

## *Problems of Participation*

**There is no simple panacea for the widespread difficulties associated with member participation that afflict voluntary organizations**

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VOLUNTARY ORGANIZATIONS are of relatively secondary importance in both rural and urban society, serve rather specialized interests, tend to become ends in themselves (as do all other organizations), and have a kind of intermittent and *ad hoc* structure. In addition, they find it necessary to establish procedures which still allow them to operate without full member participation. As a result, participation tends to be a leisure-time pursuit, segmental in quantity and quality, sometimes ritualistic, governed to some extent by the intermittency of activity and the somewhat unpatterned opportunities in the organization.

However, some participation is essential if an organization is to be maintained and to act in any useful way, since it can act only when individuals act in its behalf. The amount of membership participation that is essential varies greatly, however, depending upon the purpose of the group.<sup>1</sup> For example, in order to carry out their usual programs some kinds of bargaining, pressure, or fund-raising organizations may need membership primarily for numbers, dues, and other financial contributions. In contrast, educational, religious, and community service organizations ordinarily may emphasize programs requiring membership attendance and involvement in meetings and activities.

Thousands of voluntary associations are being maintained and

<sup>1</sup> Consider Amitai Etzioni, *A Comparative Analysis of Complex Organizations: On Power, Involvement, and Their Correlates* (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, Inc., 1961), pp. 24-5; and David L. Sills, *The Volunteers: Means and Ends in a National Organization* (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1957), p. 20.

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operated in this society. According to their avowed purposes, such organizations are trying to accomplish things which are very important. To succeed, they must have membership participation. Yet, getting the quality and quantity of participation they want turns out to be one of their most difficult and persistent problems. Thus, one reason participation is defined as a problem is its necessity for carrying out the programs of organizations, but since the necessity varies from one kind of group to another, so should definitions of particular kinds of participation as problems.<sup>2</sup>

The purposes of this paper are to examine the problem of membership participation and to consider some of the factors which influence member involvement in activities and programs of organizations.<sup>3</sup> Participation can take a great many forms: affiliation; attendance at the meetings; taking part in the programs and activities of the meetings; performing special assignments or jobs for the group; contributing financially; exercising leadership responsibilities; and working on projects.

#### THE PROBLEM

Rates of participation vary considerably among different kinds of participation and different kinds of groups.<sup>4</sup> Participating by paying dues or making contributions as a requirement for membership may be high. Attendance is likely to have a lower rate, active involvement in the meetings and programs a still lower rate, and so on.

<sup>2</sup> Problems with participation are by no means unique to voluntary organizations; all formal organizations face problems related to the activity and involvement of the members. At least somewhat unique to voluntary organizations are the restrictions on how they can handle such difficulties. For example, the activity can neither be purchased (as through wages) nor coerced (as through legally enforced sanctions).

<sup>3</sup> *Social* participation usually refers to the nature and extent of persons' involvement in informal groups and in other forms of interaction, as well as in the activity of formal organizations. See Ward W. Bauder, "Social Participation in Rural Society," in Alvin L. Bertrand and Associates, *Rural Sociology: An Analysis of Contemporary Rural Life* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1958), pp. 142-44. In applying the concept of participation to the study of organizations, some writers include not only activities in the group, but also understanding, responsibility, commitment, loyalty, identification, or other forms of involvement. For example, see George M. Beal, "Additional Hypotheses in Participation Research," *Rural Sociology*, XXI (September-December, 1956), 250; and John Harp, "A General Theory of Social Participation," *Rural Sociology*, XXX (September, 1959), 282.

<sup>4</sup> Bernard Barber, "Participation and Mass Apathy in Associations," in Alvin W. Gouldner (ed.), *Studies in Leadership: Leadership and Democratic Action* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1950), pp. 481-87; J. H. Kolb and A. F. Wilsden, *Special Interest Groups in Rural Society*, Wisconsin Agricultural Experiment Station Research Bulletin 84 (Madison: University of Wisconsin, December, 1927).

Furthermore, some groups provide few opportunities for various kinds of participation.<sup>5</sup>

Only a minority of members tend to be very active in most voluntary organizations.<sup>6</sup> Etzioni suggests three participation patterns: (1) "loyal" for those who engage in almost every event; (2) "intermittent" for those who participate occasionally just to keep in touch with the organization; and (3) the "big event participant" for those who take part in the big events.<sup>7</sup> From the organization's point of view, the problem is to decrease the number of members in the "big event" and "intermittent" categories by moving them into the "loyal" column.

