South Park Campaign of the Community Coalition for Environmental Justice

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Case Studies in Environment and Community
Antioch University Seattle
December 2001
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An Evaluation by Jonathan Betz-Zall

Introduction
This case study evaluated the effectiveness of the community organizing  
techniques used by the Community Coalition for Environmental Justice (CCEJ) in  
promoting the principles of grassroots organizing in its work in the South Park  
neighborhood of Seattle, Washington. The CCEJ's mission is to build community power  
and develop new leadership on environmental justice issues among people of color and  
low-income people. This campaign, part of the South Seattle Toxics Project, focused  
attention on the pollution caused by the Long Painting Company's activities. The CCEJ  
used traditional community organizing techniques to help South Park residents oppose  
this pollution; the residents formed their own organization to monitor progress even after  
the offending company has left town. The case study evaluated this work of the CCEJ in  
terms of the CCEJ's mission statement:
• Did the campaign build the power of the community to act on its own behalf?
• Did the campaign build new leadership in the community?

Background

South Seattle Toxics Project
The South Seattle Toxics Project of the Community Coalition for Environmental  
Justice aims to reduce and eliminate the toxic waste that is heavily concentrated in South  
Seattle neighborhoods. The Project conducts outreach, education, research and advocacy  
in South Seattle by identifying pollution sources, providing this information to the  
community and developing action plans for creating solutions to environmental  
problems. One of the Project's main focuses is South Park.

South Park, The Neighborhood
South Park, a neighborhood on the west bank of the Duwamish River across from  
the main Boeing plant in South Seattle, was once a small town of Japanese and Italian  
farmers who supplied the Pike Place Market with vegetables. By the end of the 1920s  
several industrial plants had been established there to take advantage of the abundant  
water in the Duwamish River. In 1956 the Seattle City Council rezoned the land as  
"transition to industrial", and in 1960 to "industrial". When several thousand residents  
staged a protest at City Hall, the zoning was changed to "low-density residential". Cut off  
from the neighborhood school by a freeway and burdened by high crime rates, residents  
of the neighborhood persevered in their struggle against pollution from industrial plants,  
which still persists today. A casual walk through the area, especially near the river, shows
many polluted areas: In the spring of 2001 I personally observed oily-appearing pools of an unknown liquid near some petroleum storage tanks there.

The South Park Campaign

In 1996 the CCEJ began the South Seattle Toxics Project, conducting research, community outreach and community organizing in South Park and in Georgetown (on the other side of the River from South Park). The following year Project staff and volunteers conducted a door-to-door community environmental health survey of over 100 South Park residents, which highlighted many residents' concerns about the pollution caused by the Long Painting Company. They pressured public agencies to conduct numerous other studies and meetings, including several confrontations between residents and officials of the Company. They convinced a newspaper reporter to investigate the situation; the resulting articles revealed that the company had polluted the area for years, often without official permits for some of its operations. When the company sought permission from the City of Seattle Department of Construction and Land Use (DCLU) to expand its facilities, residents testified against it, and DCLU ruled against the Company’s plans. In the summer of 2001 the Company announced plans to move their operation out of the neighborhood to an industrial area in the suburbs sometime next year. At the time of the announcement, a group of residents had organized themselves into a formal group, called "Our Space", to take over the campaign, with continued support from the Project. Our Space is now shifting its focus from pressuring the Company to monitoring plans for future uses of the space that the Company plans to vacate. The members conducted an informal survey of neighborhood residents, who expressed a preference for recreational uses.

Importance of Study

By focusing on how well this campaign carries out CCEJ’s values, this study may help CCEJ adjust its programs for maximum effectiveness. It may help similar organizations elsewhere plan their campaigns by providing lessons learned and prospects for future developments. The documentation collected may also assist future scholars in evaluating the overall effectiveness and place in history of CCEJ.

