aid in this sharing of experience and provide guidelines in plain English to the new federal programs of interest to community groups, debate issues of community concern, advertise conferences and meetings of interest, and list job openings for organizers. Table 6-3 lists some of the support networks and organizer-training schools, with the names of their newsletters and addresses.

Perhaps the most surprising development in the past two years has been the increase in coalitions among grassroots groups, and between them and public-interest and labor organizations. Given the strong egos of many of the organizers, the territorial imperatives of "turf," and the competing organizing philosophies, it was an open question whether such coalitions would be possible. A mutual and increasing recognition of the need for an ever-broader constituent base, new leadership, and the value of merged skills for common goals has led to such new alliances as the Citizen Labor Energy Coalition. This group met 150 strong in Washington on April 20, 1978, as the first joint national merger of community groups, labor, and a public-interest environmental organization. It was chaired by Bill Winpisinger, president of the International Association of Machinists, and included the United Auto Workers, the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees; the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers; the Machinists; Steel Workers, and Sheet Metal Workers.

In a similar vein, the Ohio Public Interest Campaign, which is fighting for public accountability of corporations, is composed of affiliatory groups from labor unions, senior-citizen clubs, neighborhood groups, churches,

Table 6-3
Support Networks, Newsletters, and Organizer-Training Schools

<i>Support Network</i>	<i>Address</i>	<i>Name of Newsletter</i>
Center for Community Change (CCC)	1000 Wisconsin Ave., N.W. Washington, D.C. 20007	"Monitor"
Center for Community Economic Development (CCED)	639 Massachusetts Ave. Cambridge, Mass. 02139	"The Center for Community Economic Development Newsletter"
Center for Governmental Studies	P.O. Box 34481 Washington, D.C. 20034	"Neighborhood Ideas"
Institute for Local Self-Reliance	1717 18th St., N.W. Washington, D.C. 20009	"Self-Reliance"
Movement for Economic Justice Education and Training Center (MEJETC)	1735 T St., N.W. Washington, D.C. 20009	"Just Economics"
National Association of Neighborhoods (NAN)	1612 20th St., N.W. Washington, D.C. 20009	"The NAN Bulletin"
National Center for Urban Ethnic Affairs (NCUEA)	1521 16th St., N.W. Washington, D.C. 20036	"National Neighborhood News Service"
National Center for Voluntary Action (NCVA)	1214 16th St., N.W. Washington, D.C. 20036	"Volunteering"
Conference, Alternative State and Local Policies	1901 Q St., N.W. Washington, D.C. 20009	"Ways and Means"
National Congress for Community Economic Development (NCCED)	1029 Vermont Ave., N.W. Washington, D.C. 20036	"Interchange"
National Congress of Neighborhood Women	11-29 Catherine St. Brooklyn, N.Y. 11211	"Neighborhood Women"
National Council of La Raza (NCLA)	1725 Eye St., N.W. Washington, D.C. 20006	"AGENDA: A Journal of Hispanic Issues" (bi-monthly)
National Neighbors, Inc.	815 15th St., N.W. Washington, D.C. 20005	"National Neighbors"

