



IFAS Community Development: Identifying Local Power Structures, The Decision-Making Approach¹

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This paper is part of a series of discussions on community development. This series includes specialized papers on leadership development, civic engagement, community action, and other topics important to the development of community.

Introduction

In the process of community development, it is important to identify positions, organizations, and individuals of power. All types of power can serve as a source of empowerment for local collective action or in more negative settings as a significant obstacle to the emergence of community agency, or the capacity for local communities to act (Hyman, et al., 2001; Brennan, 2006). There are several ways that extension and other change agents can identify these power structures. One useful method is the *decision-making approach*.

The Decision-Making Approach

Another method for identifying community power structures is the decision-making approach. This decision-making or event analysis method traces the history of a collective decision on one or a series

of issues. Power holders are those identified as actually having participated in the concrete decision. These can be in the form of officials, lobbyists, activists, and others who shape policy and related decisions at the local level.

Assumptions of the Decision-Making Approach

This method for identifying power is based on the assumption that the social power to affect decisions is evident through participation in the decision-making process. This decision making process is most often seen through formal government, business, or other established channels.

Procedures for Identifying Decision-Making Power

As with other methods, a series of steps can be taken to identify leaders and power holders. Included are:

1. Determine the process and actions of community decision making;

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2. Select areas of decision making that are relevant to community development or any other aspect of local life that you are concerned about. To better facilitate this, you might seek advice from key informants or others who are knowledgeable of local decision making;
3. Trace the decision-making process from its initiation stages to the actions completion stages. This can often be easily accomplished through a review of minutes and proceedings from formal meetings (i.e., city council, community forums). These minutes are increasingly available to the public through the Internet, but can also be obtained directly from the sources you are focusing on; and
4. Identify action-oriented leaders. These are often characterized by individuals who are frequently presenting issues, calling for action, and pushing particular agendas. Such people can also be identified through interviews, speeches, proceedings, newspapers, and other such sources of information.

Types of leaders identified

Utilizing this method, power holders who are active or instrumental in the resolution of issues or problems are identified. Similarly, when multiple issues/topics are studied more general or specialized power holders can be identified. Overall, these tend to be visible leaders.

Advantages and Disadvantages of this Method

As with all methods for assessing local power, this method has distinct advantages and disadvantages. Among the advantages to consider when using this method are:

1. This method can determine actual documented behavior rather than reputation;
2. It can identify general power holders who exhibit power in relation to a variety of topics/issues. By identifying overlapping activeness or power from one issue to another, people who hold power in a variety of settings can be identified;

3. This method can identify specialized power holders (people who hold particularly strong sway over a single issue); and
4. It is very effective in determining the roles people play in various phases of a decision making process. Similarly, it often allows us to see how power holders behave in the presence of other power holders.

Correspondingly some of the disadvantages of this method are:

1. Depending on the issue and complexity of the decision making process, this method can be very time consuming and costly. This is particularly true when multiple issues/topics, that are interrelated, are studied;
2. This method assumes that actual behavior is a measure of leadership and power. As a result, it may miss hidden or behind the scenes power holders; and
3. Using this method, we may miss those who exhibit power in other ways. Power holders who keep issues from emerging into open controversy are often overlooked with this method.

References and Suggested Reading

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