Research Design and Methods

Focus

The focus of the evaluation was the effectiveness of the community organizing techniques used by the Community Coalition for Environmental Justice (CCEJ) in promoting the principles of grassroots organizing. The CCEJ aims to build community power and develop new leadership on environmental justice issues. I planned to use observations, interviews of individuals and focus group sessions to obtain the information necessary to assess how well CCEJ met these aims in this campaign. Social science researchers commonly use these techniques in evaluating the efforts of community organizations; I hoped to be able to compare this study and others of the same kind.
**Methods:**

Specifically, I planned to gather information by observing community meetings, reading newspaper articles and other studies, and interviewing CCEJ staff and community members. I expected my observations to corroborate answers that community members might provide to the verbal questions I planned to ask them. I expected that the actions of CCEJ staff and community members would be congruent with the attitudes, beliefs and actions they reported verbally. Similarly, I expected that reading news articles and other reports would corroborate answers to the verbal questions, and that the sociological literature would include reports of comparable efforts to provide a good basis for analysis. In the interviewing mode, I expected to get direct answers to specific questions designed to measure the depth of participants' commitment to the campaign and their intent to follow through on it, and to measure the campaign's effectiveness in reaching people who had not joined the campaign. I did not set specific numbers of people to interview at any of these levels.

**Observations and Interviews**

I observed one CCEJ fundraising meeting (not held in South Park), one meeting of Our Space, the community group organized by CCEJ's project, and one community meeting in South Park on another topic (the siting of the new public library). I interviewed the CCEJ staff member who currently works most closely with the campaign, four of the community residents who were most active in the campaign (as a focus group), and two community residents who were not active in the campaign. One other non-active community resident refused to be interviewed and wouldn't say why. I found and read numerous short and four in-depth newspaper articles on the campaign, and a study of the situation by a group of students from Western Washington University. Unfortunately, I could not locate studies of comparable situations in the sociological literature, but did find some enlightening theoretical discussions of the issues involved.

**Results**

According to the Staff and members of the Focus Group, the campaign has succeeded in mobilizing the South Park community to pressure Long Painting to leave the neighborhood, and in building community power and developing leadership in the neighborhood people. This conclusion is supported by my observations of the community group in action. The non-participants' conclusions were much more ambiguous; they refused to take a strong stand for or against Long Painting's operations and pointed out ways in which the campaign had alienated some members of the community.

**Staff Interview**

The staff interview revealed that a small number (0.3%) of neighborhood residents participated regularly and actively in the campaign, while a much larger number (over 7% of the population) attended public hearings and meetings on the topic. These proportions are similar to those achieved in other campaigns that CCEJ has conducted. According to the staff member, the campaign succeeded on three levels:

1. Long Painting has announced plans to move out of the neighborhood to a site more suited to its toxic operations.
2. No workers will lose their jobs as a result; most will be closer to their residences.
3. A community group, Our Space, was formed to conduct the campaign and has almost completely taken over the tasks of organizing it. Our Space members are doing the door knocking, talking, and telephoning, and plan to produce their own newsletter. The Our Space board sets all the priorities for the campaign, including the goals for follow-up to ensure that Long Painting keeps its promises, and attempts to influence decisions as to what happens to the land through rezoning.

**Focus Group Interview**

In the Focus Group, community members listed several activities that made up the campaign:
- attending strategy meetings and public hearings,
- organizing groups of people to attend those hearings,
- writing letters to decision-makers,
- hiring a well-known environmental lawyer to represent the community's interests in various public processes,
- raising funds to pay the lawyer,
- appearing and commenting in the media,
- and networking with other neighborhood organizations.

By mobilizing public opinion to oppose Long Painting's permit to expand, these activities ultimately helped convince Long Painting to leave the neighborhood. As a result, people in South Park and other neighborhoods have gained a sense that ordinary people can make a difference. The group members concluded that CCEJ has been very helpful, understanding and supportive of them.

**Observations**

Observing a meeting of the Our Space board I noted that the actions of the board members and the CCEJ staff member were fully congruent with the attitudes, beliefs, and actions they had described verbally. Board members' comments indicated high levels of awareness of and involvement with the community’s situation, a strong sense of the board’s own power in directing its activities, and intention to continue their activities on behalf of their community in the future. Their behavior (attentive postures, willingness to comment) also supported these indications. The CCEJ staff member took an advisory role, clearly ceding leadership to the board members.

At a neighborhood meeting I observed a variety of residents expressing opinions about a proposed new library branch: elderly long-time residents, a landlord, and a number of Mexican Americans, as well as some young, white liberal professionals who told me they had moved in during the last few years, attracted by the relatively low cost of housing and the strong sense of community in the neighborhood.

**Nonparticipant Interviews**

Interviews with two neighborhood residents who had not participated in the campaign revealed some divisions within the neighborhood. [Both were white, middle class professionals.] They said that those people who did not live close to the Long Painting plant did not feel the need to get involved with the campaign. They objected mildly to the confrontational nature of the organizing techniques. One expressed concerns
that something worse could take over the site, that economic development is needed, and that Long Painting’s efforts to remedy conditions were insufficiently appreciated.

