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Learning Changes

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An APCOL survey interview in progress with Princess Water and Zannalyn Robest. Photo Courtesy of Joseph Sawan

COMMUNITY CONNECTION

MALVERN'S ACTION FOR NEIGHBOURHOOD CHANGE

by Sharon Simpson

Located in Scarborough, the neighbourhood of Malvern is home to one of 13 Action for Neighbourhood Change (ANC) initiatives being supported by United Way Toronto. Malvern has a geographical boundary of Highway 401 to the south, Finch Avenue to the north, Markham Road to the west and Morningside Avenue to the east.

Established in 2009, Malvern ANC was instrumental in developing the Malvern Revitalization Committee. The committee's priorities are food access, food security and environmental stewardship. This work in the priority areas has three main goals: developing large and small-scale community gardens, creating spaces where residents gather to share different ideas and support each other, learning and engaging in environmental activities and neighbourhood beautification.

The development of a community garden was a first step in addressing food access and food security. With support from Live Green Toronto and FoodShare, a neglected piece of property is now a thriving vegetable garden. The garden serves as an access point for residents living in high-rise buildings to connect with other ANC activities.

In a neighbourhood where community common space is limited, the garden has become a focal point where residents gather to share new and different ideas. Alex Dow, one of the neighbourhood's ANC Project Coordinators, describes the garden as "a place where residents go to get a sense of what's going on and to support each other".

One practical manifestation this is establishing a healthy lunch program accessible to students at Blessed Mother Teresa Catholic Secondary School. The neighbourhood school has a population too small to support in-school cafeteria service. ANC and resident committee members are hoping to support youth at Mother Teresa to determine their own healthy and affordable lunch options.

Environmental stewardship has been a prominent part of the food security and food access work being done in Malvern. Neighbourhood residents are kept involved or connect to local activities through the use of an electronic mailing list managed by dedicated ANC Community Engagement Worker, Shauna Benn. They continue to work with University of Toronto Scarborough Campus students in the City Studies Department to do research on urban farm models.

Community arts projects are being planned with local youth artists and schools in the community. Art activities along with family-friendly food and environmental workshops have been instrumental as an engagement and learning tool for children and youth.

As winter approaches, the work of the committee shifts gears. The focus will turn to long-term visioning and planning while ensuring the connections made and projects implemented are kept alive.

Sharon Simpson is Special Projects Coordinator for Labour Community Services, and community co-leader of the APCOL project. ☘

NOT ANOTHER SURVEY!

CONDUCTING THE APCOL QUESTIONNAIRE IN KGO

by Joseph E. Sawan

On the heels of two APCOL case studies; the housing case study in Kingston Galloway - Orton Park (KGO) and the food security community leadership development case study with FoodShare the APCOL survey began with the support and direction of a team of animators and organizers who have led antipoverty campaigns in their communities. After a year of survey committee meetings, the survey was finalized and we were ready to conduct our first interviewer training. Rather than rely solely on graduate student researchers, it was clear that our plans to incorporate the energy coming from the case studies could help organize and design a unique approach to survey research.

From our experience with the case studies, it was clear that participants would eagerly take on the research component of antipoverty activity, and that the broader hopes for a truly collaborative university/community research approach could be realized. It was not without contradictions and it took enormous efforts on both sides. But, these efforts are bearing important new fruit in terms of research process and outcomes. In this reflection, I outline the learning that took place, challenges faced in participatory

research and some positive outcomes that are taking place as a result of our method.

FROM CASE STUDY TO SURVEY

For my part, the roles of case study coordinator and survey researcher became heavily intertwined. For both KGO and FoodShare case study participants, there was a great deal of interest and excitement to continue some level of involvement with APCOL beyond the case studies. We returned to the animators and organizers with our plans for a broad based survey in eight GTA neighbourhoods. Most of the participants were eager to join us and engage in survey research, and several of them had previous experience in community research. Crucial to the success was our



Ashleigh Dalton interviews Gail Murray in a role playing exercise at an APCOL survey interviewer orientation. Photo Courtesy of Joseph Sawan

... animators now put on their “researcher hats” and returned to the Market with a new twist to their organizing strategy.

two-day training, led by D’Arcy Martin in a lively and participatory fashion. Participants in both APCOL case studies came together to learn the ins-and-outs of the APCOL questionnaire, as well as shape and confirm our survey approach. The level of engagement among the participants increased throughout the training and by the end everyone reached a new level of commitment to the project and antipoverty activity in their respective communities.

At this stage, participants faced a shift in their roles with APCOL, and it did not come free of challenges. Working through scheduling and workplans, the time commitment facing the researchers is significant and the honorarium for researchers does not cover the level of diligence and skill required of them. For our work to be successful we had to respect existing commitments and develop realistic workplans that would not stress or alienate them in their community involvement. One solution would be to provide continuity with the case studies and overlap with their existing community activities.

