Can "maximum feasible participation" in community action programs be accomplished, and if so what principles are involved? This is the theme of a paper which makes a number of points now being learned painfully by many involved in community programs.

COMMUNITY ADVISORY BOARDS AND MAXIMUM FEASIBLE PARTICIPATION

Donald Brieland, Ph.D.

A BOARD has been described as long, narrow, and rigid. The recent concern with developing strong community linkages for health services is evidence of our desire to reject this definition.

"Maximum Feasible Participation of the Poor—A Hope or a Hustle," was the headline in a *News Bulletin* of Mobilization for Youth, the New York community action agency. Perhaps some might wish to edit it slightly to read, "A Hope, A Hustle, or a Hassle," because maximum feasible participation (MFP) is a difficult goal under the best possible conditions. In some ways, participation may actually interfere with opportunities for more significant involvement. As Bertram Beck, director of Mobilization for Youth, has suggested, one of the biggest dangers inherent in MFP is that it diverts attention to the wrong places. "The poor shouldn't merely be scrapping over funds for neighborhood programs. They should be seeking major social reforms, and their presence on boards can provide effective power only through the emergence of social and political leaders who will operate in a wider area than neighborhood anti-poverty programs."[1]

Danger of Co-optation

Alan Haber of the University of Michigan has warned of the strategy of *co-optation* which seeks to elevate and "buy off" less militant leadership by giving them status in official advisory or other "consensus groups" dominated by community leaders. According to Haber, "It [co-optation] seeks to 'assimilate' and divide radical demands by making relatively minor or symbolic concessions, though with a great deal of rhetorical flourish, and setting up limited programs controlled by the non-poor . . . to undermine the spontaneity and mass character of the movement by creating bureaucratic, energy-dissipating channels of problem solving. . . ."[2]

To what extent is participation on community boards a snare and a delusion or, more likely, despair and diversion? This presentation will highlight some of the problems in MFP in community action and service programs and some of the issues concerning advisory boards as well.

Maximum feasible participation of the poor, which in the original OEO guidelines was described as MFP of the *residents,* is a core concept of the Community Action Programs, but the broader principles of consumer voice and participation are also seen in many other community programs. In some cases those responsible for bringing a program to the community seek the participation of the residents. In other instances the residents demand the right to participate, as in education and welfare

rights movements. An interesting example of such a demand came in New York when the Rev. Milton A. Galamison and an angry group of parents took over the meeting hall at New York City school headquarters and appointed their own board of education. Although Mr. Galamison's tenure lasted only three days because he and 11 others were arrested on charges of trespassing, he was later appointed to the real board of education — a nonsalaried policy-making school body. This is one case where the initiative of the residents paid off in official recognition.

Selecting Representatives

A review of the means to secure maximum feasible participation in community action programs reveals a wide variety of methods of selecting representatives. As a community organizer observed, members can be "anointed, appointed, elected, selected, or detected." In Chicago, our experience has been mainly with appointments made through the mayor's office after varying degrees of consultation with community organizations. In other cities there has been much more use of elections. Philadelphia held an election in 1965, the Lower East Side residents in New York had their election a year later. In November of 1967, Detroit provided for election "at least every two years."

The Gary, Indiana, Model Cities area is an example of the small response to elections, even where intensive community organization efforts are used. In the 110-block area, there are an estimated 10,000 eligible voters. Their structure is rather typical, with a board of up to 60 members, one representative from each of 20 districts, 20 elected-at-large and 20 appointed by the mayor. The latter group includes representatives from business groups, private agencies, gangs, and other organizations. All residents 16 years of age or over are eligible to vote. A candidate must also be at least 16, file a nominating petition signed by at least 40 residents, live in the district from which he is nominated, and not be a precinct committeeman, assistant precinct committeeman, or a city council member. In the first election, six candidates were under age 21. The election was conducted in 20 polling places by the League of Women Voters and transportation was provided for residents who came to the wrong polling place. Yet, under 20 per cent voted, and this was considered a very high response.

The Green amendments to the Economic Opportunity Act specified new guidelines for participation of the poor. While elections are not required, the phrase "democratically selected" requires community involvement in the process.