Discussion

These results are typical for a successful community campaign of this type, in my personal experience. I observed and participated in several similar struggles in Philadelphia and in San Francisco. A small number of concerned people, supplied with technical assistance and general encouragement from outside, mobilized a larger fraction of the community to take action, alienating some in the process. Those alienated expressed the kinds of concerns typically raised by middle class liberal whites, who are not accustomed to the rough-and-tumble methods of "street politics" that American community-based organizations typically use. One interesting difference occurred in the San Francisco case, where some radical whites wanted to broaden the campaign to attack the whole capitalist system but were rebuffed by the organization’s board, which was composed of people of color. In South Park, the whites involved played a prominent but not overbearing role.

Comparison

The sociological literature includes several articles that provide interesting perspectives on the South Park story. Professor Steve Valocchi of Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut, analyzed the history of American community organizing in the 20th century. (Valocchi, 2001) He differentiates three approaches: social work, political activist and neighborhood maintenance/community development approaches. Social workers see the neighborhood as disorganized and needing coordination by experts. Political activists see the neighborhood as a potential power base to be mobilized against a problem. Neighborhood maintenance people, who are more likely to come from the neighborhood than the social workers or the activists, have more limited goals: to maintain and improve the physical and commercial value of the property, though they sometimes have to become activists in confrontation with power-holders in the city. In South Park, the community center houses many social work efforts by nonprofit agencies. The neighborhood maintenance people were strongly represented at the library siting meeting. The Our Space activists, supported by the South Seattle Toxics Project, clearly fall in the political activist tradition. Valocchi describes the dominant approach of political activists as derived from the work of Saul Alinsky, a very well known organizer in Chicago in the 1930s and 1940s. Alinsky relied heavily on existing neighborhood elites (people already in existing organizations, especially churches) as the backbone of organizations. As a result, the groups he founded were stable and long-lived, but often conservative and even racist. But after many successes in the 1960s, organizations discovered that they could no longer fight local city halls; they were being overwhelmed by global trends. Many of them turned away from confrontation to development of housing and services, though some managed to do both. For example the Concerned Citizens of South Central Los Angeles, which runs housing and health programs with public funds, also halted a massive school district project that placed a new middle school on a toxic waste site. Our Space, with its beginning steps to determine the community’s desires for the use of the factory’s land, seems to be moving in the same direction.
One of Alinsky’s current followers, Ernesto Cortes, Jr., noted the decline of traditional networks of interpersonal support relationships in people’s lives. (Cortes, 1998) In opposition to the dominant “Contract Culture” in which people are defined as isolated individuals and lured by glittering material culture to sell their birthright, he called for the renewal of the “Birthright Culture” in which a person’s humanity is defined by his or her relationships and ability to negotiate them. This task requires each community to create public space for institutions to teach the Birthright Culture by holding many small meetings and teaching leadership skills to community residents who will then attract their neighbors; this is the current focus of the Industrial Areas Foundation (founded by Alinsky). IAF-sponsored groups in the Southwestern US have used this approach to generate considerable power in getting better wages for workers at publicly-subsidized hotels and in getting public services for poor neighborhoods. IAF has learned that community institutions “need to be continuously reorganized through conversations and the development of a civic culture”, and that broad-based organizing must connect communities across racial, religious and economic lines. Once they have rewoven the social fabric of community life they can network to negotiate with power holders to transform their communities. In education, a leading theorist is currently sounding similar themes (Bowers, 2001). In South Park, people at the library sitting meeting clearly stated that some of the old networks still exist, at least among the “old timers” in the neighborhood. The newer residents I interviewed mentioned being attracted by the “neighborhood feel” of the community. The focus group members also mentioned this sense, and seemed to look forward to strengthening it through their work.