There are several important reasons why participation is defined as a problem. One has already been suggested: participation is essential to some degree and in some forms, and rates of participation tend to be low. A second reason is that participation frequently comes to be defined as a symbol of organizational success. The organization which can point to a large proportion of its members being engaged in the activities of the group feels successful, whether or not other evidences of success (such as effective implementation of its purposes) are present.<sup>8</sup>

A third reason participation is considered a major problem is related to the value this society places on the democratic ideal, leading to a concern that low membership involvement in the affairs of the group endangers its democratic operation.<sup>9</sup>

A fourth and very important reason is the visibility of participation. Participation is something which can be seen and counted, in at least a few of its grosser aspects. It can be reported to higher headquarters. It is relatively concrete. While most voluntary organizations ordinarily have no way of indicating how effectively they

<sup>5</sup> For instance, it is clear that at any time fewer members in most organizations can hold office than can attend meetings. Fewer organizations provide opportunity for performance of special assignments or active involvement in the meetings than for attendance.

<sup>6</sup> Barber, *op. cit.*; Sills, *op. cit.*, pp. 18-19.

<sup>7</sup> Etzioni, *op. cit.*, p. 294.

<sup>8</sup> This general point is well illustrated by Burton Clark in his discussion of the "enrollment economy" in adult education programs. See Burton R. Clark, "Organizational Adaptation and Precarious Values: A Case Study," *American Sociological Review*, XXI (June, 1956), 332-35.

<sup>9</sup> Certain kinds of participation are important conditions of democracy, although it has been convincingly argued that membership participation is not a sufficient condition for democracy. See Seymour Martin Lipset, "The Political Process in Trade Unions: A Theoretical Statement," in Morroe Berger, Theodore Abel, and Charles H. Page (eds.), *Freedom and Control in Modern Society* (New York: Octagon Books, Inc., 1964), pp. 98-9; Arnold M. Rose, *Union Solidarity: The Internal Cohesion of a Labor Union* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1952), pp. 14-15.

are actually serving their purposes, they can count the number of persons attending or engaged in organizational projects. Frequently, as mentioned above, the organization comes to define this participation as evidence of success.

Finally, organizations have a great tendency to undergo a kind of "inversion process" wherein they change from being instruments toward ends or purposes to being ends in themselves.<sup>10</sup> Where, originally, they were supposed to be means to helping individuals reach certain ends, they now use persons as means to help the organization reach certain ends. This is evidenced in preoccupation with "going by the rule book," and with problems of organizational maintenance. Participation is one of the visible signs of organizational maintenance; hence, its absence is likely to be considered a problem.

In some circumstances participation may not be defined as a problem. Not all organizations are concerned with getting all members involved in running the group. In fact, some organizational leaders would prefer to see a minority taking part because this helps insure the tranquility of vested interests in their leadership positions and in certain programs of the organization. Leaders can and do take steps to discourage participation of some kinds of members in some kinds of group activities.

Further, participation is often viewed as a leisure-time pursuit, with a tendency to be satisfied with whatever levels are attained. Since many or most voluntary organizations are designed so their activities can go ahead with minority attendance—and even less participation of other kinds—programs usually are not seriously threatened by such a state of affairs.

### *As a Symptom*

Membership participation is frequently a symptom of more important problems. Leaders become concerned about the lack of activity by the members. But rather than ask *why* the degree of involvement is so low and then treat the cause, they frequently seek various techniques or campaigns for directly increasing the rate of participation—in other words, for treating only the symptom deriving from the "real" problem.

The visibility of participation, the ease of measuring at least a few simple manifestations of it, and the symbolism which seems to

<sup>10</sup> See the discussion of institutionalization in Philip Selznick, *Leadership in Administration: A Sociological Interpretation* (Evanston, Illinois: Row, Peterson and Company, 1957), pp. 16-22.

attend it, all facilitate the organization's concern with participation. Meanwhile, the real problem may lie elsewhere, but be manifest by the extent to which members take part (or fail to take part) in the organization's activities.

One of the "real" difficulties could be failure to serve effectively the purposes of the organization. Thus, the group no longer produces benefits for members sufficient to compete with alternative courses of action or valuable enough to warrant the costs of participation. The remedy for this deficiency includes defining the purposes of the organization in such a way that both the "ultimate" direction is clear and the immediate activities are likely to lead that way. It involves mobilizing and coordinating resources of the organization in the immediate programs toward the ultimate aims. It also involves doing these things in an acceptable way and in a way to preserve the integrity of the organization over the long run.