> ". . . Each board . . . shall consist of not more than fifty-one members and shall be so constituted that (1) one-third of the members of the board are public officials, including the chief elected official or officials, or their representatives, unless the number of such officials reasonably available or willing to serve is less than one-third of the membership of the board, (2) at least one-third of the members are persons chosen in accordance with democratic selection procedures adequate to assure that they are representative of the poor in the area served, and (3) the remainder of the members are officials or members of business, industry, labor, religious, welfare, education, or other major groups and interests in the community. Each member of the board selected to represent a specific geographic area within a community must reside in the area he represents . . ."[8]

Experiences with the election procedure have varied. A major problem is relative lack of participation. The number voting is generally well under that participating in ordinary primary elections. A staff member of Mobilization for Youth made an observation typical of the situation in other cities as well:

> "Even the Lower East Side election, which was supposed to be run by and for the poor people here didn't *really* aim to get everyone out to vote. If they'd wanted a high turnout,

the people who ran the election would have given it much better publicity. The election itself was a good idea, but the follow-through was lousy."[4]

Elections may involve efforts by adherents of some organizations to present slates and to organize their members so they really get out and vote, resulting in an influence far beyond their actual numbers. A small number of voters, of course, makes a takeover by specialized groups more likely.

We have concerned ourselves so far with the question of how to get *representativeness*. Neither elections nor selection by a government officer or group are ideal, but generally elections are preferable if a maximum publicity effort is made. No doubt elections provide the best way to convey a sense of trust to community residents, but community disorganization and apathy that accompany poverty also make it very difficult to get the same degree of participation that one might expect in more affluent communities.

The question of representativeness is difficult for any board, whether they are managers, directors, or trustees, or in some way advisory. No one would propose a random selection of the residents as the ideal group. The problem is often dealt with by selecting people who represent various block clubs, social agencies, and other well-established community groups, but such residents are often very conservative and may be far removed from the interests of the poor. A ceiling on income, on the other hand, may disenfranchise many of the most effective people in a neighborhood and constitute a form of reverse discrimination.

The person who gets selected or presents himself for nomination and election tends to be one who is already motivated to have a high interest in his community in general or in a special area, such as health. He is likely to end up on a board because he is *available* and *responsive*. Obviously responsiveness and representativeness do not always go together. And some people are so available and responsive that they can be found on nearly all of the boards in the community. Then there do not seem to be enough leaders to go around. The result is an elite that provides the core for most activities for community betterment.

A responsible elite may result in a very narrow leadership base. Also, the involvement of an indigenous person in a specialized program may change his outlook over time to cause him to lose touch with the community. This can happen with both board members and indigenous employees. At the outset, in neighborhood services programs, the indigenous nonprofessional worker can often provide a more accurate statement of the client's major problems than can the professional, but perception of problems often becomes less acute as indigenous staff become acculturated to their agency role. Similarly, a community board member may also lose his major value if he loses touch with the neighborhood.

Initial responsiveness does not necessarily persist. Even when members are elected, many stop coming because they lose interest. To be effective, they must have an initial commitment to both the community and the program area. The organization must take the time to orient them and train them to get a broadened understanding. This process involves the danger of brainwashing, but residents are generally able to recognize brainwashing when they see it and to resist it. High mobility in the ghetto makes it difficult to maintain continuity. Nevertheless, the inconvenience of having to involve new people to replace those who move must not lead to the selection of only those who are long-term residents.

Need for Leadership Development

As a vehicle for leadership training, the voluntary social agency enlists the

talents of people in volunteer services programs. This often produces people for the board. Typically, there has been no such leadership training opportunity in most of the community service and action groups in the ghetto. This has had to be done after residents are named to a board. Means for leadership development are needed to enlarge the base of participation and help the board to gain the needed specialized knowledge.

Another danger—the group becomes a rubber stamp, accepting staff planning and decisions without testing them out in terms of community needs and goals. This is a special problem in health because services require professional staff, and the boundaries of professional elements in decision-making and community concerns are ambiguous.

Worse is the use of community people as window dressing through the creation of boards and other bodies that rarely meet except possibly for the ritual of election of officers. The Mayor's Committee for Human Resources Development in Detroit has tried to deal with this problem by specifying a minimum of ten meetings per year. Even when regular meetings are held, long staff reports, leaving no time for discussion, may reduce any group to little more than window dressing.

Historically, advisory boards have been used most often to provide technical advice as needed without any responsibility for financing or policy determination. Often such advisers rarely met as a group but the staff consulted them individually when they needed special help.

