Indicators (29)

When people in the community identify indicators that are important to them, the indicators are more likely to carry personal and operational meaning than when social scientists who are removed physically, emotionally, and cognitively from the community identify theoretical constructs that are significant only to an academic community.

Citizens need to identify community and civic indicators that are meaningful to them. Virtually any area, conceptual or physical, could be a source of Indicators. And in any area, it will be important to think of what possible actions would be possible if the indicators were adopted. What could be accomplished with the information? Who could use the information? What resonance could the information have with various people and groups? The real work begins after the Indicators have been identified. The Indicators must be measured, discussed, and publicized. They can be used to develop policy and projects that address them.

Written by Douglas Schuler

Democratic Political Settings (31)

Democratic political action is difficult where social inequality is great. People low on the social scale are often barred, formally or informally, from political meetings. And in meetings women, poor people, and members of low-status groups often fail to voice their views because they feel vulnerable to reprisals inside and outside the meeting. How can democratic political action be initiated under conditions of marked social inequality?

Trying to change formal and informal rules of participation in existing political settings usually runs up against entrenched elite power. New and reformed settings can establish a base of democratic experience for pressing change in older, powerful settings. Strengthening already democratic settings and starting new democratic settings and organization are ways to sidestep the customs and practices that reinforce the existing social hierarchy. A new setting designed to be open and democratic can give people who have never been invited to express their ideas and advocate their interests an opportunity to gain experience and confidence.

Written by Jonathan Barker

Public Agenda (30)

At any given time, there are a few issues that are receiving “public attention.” These issues change dramatically from day to day giving us little time to actually think about one, before another takes its place. The stories that convey these issues offer little real information, especially about alternatives or opportunities for public involvement. Even the “news” is entertainment.

Who decides what issues are important, what issues are on the public agenda? If the public agenda is simply the set of issues that people happen to have in their heads at any given time then we can say that a “public agenda” exists. If the public agenda were to include the issues that ought to be considered in a public way — particularly how society uses its limited resources and what issues are truly important — then the public agenda would be a lot closer to where it should be. We need to think about what belongs on the Public Agenda that currently exists and what we can do to put those issues there and keep them there. This may mean working in opposition to — and in cooperation with — existing media systems. It must certainly involve developing diverse and specialized public agendas.

Written by Douglas Schuler

Big Tent for Social Change (32)

When separate groups work on social issues without learning of what similar groups are doing on related issues, opportunities for exchanging ideas are lost. Historically it has been difficult to bring diverse groups together to discuss and mobilize on social issues of shared concern. Worse, groups that should be working together have a tendency to argue fiercely over philosophical or other points of disagreement, thus making collaboration nearly impossible.

Bringing groups together in a big tent where a multiplicity of perspectives is encouraged fosters numerous opportunities for discussion of solutions to social problems and sharing of ideas that help other groups working on the same or similar issues. Those who attend a Big Tent event like the World Social Forum certainly have a better understanding of the enormity of the world’s problems but also can begin to entertain some cautious optimism. Airing the problems of the world with dedicated people who are working to create “another world” that is more equitable, sustainable, and peaceful than our current world is a necessary step in the solution of these problems.

Written by Mary Reissner