A closely related difficulty lies in the failure to coordinate the relationship between the contributions a member makes and the benefit he receives. While much of the participation in voluntary organizations stems from personal feelings of duty, obligation, or responsibility—to friends, leaders of the group, the community, or society at large—the organization remains obligated to benefit someone. This obligation extends to participating members, if only as secondary beneficiaries of the group's programs.

#### FACTORS INFLUENCING PARTICIPATION

Motives, constraints, and other factors which influence membership participation are numerous and their composite relationships with participation are complex, indeed. As with any form of social behavior, no single factor is likely to provide much explanation. For purposes of discussion, however, these factors may be grouped into three categories:

1. *The attributes of the participants.* This category would include some traditional variables such as age, sex, marital status, educational attainment, prestige, wealth, and the like. It would also include personal motivations, attitudes, beliefs, values, health, and so on.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> For discussion of correlates of participation which fall chiefly in this category see Bauder, *op. cit.*, pp. 147-56; Lowry Nelson, Charles E. Ramsey, and Coolie Verner, *Community Structure and Change* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1960), pp. 253-54; John S. Newberry, Jr., "Social Participation," in Edmund deS. Brunner *et al.*, *An Overview of Adult Education Research* (Chicago: Adult Education Association of the U.S.A., 1959), pp. 102-13; and Charles R. Wright and Herbert H. Hyman, "Voluntary Association Memberships of American

2. *The environments, both physical and social.* In the physical environment, such factors as weather and topography play a part. Technological adaptations, such as communications and transportation, are certainly involved. The social environment would include rival organizations, the prestige level of the organization in the community, attitudes of support or hostility toward the organization, the legal system of society, and numerous other factors.<sup>12</sup>
3. *The organization itself: its structure and procedures.*<sup>13</sup> The purposes, methods, types of programs, division of labor, size, benefits, and other features of the organization may exert considerable influence upon the kind and amount of membership participation. Since structure and procedures are most amenable to control by organizational personnel, they will be discussed further.

### *Structure and Purpose*

The design of voluntary organizations is related in many ways to membership participation. One is the relatively secondary impor-

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Adults: Evidence from National Sample Surveys," *American Sociological Review*, XXIII (June, 1958), 284-94.

Sources which also consider factors involved in other categories include Arnold S. Tannenbaum and Robert L. Kahn, *Participation in Union Locals* (Evanston, Illinois: Row, Peterson and Company, 1958), esp. pp. 148-51; and William Spirad, "Correlates of Trade Union Participation: A Summary of the Literature," *American Sociological Review*, XXV (April, 1960), 237-44.

<sup>12</sup> Illustrations of relationships between participation and factors in the physical environment can be seen in Frank D. Alexander and Lowry Nelson, *Rural Social Organization in Goodhue County, Minnesota*, Minnesota Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletin 401 (St. Paul: University of Minnesota, February, 1949), pp. 66-7; and in Frank Alexander and Carl F. Kraenzel, *Rural Social Organization of Sweet Grass County, Montana; with Attention to the Sutland Characteristics*, Montana State College Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletin 490 (Bozeman: Montana State College, November, 1953), pp. 73-5.

Some of the influences of the social environment are illustrated in Arnold M. Rose, "Voluntary Associations under Conditions of Competition and Conflict," *Social Forces*, XXXIV (December, 1955), 159-63.

<sup>13</sup> Examples of some of the studies which have relevance to this approach are: W. Keith Warner, *Membership Participation in Voluntary Organizations*, Wisconsin Agricultural Experiment Station Research Bulletin 263 (Madison: University of Wisconsin, October, 1965); Kolb and Wileden, *op. cit.*; James N. Young and Ward W. Bauder, *Membership Characteristics of Special-Interest Organizations*, Kentucky Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletin 594 (Lexington: University of Kentucky, February, 1953); John E. Tsouderos, "Organizational Change in Terms of a Series of Selected Variables," *American Sociological Review*, XX (April, 1955), 206-10; and Sidney J. Miller, "The Relationship of the Distribution of Leadership Roles and Attendance in Voluntary Associations" (unpublished Master's thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1962).

stance of the purposes served.<sup>14</sup> If the organization is viewed as an instrument for serving certain purposes, then the value of the instrument depends in large measure upon the value of the purposes. Likewise, the ability of the organization to provide incentive for participation depends to a considerable degree upon the benefits.

