

the people have the power

Kenneth E. Pigg

At a recent meeting of citizens to consider organizing an advisory committee on industrial development, conversation and debate were lively until one citizen said, "We aren't the ones to decide these matters." The discussion simply ended. That so few words could effectively prohibit further citizen participation in a matter of such great importance requires consideration.

What everyone in the room really heard in this declaration was, "We, as mere citizens, have neither the knowledge nor the authority to make any decisions concerning industrial development." The rights and responsibilities of citizenship have little meaning for many people. They were concerned that their assembly and proposed activities hadn't received official sanction from someone of authority in the community, and they hadn't been offered technical help to do their task. This is the problem of expertise. It has two dimensions—technical competence and political authority. Both dimensions are equally real to citizen groups, and both must be faced before goals can be met. Whenever Extension professionals work with organized groups, we may be confronted with this situation.

Technical Competence

Technical capability is usually the first resource needed by citizen groups in their programs. This is an urgent concern when dealing with concrete problems like a public water system. To plan and design a water system, extensive knowledge of the area's geology and hydrology are necessary, and technical information on suitable material for distribution mains, pumping and storage capacities, metering, water chemistry, and biology are needed. Comprehensive engineering designs must be based on first-hand scientific knowledge. The final design proposal

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must meet professional standards and regulations. Legal expertise is required to set up a legitimate organization for accomplishing the primary goal. In the case of public water supplies, this could be defined as a water district, water association, community development corporation, or public utility, depending on local and state regulations. In the case of agricultural policy or programs, it might be a production or marketing co-op. Each organizational form has certain advantages and disadvantages and technical expertise is necessary to decide which is the most appropriate. Finally, all necessary legal documents must be executed and filed with appropriate authorities. All of these activities require technical abilities beyond the capacity of most local groups, and often the excuse for not taking action is that "we don't understand all that jargon!"

This kind of problem can be overcome. If the necessary money can be provided, design engineers and attorneys can be employed to see that the technical requirements are met.¹ However, it's usually difficult to hire the technical expertise necessary to deal effectively with the systematic regulations and procedures of approving institutions. The number of contacts to be made are numerous, and the approval process is very confusing to inexperienced citizen groups. Most citizens don't know *who* to see in *which* agencies, *what* procedures must be followed, or *how* to successfully approach officials. Such technical competence is commonly known as "grantsmanship." The fact that there are individuals for hire who specialize in this field shows the demand for such expertise.

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The question of technical competence often depends on citizen leadership chosen for the project. Techniques to assure good communication with those who have technical expertise or control of the resources are needed. Good leadership is indispensable, and hard to find. Subject-related experience isn't a necessary prerequisite; most leadership skills are "transferable" from one project to another. Extension personnel must work closely with inexperienced leadership until the skills are developed. A major skill is communication. Knowing who to see and how to communicate is often as important as what's said. Extension professionals can draw not only on the technical assistance of the land-grant institution they're associated with, but can also assist local groups by helping to establish communication

links with technical personnel in local government or regional planning agencies, special interest groups, or advocacy organizations, who may provide assistance to local groups without charge.

Political Authority

Authority for effective decision making is a scarce commodity in democratic systems. On one hand, this problem can be traced to the "unofficial" status of citizen self-help groups in the system of local government (due to the lack of agreement over the role of citizen participation in government at all levels). Secondly, it's a problem related to the value contemporary society places on the "technical expert."² Research has shown that political authority comes more from the social and economic influence of the people involved than from the official positions they held.

Whatever the "causes," the uncertain authority given to citizen groups can deny them access to the political arena, and "jurisdiction" over problems or issues that directly concern them. It's more than a problem of power, although it's understandable that many citizens feel they have little power to effect changes. Faced with this situation, the citizen groups must answer the question: "On what basis do we justify our attempt to provide a better life for ourselves?"

In some instances there may be little or no difficulty over this uncertainty. Citizen groups sometimes operate in a sort of authority "vacuum" where there's no competition from official or other organizations with regard to their specific objective. In this case, a voluntary association may function as a quasi-official government agency. At other times, the extent of citizen participation may create an effective impression of authority. Often, however, the activities of citizen groups will be viewed either as a challenge to the existing political system, or as duplicating the efforts of existing agencies.

The problem of expertise is a serious one for citizen groups. It's serious in view of the internal organizational needs for adequate resources (money and talent), and the required legitimacy of the organization for funding by approving agencies. At the most fundamental level, the lack of expertise doesn't mean that citizen organizations have *no* resources. In the absence of the kinds of expertise discussed above, local groups are still the primary source of mobilizing the necessary enthusiasm, dedication, and commitment that ultimately determines success or failure.

In fact, the process of mobilization can overcome the lack (perceived) of political authority. Mobilization requires developing and organizing strong commitment among individuals. If this

commitment can be combined with a large membership, the necessary political basis for authority may be demonstrated. In other words, it may appear that this large number of people is speaking for the whole, and if deeply committed to their goal(s), they may speak loudly enough to be heard.

There's much evidence to show that citizen self-help groups can be successful. This has been seen in urban renewal, community health, poverty, and many other Extension program areas. I've evaluated how effective such groups are in rural water systems projects.⁴ Generally, we all agree the local groups are capable of planning for themselves if sufficient time, money, and "method" (technical help in organization skills and linkage with appropriate agency programs) are provided so the process is more than superficial.

Implications for Community Development

I suspect that often the blame for local inaction is too conveniently placed on the shoulders of "jargon," "legalese," or "statistics," when the real problem is commitment, organization, and communication. Technical expertise *is* needed and it can usually be found. The professional must learn to be sensitive to the expressions of need for help, and to recognize the real character of the expression. Extension plays a major role here through its educational programs.

The problem of political authority is more serious. To deal with it, we must help citizens understand the nature of the political process and their political responsibilities. Democratic institutions demand direct participation by constituents to survive, even though this responsibility isn't easily accepted. Local groups must learn to recognize the true nature of their particular project or needs, and where it fits in the local political scheme. Extension's public affairs programs, knowledge of local government processes, and help to public agencies in developing and using constructive citizen participation offers unique educational opportunities. In some cases, the citizens may be able to act effectively as a quasi-official or even official entity (such as a special district). In other instances, they may even be more effective and comfortable as an advisory body, recognizing that the final decisions and actions taken are the responsibility of elected officials. Except for periodic voting, most of our nation doesn't exercise its political authority, and so has allowed its political skills (and responsibilities) to deteriorate. One of the ways we can be of help in our professional role is by helping local groups overcome the problem of expertise.

Footnotes

1. The common professional practice of tying fees to the final amount of the funded project often makes working relations difficult, but such arrangements are usually manageable.
2. Edward M. Burke, "Search for Authority in Planning," *Social Service Review*, XLI (September, 1971), 250-60.
3. John Wax, "Power Theory and Institutional Change," *Social Service Review*, XLV (September, 1973), 274-88.
4. Kenneth E. Pigg, *The Role of Local Organizations in Rural Water System Development* (Working paper presented to the State Involvement Conference, Commission on Rural Water, Lexington Kentucky, 1976).