THE EAST SCARBOROUGH FESTIVAL MARKET

As a part of the KGO case study, participants engaged in tabling at the Festival Market organized by the East Scarborough Storefront during the months of June and July. They conducted informal interviews to better understand the various housing issues facing residents in the community as a part of the campaign to develop a local affordable

housing strategy. This experience provided the organizers with the knowledge and confidence to administer and understand the potentially powerful role of the APCOL questionnaire in supporting organizing.

The organizers and animators now put on their “researcher hats” and returned to the Market with a new twist to their organizing strategy. With four graduate students and four community researchers on our first day, we managed to complete seven interviews during the four hours there. Most people we approached were receptive to the project and had time to participate. Since the KGO researchers are well-known in the neighbourhood, we had very few issues finding participants.

For the first day, we paired up community researchers and graduate students in order to encourage learning from each other about interview techniques and navigating the questionnaire. This proved extremely helpful as it brought to our attention specific issues with the questionnaire that could be addressed immediately.

In one instance, an interviewer noted that the respondent is quite involved in anti-poverty activities, but in her response to the questionnaire claimed to not be involved. Here we came face-to-face with a term – community activist – that was far more complicated than either we or the research literature had previously imagined. Practically speaking, we realized that the manner in which

interviewers were asking the preliminary questions needed to be further clarified in order to improve the quality of the answers. Also, definitions of phrases such as “anti-poverty campaigns or activities” were necessary to help frame what types of activities are included. Often respondents would feel trapped by such specific terms, and the ability of the interviewer to provide an explanation determined the quality of the data.

The following week, community researchers showed significant development in their command of the questionnaire. Once again,

This was informal activist/researcher learning in action: learning that took place on the ground and was as valuable as the formalized two-day training that occurred in July.

After the first two weeks, researchers began to conduct interviews on their own with neighbours, family and colleagues. Once we completed around 30 interviews, we evaluated the demographic data of interviewees to determine if the breakdown was representative of the neighbourhood. Noting that the majority of respondents were past participants, non participants, women and over 25, we realized that to reach a somewhat representative sample would need to target more male, current participants between 18 and 25. At this point researchers used their networks to reach out to male, current participants and young adults. It proved very effective, and researchers worked together to identify potential participants.

NOT ANOTHER SURVEY!

As one of the GTA's priority neighbourhoods, residents in KGO are no strangers to academic and community-based surveys, and one of the most significant challenges that interviewers faced was ambivalence towards the interview. Community researchers were clear about these issues during the training and provided concrete solutions to improve the administration of the survey.

First, it was necessary to refer to the survey as a questionnaire and interview as a means to better describe the depth and unique characteristics of the overall APCOL project. Like the word ‘activist’, the word ‘survey’ was also pre-loaded with a specific meaning for many.



A group of graduate students and KGO animators set out to administer the APCOL survey. Photo Courtesy of Joseph Sawan

several student researchers joined the team, but this time most of us conducted interviews alone. Following completion of each interview, the researcher would return to the APCOL table and would debrief with myself or another researcher while reviewing the questionnaire. This process allowed the opportunity to reflect on challenges encountered and strategies for improving the interview process. The informal aspect of this learning process is important to highlight.

This was informal activist/researcher learning in action: learning that took place on the ground and was as valuable as the formalized two-day training

Second, rather than approaching the questionnaire as strictly data collection, researchers learned to conduct the interviews in a professional and scientific manner while building new networks with interviewees who showed interest in the local campaign.

Such an unorthodox approach to quantitative research has so far proved to have significant advantages in the quality of data, as well as opportunities for building stronger community-university relations. At the same time, there are inherent challenges as well that we mustn't ignore, but in our first completed neighbourhood, it is clear that the advantages far outweigh potential challenges in the data analysis.

Furthermore, there is strong evidence that the mixed methods approach to research provides us with unique opportunities to understand dynamics in a more holistic manner. By implementing a participatory approach throughout the research, in as many aspects as possible, academics and community partners are able to contribute to each other's efforts in ways that encourage innovative strategies for social change.

NEXT STEPS

As we move forward to complete the survey across the GTA, as field experts the team of community researchers will now have the opportunity to help train and mentor the next team of community researchers.

Equally important, the community researchers will also join graduate students in the data analysis process to help us dig into the immense amount of information collected on the dynamics of anti-poverty activities in KGO. As we begin the process together, we will develop a unique understanding of anti-poverty activity throughout the GTA.

All of us encountered a great deal of learning throughout the first phase of the APCOL questionnaire, and the lessons that we are applying to subsequent neighbourhoods will continue to bring us closer to a truly participatory process. Opportunities to reflect on the process each step of the way have tremendous value to ensure that we are true to the goals of the APCOL project. In order to adhere to the values of participatory research, we must continue to struggle with the challenges and contradictions at every level of research and community activity.