Table 6-3 (cont.)
Support Networks, Newsletters, and Organizer-Training Schools

<i>Support Network</i>	<i>Address</i>	<i>Name of Newsletter</i>
National People's Action (NPA)	1123 West Washington Blvd. Chicago, Ill. 60607	"Disclosure"
National Self-Help Clearinghouse	33 West 42nd St., Rm. 1227 New York, N.Y. 10036	"Self-Help Reporter"
National Self-Help Resource Center, Inc.	2000 S St., N.W. Washington, D.C. 20009	"Network Notes"
<i>Organizer-Training Schools</i>		
Center for Urban Encounter (CUE)	3410 University Ave., S.E. Minneapolis, Minn. 55414	
Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF)	12 E. Grand Avenue Chicago, Ill. 60610	
Mid-American Institute	9401 S. Leavitt Street Chicago, Ill. 60620	
Mid-Atlantic Center for Community Concern	388 Sackett St. Brooklyn, N.Y. 11231	
Midwest Academy	600 W. Fullerton Chicago, Ill. 60614	
National Center for Urban Ethnic Affairs (NCUEA)	1521 16th St., N.W. Washington, D.C. 20036	
National Training and Information Center	1123 W. Washington Blvd. Chicago, Ill. 60607	
New England Training Center for Community Organizers (NETCCO)	19 Davis Street Providence, R.I. 02908	
Organize, Inc.	814 Mission San Francisco, Calif. 94103	
Pacific Institute for Community Organization	3914 E. 14th St. Oakland, Calif. 94601	
The Institute	628 Baronne New Orleans, La. 70113	

minority organizations, and environmental associations. And Connecticut Citizen Action Group, which began as a Nader organization, became a membership direct-action group and now has UAW backing on all of its state-wide issues.

There is no doubt that these coalitions provide added clout and staying power for the entire movement. Massachusetts Fair Share, for example, using the expose tactics of the public-interest movement, was able to get tens of millions of dollars of unpaid corporate taxes back into city coffers and \$55 million of overcharges on auto insurance repaid to unfairly charged consumers.

What Have Grassroots Groups Achieved?

The specific achievements of the groups are as varied as their styles, constituents, and locations. They range from legislative victories to neighborhood revitalization, to rural development, to self-help technology. Table 6-4 provides some selected examples.

Table 6-4
Selected Achievements of Grassroots Groups

1. *The New Jersey Federation of Senior Citizens*, since its start in 1975 with a "Rally Against Inflation," has organized 470 groups into a state-wide coalition. Working together, they lobbied successfully for the passage of 11 pieces of state legislation concerning taxes, utility rates, health, and supplemental income, in some cases over the opposition of both industry and labor.
2. In St. Louis, in an all-black neighborhood that many had considered beyond restoration, the *Jeff-Vander-Lou Community Development Corporation* (without any federal money) has rehabilitated 331 housing units, constructed 75 new apartments, and is now working on a 100-unit elderly project and 170 units of infill and scatter sites. It also operates an extensive list of human service programs, has persuaded the construction unions to run an apprenticeship program (which has trained 1,000 people), has attracted a new Brown Shoe Company factory (with 450 jobs) into their area, is redeveloping a deteriorated commercial street into a shopping center, is producing a self-sustaining monthly newspaper called "Proud," and has assembled a blanket insurance plan whereby six insurance companies have combined to provide full home and commercial policies to the neighborhood.
3. *National People's Action* groups, acting at the national level through the Home Mortgage Disclosure Act in December 1975, lobbied successfully for an amendment to the Housing and Community Development Act that reimburses homebuyers for defects in FHA housing, and was instrumental in establishing the Urban Reinvestment Task Force as a separate entity, over HUD's opposition.
4. *MACE (Mississippi Action for Community Education)*, active in 14 rural counties of the Mississippi Delta, has succeeded in maintaining an active organizer-training program and voter-registration arm, as well as delivering an array of direct services and providing jobs through their community economic development activities. They are operating a blue jeans factory, Pine Vines, with its own retail store; a number of low-income housing projects; four supermarkets and an agricultural coop. They have elected numerous black officials to local office; and they publish a newspaper called "The Voice of Shrimph."

Table 6-4 (cont.)