Michael Eichler also looks for new approaches to deal with the increasing complexity of community struggles (Eichler, 1998). Experienced organizers seem to be “frozen in time, rehashing the unfairness of legislation” rather than helping people adjust and cope with new realities. “The organizer who sees the world in terms of absolutes is doomed…. We can no longer afford to oversimplify.” Instead, organizers must focus on the intent of development of leadership and organizing skills among community members, so the latter can pick their issues and organize themselves. In the YO! Project of Brooklyn, New York, the high school students who participated looked for ways to involve people in an activity that could benefit everyone in the neighborhood. “They struggled with the complexities of diversity and gained skills and experience, which has both energized and humbled them”. Organizers must be able to “find the commonalities among seemingly divergent people”. This is where Our Space may have to put forth some extra effort to reach those who were alienated in the Long Painting struggle. Given the savvy attitudes they exhibited in their meeting, this should pose no problem for them.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The South Seattle Toxics Campaign succeeded in carrying out the CCEJ’s operating principles in its effort to mobilize the South Park community to defend its quality of life. Residents and staff alike acted to build community power and develop local leadership. Accounts from the sociological literature support the general direction and emphasis of the effort. Therefore, I recommend that CCEJ continue to use its current methods in organizing other neighborhood campaigns. It may be possible to gain the
support of those who fear confrontational activities through education addressing their fears, if they appear to block community action.

References


Appendix

**CCEJ South Park Campaign Chronology**

1994--CCEJ founded by a diverse group of activists representing community groups and Seattle neighborhoods. Major assistance came from People for Puget Sound.
1996--provided environmental justice education and outreach on indoor air pollution for 54 families of children with asthma in Central and Southeast Seattle
1996--began South Seattle Toxics Project: conducted research, community outreach and community organizing in Georgetown and South Park
1997--conducted a door-to-door community environmental health survey of more than 100 South Park residents.
1997--under CCEJ auspices, Western Washington University students compiled *An Environmental History of South Park and Georgetown*.
1997-1998--convened community meetings of Long Painting and residents. Long promised to develop a plan to respond to community complaints.
1998--alerted Metro King-County Hazardous Waste to a pile of carbide lime, a highly acidic substance that was being stored along a public street in South Park.
1998--completed a community environmental and health survey of the residents of the 98108 zip code area.
1998--discovered that Long Painting had been operating without permits from the Fire Department since 1992.
1998--petitioned ATSDR to do a health risk assessment of residents near five polluting facilities including Long Painting Company.
1998-1999--informed residents of Puget Sound Air Pollution Control Agency hearings and testified along with residents.
1998 and 1999--gathered signatures door-to-door for petitions to Seattle City Council and Department of Construction and Land Use.
1999--helped a South Park resident take two air samples near Long Painting Company.
October, 1999--helped residents mobilize community members to attend a public hearing regarding Long Painting.

November 1999--ATSDR finished a report raising concerns about Long Painting and the health of nearby residents.

1999--convened a meeting between DCLU and a South Park resident at which CCEJ informed DCLU that Long was using residential homes for storage. DCLU promised to investigate the claim.

2000--mobilized South Park residents to attend monthly community meetings to develop action plans for getting city agencies to address their health concerns.

2001--assisted South Park residents in forming their own organization, Our Space, to carry on the campaign against Long Painting.

South Park Campaign Evaluation Observation Guide

In the observing mode, I will observe community meetings for the following indicators:

- Are residents participating actively? [asking questions, making statements, presenting information, etc.]

- Are residents acting in leadership roles? [chairing meeting, taking notes, reporting activities of sub-groups, etc.]

- Do CCEJ staff defer to opinions/beliefs/ideas of residents? Do they provide information? Suggest alternatives? Impose viewpoints?

South Park Campaign Evaluation Interview Guide [for staff]

- How many community residents have participated in the campaign at each level:

  1. active,
  2. passive [signing petitions, giving money],
  3. nonparticipating.

- What proportion of the total community population participates at each level?

  1. active,
  2. passive [signing petitions, giving money],
  3. nonparticipating.

- How do these proportions compare with other neighborhoods in which CCEJ has campaigned?
• How successful do you expect the campaign to be? What is likely to happen with Long Painting?

• How much does it build community power and develop leadership in the neighborhood people?

**South Park Campaign Evaluation Interview Guide [for non-participants]**

• Where and when did you hear of the campaign?

• What might have led you to participate in it?

• How much does it build community power and develop leadership in the neighborhood people?

• How successful do you expect the campaign to be? What is likely to happen with Long Painting?

**South Park Campaign Evaluation Interview Guide [for focus group]**

• What activities have you participated in to address problems with Long Painting?

• How do you think that your efforts have been helpful?

• How much has this struggle built community power and developed leadership in the neighborhood people?

• What specific recommendations do you have for CCEJ?

**South Park Campaign Evaluation Interview Guide [for active participants]**

• What activities have you participated in to address problems with Long Painting?

• How do you think that your efforts have been helpful?

• How much has this struggle built community power and developed leadership in the neighborhood people?

• What specific recommendations do you have for CCEJ?