Joseph Sawan is a graduate student in Sociology and Equity Studies in Education at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto. He completed his M.A. in Adult Education at San Francisco State University and has a background in union and community organizing in California. Joseph's current research is on the dynamics within social movements and the learning processes involved. ☘

APCOL is online at www.apcol.ca

ROOMING HOUSES = AFFORDABLE HOMES

by Regini David and Sritharan Kannamuthu

For over 21 years, West Scarborough Community Legal Services (WSCLS) has provided legal advice and representation on laws relating to poverty for low income persons in Scarborough. One of the major areas of our work is helping tenants with housing issues. WSCLS currently is working on a campaign along with other housing advocates and organizations on rooming house issues.



Regini David and Sritharan Kannamuthu at the West Scarborough Community Legal Services office. Photo Courtesy of WSCLS

A rooming house is a dwelling where three or more people share a bathroom or a kitchen as tenants. Rooming houses have always provided affordable housing to many people in the City of Toronto. In Scarborough, East York and North York, present zoning by-laws are such that rooming houses are not permitted.

In Etobicoke and York, they are only allowed in very restricted areas, while in the former City of Toronto they are generally allowed. Often these prohibitions and restrictions are ignored. In a City that is experiencing a crisis in providing affordable housing, shared residential uses will always be in

demand by people who cannot afford to buy or rent self-contained units.

The City has a strict licensing system to protect rooming house tenants and our neighbourhoods from overcrowding, bad maintenance and exploitation. However, because most rooming houses are not a

recognized use in the zoning by-law, they are outside this system of protection.

"I have been living in so-called "illegal" rooming houses for the last 14 years in many parts of the city. As someone with a low income, receiving Ontario Disability Support, I am not able to pay for a full apartment. The only homes I can find are rooming houses with my limited income." Kannamuthu

Restricting rooming houses in some parts of the City will force low income persons further into poverty and push them away from affordable housing because they will not be able to pay full rent to live there. It is almost impossible to get into Toronto Community Housing when people need it the most. There is a waiting list of 70,000. Therefore, a person on welfare receiving \$364 a month for shelter, or a single parent family paid

The current City by-law pushes common working class people into very vulnerable situations and strips them of their basic right to safe and affordable homes.

minimum wage of \$ 10.25 an hour, or a student on OSAP with a limited budget mainly can only afford rooming houses.

UNSAFE CONDITIONS

Many people are living in unsafe conditions. The current City by-law pushes common working class people into very vulnerable situations and strips them of their basic right to safe and affordable homes.

"I share a basement apartment with other tenants. My landlord has not given me any key. My room window does not open. The ceiling is covered in Styrofoam. If rooming houses were legalized and inspected across the City, landlords would be forced to provide safe living conditions. This is essential as rooming houses are the only option to keep me away from the streets or the shelters." Kumari.

The Toronto Housing Charter says: "All residents should be able to live in the neighbourhood of choice without discrimination."

TAKING AWAY MY CHOICE TO LIVE IN MY NEIGHBOURHOOD IS DISCRIMINATION

"I am very upset and disturbed to know that rooming houses are illegal in Scarborough and especially that last fall the Planning Committee proposed that they would permit rooming houses in certain areas but not in residential

areas. This is discrimination and City Councillors are not ready to address this reality. I have always lived in residential areas with many other rooming house tenants. I know there are many rooming houses in my neighbourhood. I do not want to identify the location because I do not want myself or my friends to end up on the streets" Kannamuthu

The City by-laws target people who are the most marginalized, the most vulnerable and most in need. According to the United Way Report, Scarborough saw a 136% increase in the number of "poor families" between 1981- 2001. Further, according to the Shared Accommodation, June 2008 Report, there are over 165,000 low income single adults in Toronto, for whom rooming houses are the most affordable option. Ontario Human Rights Chief Commissioner, Barbara Hall has informed the City of Toronto Planning and Growth Management Committee that the City by-law has the potential to violate the Ontario Human Rights Code.

"I am a person with epilepsy and I am emotionally disturbed due to a war in my country. I was a government officer back home. Due to my health condition and economic status, I am now in this living condition. I see many other immigrants, people with low-income in the same situation as me. We already face so many barriers to surviving in this

city due to our status and health. Not allowing rooming houses in our neighbourhoods adds another barrier by making us occupants of illegal houses. The city is placing another barrier to our most basic right to affordable housing"
Kannamuthu

Making rooming houses illegal in some parts of the City creates barriers within our own communities because these restrictions are based on economic status. Those most affected by these are low income families, new immigrants, students and people with disabilities.

IT'S TIME TO ACT

All tenants deserve equal treatment. We believe that rooming houses should be licensed, inspected, and standardized in all areas of the City to ensure affordable housing for every tenant in this City without discrimination.