It is not that the ends of voluntary associations are unimportant, but only relatively so in relation to the alternatives. Furthermore, they are more important in the abstract than in the concrete. There is considerable agreement in principle (in the abstract) that the typical ends of most voluntary organizations are important. For example, "making the community a better place in which to live" or "improving the welfare of our young people" would generally be considered very important. Disagreement comes in matters regarding the immediate importance of particular activities and programs supposedly designed to serve these abstract purposes.<sup>15</sup>

Second, voluntary organizations are structured so their ends or purposes are specialized.<sup>16</sup> One consequence has been multiple-group membership. This, in turn, may result in divided loyalties, competing demands for the person's time, and other things. "Segmental participation" suggests what happens: individuals become a bit involved in a number of groups, with any one group having little control over their participation.<sup>17</sup>

A third trait is the tendency for organizations to become ends in themselves.<sup>18</sup> Organizations which exist over a period of time come to have some existence above and beyond the individuals who make up the organizational "parts." They come to be valued as something important in themselves—in addition to or in place of their value as instruments for serving the purpose for which they are presumably maintained. When this happens, participation can become something of a habit or a ritual, performed as a matter of responsibility toward the organization and laden with overtones of growing tradition.

<sup>14</sup> Barber, *op. cit.*, pp. 486-87. Clark's discussion of "organizational marginality" is another way to picture the same general phenomenon. See Clark, *op. cit.*, pp. 331-32.

<sup>15</sup> See Clark, *op. cit.*, pp. 328-29, for a discussion of "precarious values" which illustrates this point.

<sup>16</sup> Kolb and Wileden (*op. cit.*) used the term "special interest group" to distinguish this newer form of organization from the locality groupings of earlier rural society. The trend in rural society has been away from limitation primarily to kinship and locality groupings and toward greater development of special interest organizations. Also see Roland L. Warren, *The Community in America* (Chicago: Rand McNally and Company, 1963), pp. 59-62.

<sup>17</sup> Philip Selznick, "Institutional Vulnerability in Mass Society," *American Journal of Sociology*, LVI (January, 1951), 325-26. Multiple group membership is discussed by Sills, *op. cit.*, pp. 35-6.

<sup>18</sup> See footnote 10.

Fourth, voluntary organizations are usually designed and operated in such a way that they can get along with less than full or complete member participation.<sup>19</sup> This creates a kind of "participation paradox" wherein the group seeks full participation, but takes steps to get along without it. Then the group finds those steps hindering further attempts to get the membership activity it seeks.

A fifth attribute having an important bearing upon participation is the "intermittent structure" of organizations.<sup>20</sup> This kind of organization typically meets occasionally—for example, once a week or once a month. Regular participation is not a daily process—and even this intermittency is affected by seasonal variations.<sup>21</sup> During some seasons meetings are suspended because of work activity, weather conditions, or tradition.

The *ad hoc* nature of voluntary organizations and their programs constitutes another attribute which has relationship to membership participation. These groups are relatively unorganized, and such organization as they have is relatively informal. They have a minimum core organization and elaborate this structure and procedure with special committees or programs as the need arises.<sup>22</sup> Or, given a more or less established pattern based on tradition or a constitution, they implement or mobilize it by informal means. It is easy to see that at least some of the opportunities for participation are likewise *ad hoc* and change from time to time.

*Informal Structure* Rural society seems to constitute the kind of social environment which reinforces the informality of local voluntary organizations. In rural areas, membership is more likely to constitute a society of acquaintances—the group can use patterns of interaction established outside the organization. This allows the group to remain more informally structured.<sup>23</sup> Initially, in urban areas membership is more likely to constitute a society of strangers. The organization must then establish basic patterns of interaction before getting on with the business of the group.

One practical consequence of the loose, semiformal structure of

<sup>19</sup> Barber, *op. cit.*, p. 487.

<sup>20</sup> Etzioni, *op. cit.*, pp. 288-95.

<sup>21</sup> See W. Lloyd Warner and Associates, *Democracy in Jonesville: A Study in Quality and Inequality* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1949), p. 129.

<sup>22</sup> Consider a discussion of "the continuum of organization." See Robert Blaustedt, *The Social Order: An Introduction to Sociology*, 2nd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1963), pp. 322-23, also pp. 333-40 regarding formal and informal organization. Local-level voluntary organization, on the whole, seems to be located toward the unorganized end of the continuum in many respects. Also, see Philip Selznick, *The Organizational Weapon: A Study of Bolshevik Strategy and Tactics* (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1960), p. 96.

