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www.nowwethepeople.org

Community organising

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Community Organising is a strategic approach to social action that addresses immediate community priorities, builds power by mobilising citizens and challenges structural inequalities. Community organisers build networks, sustain community action for the long term and recruit, mentor and support spokespeople and activists. They perceive community problems and initiate programs, coalitions or organisations. Community organisers are unlikely to be in the limelight as spokespeople for concerns and communities. Instead, they are generally behind the scenes, supporting, coordinating, liaising and facilitating. According to Heather Booth, founder of the Midwest Academy, *organisers organise organisers*. That is, organisers have a long-term perspective and build community for others to continue and succeed in their work for change. These features help differentiate community organising from community development, service delivery, self-help and advocacy.

Community organising has a long and inspiring history in the United States, where literally hundreds of community-based organisations working for social and environmental change refer to their work as community organising. There are also activist training organisations such as the Midwest Academy that specifically train community organisers. Community organising is generating increasing interest in Australia as a useful way to re-orient campaigns and organisations and to promote participatory democracy.

The tactics associated with community organising are not unique and call on a comparable skill set as other advocacy approaches. These include establishing and strengthening community groups and organisations, building coalitions and staging direct encounters with decision makers (primary or secondary 'targets').

Community organising begins and ends with the community. It is not undertaken *for* the community but *by* and *with*. An initial challenge for community organisers is to 'cut' social problems into issues where real progress can be made. It is not uncommon to witness social change organisations broadcasting their concerns in general terms like globalisation, privatisation and sustainability. These are unquestionably worthy causes, but it is hard for the average citizen to immediately relate these concerns to their everyday life. While a problem is a broad area of concern, an issue is a solution or partial solution to the problem. Community organisers play an important role by helping community groups 'cut' problems into issues and to define objectives that are strategic, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-specific.

There are currently a range of initiatives to promote community organising skills and understandings in Australia. These include the Community Organising School co-hosted by NSW unions and the University of Technology Sydney Centre for Popular Education, and workshops facilitated by the Change Agency with social change organisations. Community organising is a timely response to two social and political trends. Firstly, community organising directs attention away from professional opposition organisations. Established professional advocacy groups perform a vital social change role by researching and articulating alternatives to unsustainable and unjust practices and by lobbying governments and business. They are vulnerable to cooption, as highlighted in reports published by the Australia Institute, and are being systematically targeted by right wing organisations such as the powerful Institute of Public Affairs. With the Liberal Party's

domination of the Australian Senate, anticipated legislative changes will strip some advocacy groups of their tax-deductibility status. The political activities of non-government organisations will be subject to increasing scrutiny and coercion, as has already occurred in both Britain and the USA.

Secondly, community organising tackles social and environmental justice concerns as mainstream citizen issues rather than as radical or threatening ideas championed by marginal, sectoral, single-issue groups. The political and cultural shift to the right evidenced by the re-election of the Howard Government isolates many advocacy groups on the left that define, articulate and pursue issues without building and maintaining strong community links. Claims asserted through community organising are intrinsically legitimate as they start at the centre of society, with the concerns of citizens.

This workshop presents an opportunity to consider examples of effective community organising and strategies to integrate community organising principles and tactics into existing campaigns.

About the speaker

James Whelan is a lecturer and researcher with Griffith University's Australian School of Environmental Studies where he convenes a postgraduate course in Environmental Advocacy. James' doctoral study identified and evaluated strategies for education and training for environmental advocates. He has published widely in academic and activist literature on environmental policy and politics, governance, advocacy and education. James has combined his academic and advocacy interests as a board member, volunteer and action researcher with several social movement groups. As an environmental advocate, James has over a decade's experience with Greenpeace, the Queensland Conservation Council and The Wilderness Society, campaigning on genetic engineering, air pollution and sustainable transport, toxics, tropical rainforest conservation and wilderness conservation. James is co-founder of the Change Agency <<http://www.thechangeagency.org>>, a non-profit organisation dedicated to supporting effective community action through facilitation, training and research.

References & further reading

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For more information about the conference, how to register, this particular workshop and the Now We The People network, please visit www.nowwethepeople.org.

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