Affordable Housing is one of the primary ways to help low income people out of poverty. We know that rooming houses are very important to keep people off the streets and provide affordable homes for many low income individuals. The City by-law should include everyone and address the needs of the entire community.

Delaying or avoiding decisions on this important issue will not make it go away. It will simply leave tenants and their neighbourhoods vulnerable to those who would work outside the laws that aim to keep our city healthy.

This is an important issue for people who are directly affected and the many grassroots community organizations that are working with these marginalized individuals. We

have come together to build awareness and address this important issue in our communities.

Rooming house tenants as a group, are leading the fight and are organizing at the grassroots level for change. We are working with other organizations that are also playing a major role in trying to provide affordable homes, many for years, such as the Advocacy Centre for Tenants Ontario (ACTO), The Rupert Coalition and other community organizations in Scarborough and some other parts of the city.

We will not stop until our affordable homes are legalized and safe. Please join our fight for affordable and safe homes for low income families.

- Visit our blog to sign the petition at <http://roominghouse.wordpress.com>
- Join us by lobbying your councillors.
- Support us by passing this important message on to your friends and family.
- Call one of our members to speak at your event to get the word out for change.
- If you or someone you know wants to file a Human Rights complaint as a rooming house tenant, please contact us.
- For further information, contact Regini David at 416-285-0502 x 226 or visit the WSCL web site at <http://www.westscarboroughlegal.ca>

Regini David is a Community Legal Worker for the West Scarborough Community Legal Services, and Sritharan Kannamuthu is an Advocate and Member of Tenants Support Group of the West Scarborough Community Legal Services. ☘

THE FOOD ACTIVIST PROJECT AT FOODSHARE: AN INSIDE VIEW

by Christine McKenzie

Starting in the fall of 2009 until the spring of 2010, APCOL in partnership with FoodShare, undertook the Food Activist project in an effort to understand and address food security as a part of the broader anti-poverty movement. I was a member of the team as a popular educator and Graduate Assistant from OISE, University of Toronto, along with Rachele Soulliere.

FoodShare is a hub of food activism. It describes itself as taking “a multi-faceted, innovative and long-term approach to hunger and food issues. Its projects are based on the principles of self-help and community building” in order to “address short-term issues of household hunger, while also providing longer-term benefits by building the capacity of individuals and communities.”

The Food Activist group made an important contribution to food activism through connecting community leaders active on food issues across the Greater Toronto Area and developing workshops that would expand the number of community members working on food issues. We used a community-based research approach, which meant that the focus was to struggle collectively as allies in the food security movement to understand what is, and is not, working in anti-poverty organizing.

The participating community leaders were representatives from communities that have limited economic and physical access to food that is healthy, nutritious and sustainably

produced. These activists were chosen from hundreds of applicants who were interested in mutual learning and food security issues. Many of the Food Activists felt that their desire for justice and their passion for food were “born in their blood.” A common thread throughout the group was the feeling that food is the link that brings people together and opens them up to healing and learning about each other and their communities.

The Food Activists’ main project was to create a series of workshops which they could organize, promote and facilitate in their communities. The content of these workshops was informed by the challenges and successes the Food Activists have faced, as well as drawn from existing training materials.

FoodShare already offered many “hard skills” workshops, on topics such as how to start a community garden or how to compost; thus, our materials focused more on ways to develop “soft skills,” such as communication skills and imagination, in order to contribute to the capacity of the Food Activists’ communities and beyond. A few of the workshop topics were: Tools for Participatory Organizing, Community Food Animation: Bringing Food Projects to Life, Community Participation, Community Peace Building and Engagement.

Each Food Activist took the lead in developing one workshop with input and support from the rest of the group and guidance from

FoodShare community animator Sarosh Anwar. The workshops evolved through the group's discussions about how to strengthen the food movement using a nurturing and holistic approach. For example, "Austin's" (pseudonyms are used in this article to ensure confidentiality) Engagement workshop was initially conceived as a workshop about how to involve volunteers. Over time, however, the goal became for people to connect to their better selves and, from this place, discover a desire for involvement in social change.

Austin learned an appreciation of food from his mother and from friends in his Toronto Community Housing building. Currently, he organizes his building's Community Garden. He was inspired to create this workshop because he feels a strong connection between food and community. In his words,:

People can share challenges and successes through the power of ritual and ceremony, which motivates and directs energy. [...] it is a way to create occasion for energy to emerge. [...] I want people to think about volunteerism from a place that inspires them.

This approach connected with community members' visions of what their communities can become.

In a similar way, "Vandana" envisioned and created the Community Peace Building workshop. As she developed her workshop, she realized that activism starts with small actions. "We shed the expectation of needing to deliver everything," she said. For this reason, her workshop focused on just two activities and provided an empty space for participants to give input and connect.