<sup>23</sup> See Jacqueline D. Goodchilds and John Harding, "Formal Organizations and Informal Activities," *The Journal of Social Issues*, XVI (1960), 16-28, esp. 16-18.

voluntary organizations is illustrated by the relationship between the roster of members (size of organization) and the level of participation.<sup>24</sup> Because organizations of this kind define membership loosely they often keep persons on membership rolls who have ceased to be actively involved, moved away, or died. This inflation of membership size deflates the percentage attending or otherwise participating because the percentage is based on membership size.<sup>25</sup> In other ways, too, the loose, relatively unorganized nature of local-level voluntary associations increases the difficulty of systematic analysis of the group and its problems.

### *Procedures*

Organizational procedures influence the kind and amount of membership participation. For example, programs frequently consist of a speech or some similar activity in which the interaction among most of those present is confined to periods before and after the formal part of the meeting. During the meeting, members essentially constitute an audience. For some purposes this does not pose a problem. But it probably does make the task of obtaining such involvement more difficult in situations where it is desired.

As another example, when a member attempts to be creative and exert initiative by making suggestions for improving the organization, a familiar pattern is to give him responsibility for implementing his suggestions. If the person does not wish the additional responsibility, such procedures inhibit creativity and initiative.

Finally, it is ordinarily presumed that the activities of the group will make reasonable and visible progress toward the organizational objectives. If this is not the case, at least the activities will need to

<sup>24</sup>The study of a cooperative by Copp and Rust found that the patron list included persons who were no longer active farmers, had moved from the area, or were deceased. See James H. Copp and Irwin W. Rust, *Exploring Communication Processes in a Farmer Cooperative: A Case Study*, Farmer Cooperative Service General Report 97 (Washington, D.C.: U.S.D.A., August, 1961), p. 5. Also see William S. Folkman, *Membership Relations in Farmers' Purchasing Cooperatives*, Arkansas Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletin 556 (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas, June, 1955), pp. 23-4; and William R. Catton, Jr., "Unstated Goals as a Source of Stress in an Organization," *Pacific Sociological Review*, V (Spring, 1962), 30.

Kolb and Wileden's study indicated that a substantial portion of the participation in organizations was by non-members. See Kolb and Wileden, *op. cit.*, pp. 30-34. Anderson also presents some information regarding attendance by non-members. See Walfred A. Anderson, *Social Participation of Rural Nonfarm Adults*, Cornell Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletin 928 (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University, May, 1958), pp. 25-8.

<sup>25</sup>See W. Keith Warner, "Attendance and Division of Labor in Voluntary Associations," *Rural Sociology*, XXIX (December, 1964), 402 (footnote).

be interesting and valuable in themselves. To the extent the program fails on one or both counts, problems of membership appear imminent.

#### CONCLUSION

Member participation is one of the most widespread difficulties afflicting voluntary organizations. There is no simple panacea for this problem. Instead, if there is to be a high rate of voluntary membership activity, it seems likely that the organization needs to consider (1) serving purposes that rank very high in the value scale of individual members, (2) providing benefits which are sufficiently important to compete with alternative actions available to members, (3) insuring that there is an equitable relationship between each member's contributions of time, effort, and other resources, and the benefits he receives, and (4) making sure that its structure and procedures do not inhibit participation. Voluntary organizations seldom give sufficient attention to these matters. Instead, they become preoccupied with maintaining the organization and its programs, and especially with obtaining more visible participation.

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PERHAPS the most important fact for instructors of adults to remember—in either formal or informal learning situations—is that such students are adults and cannot be treated as children. To treat them as children, Lorge states, “violates the status and recognition they enjoy in their respective worlds. Each adult, in at least some respect, will have the authority of experience over even the instructor. To give this due recognition inevitably enhances learning experiences.”

Younger, less experienced Extension workers may on occasion be placed in teaching situations where the above-quoted paragraph will be extremely applicable. An understanding of the importance of adult autonomy and a recognition of the underlying dynamics which can develop in such situations are essential for insuring the success of the experience from both the teacher and learner viewpoint.

—LINNEA B. HOLLAND.

IF PLANNING is purposefully done and the resulting plan is followed, the time spent on planning can be the most fruitful time spent in conducting a successful Extension program. It can save much more time than that which may have been wasted in “spinning our wheels” in carrying out the program.

—VERNON L. PELLETT.