These definitions of "community organizing" are from COMM-ORG, the Online Conference on Community Organizing and Development.

Community organizing is about how people without power get power, both as individuals and as a community.

Community organizing is also about building relationships, and sometimes this is its primary goal.

Community organizing begins in a local area, often as small as a neighborhood.

Community organizing builds on shared experience - rooted in a place or a cultural identity.

Community organizing, when it succeeds, often leads to development activities and/or larger social movements.

**The Roles and Responsibilities of Community Organizers**

**Organizers** challenge people to act on behalf of their common interests. Organizers empower people to act by developing shared relationships, understandings, and tasks which enable them to gain new resources, new understanding of their interests, and new capacity to use these resources on behalf of their interests. Organizers work through "dialogues" in relationships, understanding and action carried out as campaigns. They identify, recruit and develop leadership, they build community among that leadership, they build power out of that community.

**Organizers** develop new relationships out of old ones - sometimes by linking one person to another and sometimes by linking whole networks of people together.

**Organizers** deepen understanding by creating opportunities for people to deliberate with one another about their circumstances, to reinterpret these circumstances in ways that open up new possibilities for action, and to develop strategies and tactics that make creative use of the resources and opportunities that their circumstances afford. Organizers motivate people to act by creating experiences to challenge those feelings which inhibit action, such as fear, apathy, self-doubt, inertia and isolation with those feelings that support action such as anger, hope, self-worth, urgency and a sense of community. ... **Organizers** work through campaigns. Campaigns are very highly energized, intensely focused, concentrated streams of activity with specific goals and deadlines. People are recruited, battles fought and organizations built through campaigns. Campaigns polarize by bringing out conflicts ordinarily submerged in a way contrary to the interests of the organizing constituency. One critical dilemma is how to depolarize in order to negotiate resolution of these conflicts. Another dilemma is how to balance the work of campaigns with the ongoing work of organizational survival.

**Organizers** build community by developing leadership. They focus on identifying leaders and enhancing their skills, values and commitments. They also focus on building strong communities: communities through which people can gain new understanding of their interests as well as power to act on them. Organizers work at constructing communities which are bounded yet inclusive, communal yet diverse, soladaristic yet tolerant. They work at developing a relationship between community and leadership based on mutual
responsibility and accountability. 

http://www.nfg.org/cotb/07whatisco.htm

COMMUNITY ORGANIZING: THE BASICS
WHAT IS CO?

Community organization is that process by which the people...organize themselves to 'take charge' of their situation and thus develop a sense of being a community together. It is a particularly effective tool for the poor and powerless as they determine for themselves the actions they will take to deal with the essential forces that are destroying their community and consequently causing them to be powerless. 

-Reverend Robert Linthicum, World Vision International

Organizing does two central things to seek to rectify the problem of power imbalance - it builds a permanent base of people power so that dominant financial and institutional power can be challenged and held accountable to values of greater social, environmental and economic justice; and, it transforms individuals and communities, making them mutually respectful co-creators of public life rather than passive objects of decisions made by others. 

-Mike Miller, Organize Training Center

Power is the purpose of community organizing, and the issues, problems, strategies and victories are a means to the end of increased power for the organization and the community. 

-Dave Beckwith and Randy Stoeker

The empowerment process at the heart of CO promotes participation of people, organizations and communities toward the goals of increased individual and community control, political efficacy, improved quality of community life, and social justice. 

-Nina Wallerstein, American Journal of Health Promotion

Just what is CO? What are its driving philosophy, values and goals? Who employs the strategy? What are some examples of CO in practice? What is being accomplished? Why does it seem to be gaining in importance and use today? How does CO differ from other strategies, activities or interventions that seek to benefit low-income people and communities? This section of the Toolbox paints a broad-brush picture of CO and underscores its importance for making what may be called "bottom-up" change in pursuit of social and economic justice. 

CO is a values-based process by which people - most often low- and moderate-income people previously absent from decision-making tables - are brought together in organizations to jointly act in the interest of their "communities" and the common good. Ideally, in the participatory process of working for needed changes, people involved in CO
organizations/groups learn how to take greater responsibility for the future of their communities, gain in mutual respect and achieve growth as individuals. Community organizers identify and attract the people to be involved in the organizations, and develop the leadership from and relationships among the people that make the organizations effective.