In the pilot of the Community Peace Building workshop, participants brainstormed about what peace looks like. In order to unite as a group, members had to "create a deeper space to connect at a heart level. It was a moment for a kind of slowing down, opening, listening, and breathing: to understand the big picture. This gave people new energy to be involved." Part of this involved activities to slow down and connect to oneself and the group. Vandana calls these "mellow-izers," in contrast to the usual energizers used in a workshop process to pick up the pace. She concluded:

This workshop helps in thinking more deeply and creating connection. And that is what happened in our group. And I believe it happens in any setting, if we allow it to time-wise. Any community needs to consider this. We are all goal oriented. Thinking without an agenda can be more powerful. Underlying issues come to the surface. It can be more powerful than answers.

In reflecting on our collective work, the Food Activists noted the strength of working together and overcoming the fear of doing things differently. Several of the concrete learnings included becoming receptive to



Members of the Food Activist group tour the FoodShare kitchen and learn about its training and student nutrition program. Photo Courtesy of Christine McKenzie.

... food is the link that brings people together and opens them up to healing and learning

diverse approaches and visions when working in a group, the importance of listening and how styles of leadership impact the group. The group members also appreciated learning about new tools and ways to run workshops, such as different approaches to storytelling.

While initially the Food Activists said they experienced a huge learning curve, they gradually felt more confidence in problem solving. Overwhelmingly, they spoke about feeling empathy, connection and a willingness to share with others in the group.

The Food Activists also spoke in detail about how they gained an appreciation for nurturing the connection between people while undertaking food security activism. They reflected on how the group's process enforced the importance of honouring people's feelings in community organizing.

Through the process of coming to know one another, exploring issues related to the

food movement and designing and piloting the workshop series, the Food Activist group worked towards strengthening the food movement. We attempted to reconnect with our conviction to be active in ways that are nurturing and holistic and through renewing our collective strength through the powerful energy of the group. This took courage, and we challenged others to take similar risks as we shared our work.

The work of activists of all kinds needs time for pause and reflection, time for regeneration along the path. As a member of the group, I witnessed a blooming and regeneration as the Food Activist group had the opportunity to come together through FoodShare and the APCOL project.

Christine McKenzie is a popular educator and activist in Toronto. She participated in the FoodShare Food Activist Group as a Graduate Assistant at OISE, University of Toronto, where she is working on her Ph.D. in Adult Education and Community Development. ☘

FILLING HOLES: COMBINING CASE STUDY AND SURVEY METHODS IN ANTI-POVERTY RESEARCH

by D. W. Livingstone

Many researchers tend to think the chances of effectively mixing case study and survey methods are as likely as mixing oil and water. Survey methods rely on counting responses and computing patterns; case studies interpret the meaning of participants' stories rather than counting them. Sample surveys of relatively large numbers of people can generate summary statistics about the general

population of areas ranging from local neighbourhoods to countries. In-depth case studies typically focus on small numbers of people in particular settings and bring forth stories about personal experiences. Most of the research on poverty issues falls on one side or the other: either statistical indicators of poverty or personal testimony about living conditions.

The APCOL project has been designed to try to combine case study and survey methods from the outset in order to provide both statistics and stories helpful for overcoming poverty. Our case studies of different campaigns are beginning to show how activists learn to bring about changes in their neighbourhoods. The questionnaire survey of the populations of these neighbourhoods will provide profiles of the general social conditions in these neighbourhoods that are the immediate context for activists' campaigns.

The challenges of combining qualitative case study and quantitative survey methods in poverty research definitely should not be underestimated (e.g. Kanbur, 2003; Ravallion, 2003; White, 2002). But a basic assumption of the APCOL project is that by using a participatory action research approach we should have the best chance to combine the strengths of both methods. That is, by involving community members as co-researchers in both the case study and survey designs, the project can maximize understanding the situations of both the general populations and anti-poverty activists, as well as to have the generated knowledge used effectively in these communities. Prior experience of the research team indicates that a participatory action research approach can be an effective way to ensure that survey and case study research both contribute to positive change processes (e.g. Martin 1995, Livingstone and Sawchuk 2004).

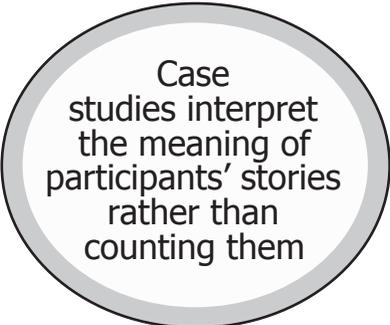
In the initial design stage of the APCOL project, reviews of prior literature and consultation with city-level community partners identified four major priority areas of basic needs (Health, Nutrition, or Food Security; Housing or Safe Shelter; Opportunity for Fair Education; and Access to Jobs and

Living Wages). Then anti-poverty groups giving priority to each of these areas were identified across the city and the APCOL team began to work closely with them to develop both the case study and survey designs.