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5. *U-HAB (Urban Homesteading Assistance Board)* in New York City has taken two problems—housing abandonment and unemployment—and parlayed them into a solution. Using “sweat equity,” they rehabilitated vacant or deteriorated housing units. So far, 1,000 units have been rehabilitated, while many useful skills have been taught, small spin-off jobs and businesses have been created, and energy conservation has been promoted.
 6. *The People's Development Corporation*, in the South Bronx, in addition to rehabilitating 28 apartments and several community rooms of an abandoned tenement, created a small park, formed a food cooperative, built a solar greenhouse, and set up a group to train others in the skills they had learned.
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Each accomplishment and each victory may not be earth-shattering, but as the groups begin to build incrementally on their past achievements, the cumulative picture becomes increasingly impressive. Even in cases where the achievements are reversed or overturned, the experience of involvement remains a valuable one. More and more people are beginning to understand the issues, to see how power and politics operate, to grasp both the potentials and limitations of collective action, and to feel a new sense of self-esteem. Leaders are being created, skills are being developed, and passivity is being challenged.

The Government Response

One indicator of the achievements of the grassroots groups is the new degree of recognition and legitimacy they have been awarded by the national government. President Carter's recently announced national urban policy included “neighborhood groups and voluntary associations,” along with all levels of government and the private sector in his “New Partnership to Conserve America's Communities.” It allocated \$100 million for neighborhoods, which included mini-grants directly to neighborhood organizations (with mayoral concurrence), consumer-cooperative credit unions, an urban volunteer program, community-based crime prevention, a neighborhood arts program, and new resources for neighborhood housing and commercial revitalization.

Even before that, the neighborhood movement had officially come of age with the presidentially-appointed National Commission on Neighborhoods. The National Neighborhoods Policy Act, passed by Congress in 1976 to establish the Commission, grew directly out of efforts by grassroots coalitions throughout the United States. One of its clear mandates was to evaluate citizen-initiated neighborhood revitalization efforts and determine how public policy can best support such efforts.

In the bureaucracy, as well, room is being made for neighborhood groups. HUD has just created a new Office on Neighborhoods, Voluntary Action, and Consumer Affairs (headed by Monsignor Geno Baroni, former director of the National Center for Urban and Ethnic Affairs). ACTION has just created a new office of Volunteerism and Citizen Participation. Even at the city level, the growing importance of citizen-initiated grassroots groups is being recognized, and many city governments are decentralizing their functions and responsibilities so as to devolve power to local community groups and neighborhood agencies. For example, in 1974 Portland, Oregon, adopted an ordinance that allowed the city council to recognize neighborhood organizations that met criteria of open membership. The ordinance established an Office of Neighborhood Associations, with one central and five neighborhood offices, the staff of each being hired by the neighborhood associations, with the consent of the local council member. These offices have a responsibility to notify neighborhood associations of pending measures affecting their neighborhood, to conduct needs assessments, and to gain input into the city's budget process. In Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, the planning department created a Community Planning Division in 1971, assigning planners to designated neighborhoods with the power, along with community groups, to recommend how the entire capital budget and community development block-grant money should be allocated throughout the city's neighborhoods. The Pittsburgh city charter also allows for the development of elected community advisory boards. In Baltimore, Maryland, a portion of community development block-grant money is channeled directly to community organizations for the purpose of hiring staff and obtaining office space. Even in New York City, after recent charter revisions, there is a move toward more decentralized administration and local planning.

The question then becomes whether this official recognition will "enable" or "disable" the grassroots groups. Will it be another case of "the helping hand strikes again"? Since very often the powerful thing about these groups is their localism, diversity, and autonomy, will governmental recognition, programmatic responsibility, and federal funding be the proverbial kiss of death? Even if co-optation or social control is *not* the government's intent, empowerment is unlikely to be the result.

However, there certainly are measures that government can take to increase the capacity and effectiveness of grassroots groups; for instance, opening up access to information and to the decision-making processes; facilitating peer training and intergroup contacts and communication; providing financial and technical support directly to the groups and indirectly to those mayors who take major steps toward devolving power and decentralizing control down

to the neighborhood level; and building participation criteria into federal programs. Some examples are shown in table 6-5.

The transfer of any responsibility to the grassroots level must be accompanied by a transfer of power and control. Decentralized administration without authority is merely a more subtle form of centralized power. Further considerable sensitivity is needed to capitalize upon the strengths of grassroots groups so as to permit them to preserve their integrity while integrating them with the functioning of existing institutions.