Typically, the actions taken by CO groups are preceded by careful data gathering, research and participatory strategic planning. The actions are often in the form of negotiations - with targeted institutions holding power - around issues determined by and important to the organizations. The CO groups seek policy and other significant changes determined by and responsive to the people (that is, their "constituencies"). Where good-faith negotiations fail, these constituency-led organizations seek to pressure the decision-makers - through a variety of means - so that the decision-makers will return to the negotiations and move to desired outcomes. CO groups continuously reflect on what they have learned in their action strategies and incorporate the learning in subsequent strategies.

Modern CO rests on a solid bed of key principles around which most knowledgeable practitioners and observers are in general agreement. The degree of adherence to these principles, and the relative emphasis placed on one principle or another, provides the best means to distinguish CO groups and efforts from each other. These same principles also help to distinguish CO from other types of strategies for neighborhood and community change and social betterment.

The central ingredient of all effective CO in the view of many involved in the field - what they believe distinguishes CO most clearly from all other social change strategies - is building power: CO builds power and works for change most often to achieve social justice with and for those who are disadvantaged in society.

CO encompasses other principles that were described in a particularly thoughtful article jointly written a few years ago by a veteran foundation official and an experienced community organizer. The authors, Seth Borgos and Scott Douglas, stressed that "the fundamental source of cohesion of every strong CO group is the conviction that it offers its members a unique vehicle for exercising and developing their capacities as citizens."13 The authors also noted that the most common usage of the term CO "...refers to organizations that are democratic in governance, open and accessible to community members, and concerned with the general health of the community rather than a specific interest or service function..."14

According to Borgos and Douglas, the key principles of contemporary CO are:

- **A Participative Culture.** CO organizations view participation as an end in itself. Under the rubric of leadership development, they devote considerable time and resources to enlarging the skills, knowledge and responsibilities of their members. "Never do for others what they can do for themselves" is known as the iron rule of organizing.

- **Inclusiveness.** CO organizations are unlike other kinds of voluntary associations that, in most instances, tend to draw their membership from a narrow social base and their leadership from business and professional elites. As a matter of principle, CO groups are generally committed to developing membership and leadership from a broad spectrum of the community, with many expressly dedicated to fostering participation among groups that have been "absent from the table," including communities of color, low-income constituencies, immigrants, sexual minorities and youth. Working with marginalized groups demands a high level of skill, a frank acknowledgment of power disparities, and a major investment of time and effort.

- **Breadth of Mission and Vision.** In principle, every issue that affects the welfare of the community is within CO's purview, where other civic institutions tend to get stuck on certain functions while losing sight of the community's larger problems. In practice, strong (but by no means all) CO organizations have proven adept at integrating a
diverse set of issues and linking them to a larger vision of the common good. This is a holistic function that has been largely abandoned by political parties, churches, schools and other civic institutions.

- **Critical Perspective.** CO organizations seek to change policies and institutions that are not working. In many communities, they are the only force promoting institutional accountability and responsiveness. Because community organizations take critical positions, they can be viewed as partisan or even polarizing in some contexts, and an obstacle to social collaboration. However, research suggests that effective governance depends on "civicness" - not consensus. A critical stance may generate conflict, but it can also stimulate participation and sharpen political discourse in ways that lead to deeper forms of social collaboration.\(^1\)

**How CO Differs from Other Strategies.** CO is one of many strategies for revitalizing disadvantaged neighborhoods and communities and for pursuing social change on a broader basis. But CO is the only strategy that invests all of its resources and energy to build the power of the people themselves - low-income residents, people directly impacted by the issues being addressed - to work effectively for community change.

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9 The term "values-based" refers to values that form the basis of CO theory and practice. For most community organizers and CO groups, the values include: community, solidarity, equality, freedom, justice, the dignity of the individual, respect for differences, civility, and political democracy.
11 Dave Beckwith and Randy Stoecker, *Community Organizing: Soul and Substance*, forthcoming.
14 Ibid.
15 Ibid.