CASE STUDIES

The case study component involves eight case studies in community-based anti-poverty organizing initiatives, two case studies representing each of the four basic needs for anti-poverty action identified above. The case studies will be conducted in sequence over the five year life of the project. In each case, the specific design will be developed with the local anti-poverty organization. These studies will include in-depth semi-structured interviews and focus group dialogues centred on themes related to the basic need that is the priority of the local neighbourhood campaign.

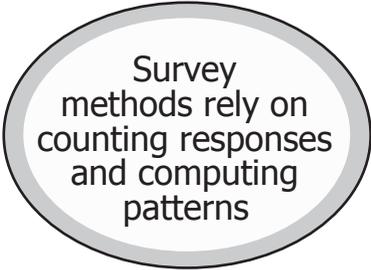
The case studies will be carried out by teams of academics, graduate students and well-trained, equipped and paid community members. Using these qualitative case study data on all of the identified issues, descriptive and analytic accounts of organizing and learning activities will be prepared and shared. The semi-structured interviews will also provide some quantitative measures to link to survey data as well as more specific emergent themes. Each case study is co-led by a local community representative and an academic researcher.



Case studies interpret the meaning of participants' stories rather than counting them

APCOL SURVEY

Sample surveys of poor neighbourhoods remain a rarity in studies of community organizing to date. A notable exception is a survey of the attitudes and conditions of Brazilian youths in a poor urban neighbourhood, conducted by a research team of local academics, NGOs, community representatives, and with youths from the neighbourhoods as interviewers (Verner and Alda 2004). But the APCOL Survey may be the first one in which the survey results will be produced with assistance of neighbourhood researchers and combined with case study findings to aid in further anti-poverty campaigns.



Survey methods rely on counting responses and computing patterns

In the first year of the project, APCOL researchers and community case study partners have cooperatively developed the survey questionnaire. Pilot studies have identified specific generative themes based on discussions in the neighbourhoods.

The main purpose of this questionnaire is to gather information regarding anti-poverty issues as well how and what people learn from participating in anti-poverty campaigns and related activities.

The survey questionnaire addresses actual conditions and attitudes towards the four basic needs, community involvement and anti-poverty organizing; formal and informal learning in anti-poverty community organizing and basic demographic information.

The APCOL Survey will be conducted in 2010-11 and again in 2013-14 in the same general neighbourhoods as the case studies in eight of the poorest neighbourhoods in GTA (United Way 2004). In each neighbourhood, purposive samples will include both current and past participants in anti-poverty campaigns as well as non-participants. The surveys will also be conducted by teams of academics, graduate students and community organization members themselves.

The resulting data on material conditions and attitudes will establish benchmarks and allow estimation of changes in poverty conditions as well as community-based anti-poverty organizing and popular education/informal learning activity over this four year period. The data will be used to produce general and comparative profiles of anti-poverty organizing and related learning in these low-income neighbourhoods of Toronto.

At minimum, the APCOL data will provide unique information about organizing processes and learning practices in anti-poverty movements. If these stories and statistics about community organizing and learning in anti-poverty movements can be combined effectively, and shared widely among these movements, we believe these resources can contribute very positively to actions to reduce basic dimensions of poverty.

References cited in this article are listed in Further Readings on page 19.

D.W. Livingstone is Canada Research Chair in Lifelong Learning and Work and professor emeritus in OISE/UT's Department of Sociology and Equity Studies. His recent books include Education and Jobs: Exploring the Gaps (2009), Lifelong Learning in Paid and Unpaid Work (2010) and Manufacturing Meltdown: Reshaping Steel Work (forthcoming in 2011). ☞

SPOTLIGHT: DISCUSSING ACTIVIST LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT WITH JOHN CLARKE

by Peter Sawchuk

On September 28, 2010. I sat down with Ontario Coalition Against Poverty (OCAP) leader John Clarke to discuss how activists and organizers develop, and the future of organizing and social change. Clarke emphasized the importance of opportunities for activist groups to have debates, dialogue, to learn and work with ideas. Here some kind of new political formation – a formation that develops not simply ideas but programs that go beyond activism – is useful to both discuss and define. The following is a condensed transcript of our discussion.



Photo Courtesy of Peter Sawchuk

PS: The APCOL project looks at the way that activist learning takes place, and how it depends a great deal on the types of situations and organizations that activist are involved with... The direct action experience when people do it or even just see it as a bystander is, amongst everything else, an incredibly educational thing. So in that sense would you say OCAP is very aware of these kinds of educational moments of the direct action event?

JC: Yes. Our whole practice in one very good sense is about trying to create that kind of an example for people, and trying to create that kind of a model... We are never going to change the world if people don't have the

sense that something can be done. We can't tell people that we can build a better society if we can't prevent people from getting evicted or getting their lights cut off or something like that...