The Challenge Ahead

No matter how sophisticated and successful the grassroots movement is, or how sensitive government is in exploiting its potential, there are severe limits to what it can achieve. First, many of the most important decisions and events shaping the lives of community people are determined well beyond the sphere of the neighborhood, often at the national level or even at the international level. Second, many of these decisions are made not by government but by private businesses and banks, which lack even limited accountability to the people affected by their decisions. Steps taken by OPEC and the energy industry or by multinational corporations can affect

Table 6-5
Government Measures for Building Grassroots Capacity

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1. Providing access to information and decision making
 - a. Disaggregate census data to the neighborhood level and disseminate them to grassroots groups upon request
 - b. Notify neighborhood groups in advance of major federal, state, or local activities that would directly affect their interests
 - c. Withhold federal funds from localities that are not in compliance with citizen participation guidelines at all stages of planning, implementation, and monitoring
 - d. Empower community groups to function as independent monitors and evaluators of federal programs
 2. Facilitating exchange of experience among grassroots groups
 - a. Hold regional conferences on specific issue areas for groups working at the local level
 - b. Provide support to the umbrella agencies and resource centers that have been serving the needs of grassroots groups and helping to start new ones
 - c. Make available funds for community leaders to visit one another's organizations and to develop and participate in mutual training programs
 3. Supporting grassroots groups and decentralization experiments
 - a. Provide direct grants (without mayoral concurrence) to groups for staff support, hiring technical assistance, expanding their outreach capacity, or developing a project or program that meets local needs (either as a parallel activity or as replacement of government funds)
 - b. Conduct public-relations campaigns through the mass media, stressing the legitimacy and value of grassroots activity, self-help, and volunteerism
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the quality of life of neighborhood people far more profoundly than a fair-share utility bill or a campaign against corporate tax abatement.

As the locus of decisions shifts from neighborhood to nation, from national to international, and from public to private, the challenge to the grassroots movement is ever greater. The groups must make the link between the macro-issues of the day and the micro-events of their own lives; they must begin to organize for the social accountability of nongovernmental institutions; and they must contrive to build their organizational strength simultaneously at the community and the national level. No one but themselves has the will or the capacity to act on their own behalf.

Whether or not it is possible to meet this challenge, and whether the grassroots initiatives will ultimately serve to lubricate the wheels of the system or to create the seeds of significant social transformation, are open questions. But what seems clear is that, in either case, the survival, growth, and independence of the grassroots groups—not individually, but as a movement—are critical to the survival of our democracy.

As President John F. Kennedy once said, "Those who make peaceful revolutions impossible make violent revolutions inevitable."

It is precisely the making of peaceful revolutions that is the business of the grassroots groups in the United States today.

Notes

1. Sherry Arnstein, "A Ladder of Citizen Participation," *Journal of the American Institute of Planners* 35 (July 1969):221.
2. Peggy Wireman, "Citizen Participation," in *The Encyclopedia of Social Work* (Washington: National Association of Social Workers, 1977), pp. 175-180.
3. Roland Warren, *The Structure of Urban Reform*, (Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, D.C. Heath and Company, 1974).
4. Janice E. Perlman, "Grassrooting the System," *Social Policy* 7 (1976).
5. George Gallup, "Strong Neighborhoods Offer Hope for the Nation's Citizen," *The Gallup Poll* (March 5, 1978).
6. For some excellent case studies of this evolution, see Hans Spiegel, *From Protest to Program: Three Grassroots Coalitions in Their Formative Stages* (New York: Hunter College, April 1978).
7. Cf. Joan Flanagan, *The Grassroots Fundraising Book: How to Raise Money in your Community* (Chicago: The Swallow Press, Inc., 1977).
8. *Neighborhoods First: From the '70s into the '80s* (Chicago: National Training and Information Center, 1977), p. 4.