PS: And so, is the most fundamental thing of all in organizing, a teaching of a sense of ability to do something, a sense of a kind of agency? And, do people get a chance talking about it at OCAP especially amongst organizers?

JC: I think we do, I mean amongst organizers and sort of long-term activists, I think it is probably more informal, it wouldn't be in a formal setting.

PS: For instance, it's not a formal point on the agenda at a meeting or something?

JC: That's right. It's just sitting around talking but still we are also very conscious of actually making a case. I mean we make it to the people we try to mobilize to the extent that we are given opportunities to address organizations with classes and that kind of thing. We sort of bring it home. It's that sort of message that we have, we have some very big ideas about what society should look like but the starting point is defending people... Teaching them they can do something.

PS: So that's the first lesson?

JC: That's right

PS: What we are going to do doesn't matter until we learn that lesson.

JC: Yes, yes that's right.

PS: Okay, so I think of this idea of learning agency as a kind of fundamental aspect, it's kind of learning a new sense of your relationship to the world around you. A very big and important lesson. Abstract but really also the most concrete thing of all. But are there other kinds of more, I guess you would say, more technical skills that are needed to be taught to activists? Especially after that first lesson is learned? Is there anything there that is discussed at OCAP?

JC: There is to some degree, there are particular people who become active and start to be active in the OCAP office. And so there are very definite technical measures that have to be addressed about the office but also if we are going to advocate for people there has to be a certain level of knowledge of the systems that we are dealing with. There also have to be discussions about what we are trying to achieve.

We do a great deal of case work but for us the idea of case work is that it's important because it assists people. Its political role and organization is sort of a dissention thing so we have a lot of discussions with people about the kind of case work we should do, as much as possible avoiding the 'proper channels' and using collective action as a way of remedying things because we find it genuinely to be more effective. .

We also find it to be something that gets you something. If you go and argue the case before a tribunal and get a favorable result that's good, it helps people. But if you can

get a community of people to stand up and do something and take an actual stand on it and you win with that same victory I think it's actually worth more politically. But at the same time, you don't play games with people. You don't say we could probably win this with a formal appeal, but let's have the type of relatively risky office occupation instead because that's our principle.

I also think that we need to recognize that those 'proper channels' have been designed. The word channel is not a coincidental term. I mean a channel is there to provide a controlled, safe way of winning limited concessions. Or in many cases, minimizing damage and as such it's about making people as powerless as possible.

PS: So do these kind of discussions ~ you call them cases ~ are they a core part of the process that groups and organizers would go through in OCAP?

JC: Yes, it's a core part of what we call building our own active place. I think in every case, at least every case that leads to at least a major possibility of an action, or in some case an in-action, in all those cases it is necessary to have some level of discussion about who we are and what we are doing, otherwise people don't comprehend.

I mean you can't say to people "well we are going to bring 25 people into the welfare office." They naturally would wonder why? What's going on? Why are they doing that? So the case is the necessary opportunity to discuss and explain those things ...

So, first we would have to have the discussion with the person with the grievance and that's probably the main level of political discussion for people. But then we also would put out a call to our own networks

for people to come out and participate, we expect people to come out and participate, and that would be an opportunity in a way to talk about all sorts of expansive ideas and

When people are gathered, let's say 25 people, you know there is going to be discussions amongst them. What are we doing this for? Which directions could we go with this and what could be achieved through it?... I don't want to overstate what we do, but probably everyone in OCAP would agree with me that we tend to get so caught-up in the day to day stuff that actually developing our ideas and educating even our members, let alone broader groupings of people that we have contact with, it doesn't get nearly enough attention...

PS: So in terms of how the left can build on this model or where things might be heading in the future in terms of organizing effectively, what do you think?

JC: I think of something much more community based. In the 30s the unemployed organized on the basis of block community, and I could actually see something along those lines...

We are actually starting to see the beginnings of that in the work that OCAP is doing with the Somali community. We started to find that we were building a real base in the Somali community, in Etobicoke largely, and it's a fascinating community because it is one where the normal multicultural controls are quite weak... So what we have now is actually an OCAP organizer in the Somali community who is doing fantastic work. So we have got the sort of workings that I'm talking about for the first time not taking place at the downtown OCAP office, but taking place in and around people's kitchen tables and in a neighbourhood which really means something.

November 2010 marks the 20th Anniversary of OCAP. For more information go to <http://www.ocap.ca/>

The full transcript and audio version of this discussion, as well as other SPOTLIGHTS can be found on the APCOL web site at <http://www.apcol.ca>

Peter Sawchuk is a co-leader of the APCOL project and Professor of Sociology & Equity Studies, University of Toronto. ☘

POLITICS MATTER:

“ZERO DOLLAR LINDA” AND THE TRAPS IN SOCIAL ASSISTANCE

This is an excerpt from “Zero Dollar Linda” a report by John Stapleton, published by the Metcalf Foundation in November 2010. The complete report can be accessed at www.metcalffoundation.com

Linda Chamberlain is a Toronto woman with serious disabilities living in subsidized housing. Through one of her support agencies, she found part-time work to supplement

her disability income. Instead of bolstering this success story, her public housing landlord immediately made her rent unaffordable, while her disability support program severely cut her benefits. [...] she too could have done better had she received the help and advice she needed. But she came to the conclusion she could only prosper by leaving the work she loved.

... She represents the great majority of social assistance recipients, who want to get ahead and be as self-reliant as they can under their individual circumstances. Why then, does our social welfare system use very tough, unbending, counterproductive rules to pounce upon people like Linda, treating her as if she were doing something wrong? Why are there no good sources of advice and support to help Linda out of her dilemma?

In this essay I explain the tangled and irrational rules and accounting practices that led to Linda's downfall and what she did to try to lessen her exposure to them. I also question why the Auditor General of Ontario did nothing to examine those practices, and chose instead to fan the flames of the public perception that Ontario's welfare system is riddled with fraud.

I also ask why the rules that led to Linda's downfall were followed so mindlessly. As taxpayers, we invest a lot in the education and compensation of our public servants, in the hope that they will administer our housing and welfare systems intelligently. Why then, do we give them the latitude and discretion of parking lot attendants?

I believe we need to create a space in the public conversation to talk about building social assistance policies based on trust in the majority, not suspicion of a minority of outliers. We need intelligent rules, administered with positive discretion, by public servants who are educated and supported in this approach.

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WHAT'S NEXT?

by D'Arcy Martin



Photo courtesy of Line Bolduc

we have begun writing them up. Our new case study is beginning in St. Jamestown, downtown east Toronto, a partnership with the pre-apprenticeship program of George Brown College, which will place decent work in the foreground.

APCOL is now half way through the second year of our project and the multiple dimensions of anti-poverty work are becoming increasingly clear. Our two initial case studies are now completed and

If these case studies are foreground, what is the background? In a word, survey.

Our goal is to engage peer researchers from our initial case studies, together with graduate students, to interview fifty people in eight neighbourhoods. The interviewees are a mix of people currently active on community issues, people who used to be active but aren't any longer, and people who have never been active.

For the first group, we want to track the informal learning they experience by being engaged, the skills and knowledge that they have developed which are rarely recognized and built upon in any systematic way. For the second group, we want to identify the reasons why people step back from community involvement, the patterns which make

this activity difficult to sustain. For the third group, we want to consider the factors that discourage citizen engagement.

What tangible results can we see so far? People in both of our initial case studies have evaluated the APCOL project as having contributed to their work, deepened their commitment and sharpened their skills.

WEB SITE

To showcase the people and their ideas, we have now put up the web site, www.apcol.ca. We hope it will become a forum for dis-

ussion, as well as a record of activities and ideas.

CONFERENCE

Already, community researchers have begun presenting reflections on their learning at conferences, in both policy and academic settings. We hope to expand this outreach in the coming year. In June 2011, we plan to draw together the people with whom we have worked in an internal conference.

D'Arcy Martin is an activist educator and coordinator of the APCOL project. ☘

FURTHER READINGS OF INTEREST: METHODS OF INQUIRY

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APCOL SPEAKER SERIES

by Peter Sawchuk



Photo Courtesy of Peter Sawchuk

On February 23rd, 2010 the APCOL Speaker Series continued its tradition of linking leading scholars on community organizing to the public as well as academic researchers with its sponsorship of a special talk by South African Labour and

Community Educator Linda Cooper (University of Cape Town). Professor Cooper spoke to a group of university and community researchers as well as students at OISE based on her over two decades of research on the changing nature of political organizing in South Africa pre- and post-apartheid. Cooper emphasized theoretical tools for effectively understanding how forms of organizing change, emphasizing contrasts between ‘rolling mass organizing’ and culture versus the ways that social movements can be incorporated into governance and the challenges that incorporation imposes on social movements. Lessons for effective organizing and activist learning included the dangers of exclusion and the contradictions of the ‘professionalization’ of activism. ✂

KEEPING IN TOUCH

Members of the APCOL project are committed to communicating with groups and individuals interested in issues and campaigns involving Nutrition and Food Security, Housing, School Completion, and Jobs/Living Wages. If you would like to be part of this exchange of information please email us at info@apcol.ca and we will add you to our electronic listserv.

LEARNING CHANGES is the newsletter of the Anti-Poverty Community Organizing and Learning (APCOL) Project. Funding is provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. Your feedback is welcome. Please contact us care of CSEW, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, Room 12-204, 252 Bloor St. West, Toronto, ON, M5S 1V6; call us at (416) 978-0515; or email info@apcol.ca; APCOL is online at www.apcol.ca

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