Role of Community Advisory Boards

With the recent emphasis on indigenous participation, advisory boards are now created less for technical knowledge than as a means of involving the community in activities for its own best interest. Like the technical advisory board, the indigenous board has an advice-giving role rather than a policy-making responsibility—consultation but not control. This is quite different from membership on a board of directors where fiscal responsibility and ultimate control of policy reside with the board. Can an indigenous advisory board with such limited responsibility thrive?

If we accept the validity of maximum feasible participation for advisory boards, several key principles need to be considered.

1. *Advice on What?*—While the board should expect to receive general information on the total program, in what area is the board expected to be responsible? The most appropriate concerns of a specialized advisory board for a community service are matters that affect the geographic service area. These include program practices, service boundaries, hours, fees, policies related to hiring of neighborhood people, publicity efforts—all the issues of major concern to the residents.

2. *Necessary Limits*—Many programs are limited by statute or by formal regulations of a parent agency. It is not appropriate for an advisory board to insist on policies that are illegal or in conflict with regulations. They should make strong recommendations for change in laws and regulations but cannot flaunt them. Similarly, an advisory board must accept the ethical framework of a professional service.

3. *How Independent a Board?*—The board will generally not have to exert its independence. However, it must be so structured that, with *cause*, it can bring recommendations and complaints concerning the program to city officials, boards of trustees, and other groups with ultimate management responsibility. Thus, the advisory board should have its own officers and be able to meet on the call of the chairman or by petition from its members if major problems arise.

4. *Responsibility for Financing*—While most advisory boards are not charged with fiscal responsibility, boards may find themselves involved in such questions, especially if the federal government requires more funds to come from *local* governmental and nongovernmental sources. Also, where some community fiscal participation is feasible, the service program may become more a part of the community than if it is financed exclusively from outside.

5. *Rotation and Leadership Development*—Committees involving prospective board members provide one means of leadership training. Rotation of members is essential to broaden community participation and understanding.

6. *Payment for Services*—With the involvement of the poor in board activities, the question of payment is likely to arise. Payment for time spent takes the board out of the community service realm. It is generally inadvisable to pay for members' time although, to insure participation, it is sound policy to pay the cost of transportation and for baby-sitting service during meetings.

Conclusions

After reviewing the vast but scattered literature on maximum feasible participation, I find the wide range of functions of advisory boards vague and confusing. Perhaps the term advisory board should be abandoned in favor of *community policy board.* If *advisory* board is kept, it should be understood to imply more than advice. The board should have clear policy-making power on those issues that affect the residents. Otherwise, there tends to be frustration because there is no area in which advice has to be taken, i.e., no control. As advice is ignored, less will be given. Then the board becomes window dressing.

A community policy board recognizes the expertise of the members as *knowledge of the community.* Such a board can interpret the community to the program staff and interpret the program to the community. It can also perform a trouble-shooting function when major problems arise. A community policy board can be given the status to sponsor public hearings when community reactions on major issues are needed. Obviously essential is a clear definition of the areas of policy-making delegated to the board.

The board needs to involve specialized groups including recipients of service and youth between 16 and 21 as well as more visible leaders. Members should be elected where feasible; election tends to convey trust to the community. But, for many smaller specialized programs, election is probably not feasible. Democratic selection must be assured in other ways.

Those of us who operate community programs expect community residents to be effective partners, not rubber stamps or window dressing. Residents of the community must help assure representativeness and responsiveness.

REFERENCES

1. Beck, Bertram M. Maximum Feasible Participation of the Poor. Mobilization for Youth, News Bulletin 5,2:2 (Summer), 1966.
2. Haber, Alan. The American Underclass. Poverty and Human Resources Abstracts s,3:15 (May-June), 1967.
3. Bedford, Ed. Maximum Feasible Participation of the Poor. Mobilization for Youth, News Bulletin 5,2:2 (Summer), 1966.
4. The Green amendments to the Economic Opportunity Act can be found in Office of Economic Opportunity, Code of Federal Regulations, Title 45, Chapter 10, Part 1060, 33 Federal Register, 17140, effective December 19, 1968; also in: The Poverty Law Reporter, Paragraph 6208.

Dr. Brieland is Professor, Jane Addams Graduate School of Social Work, University of Illinois (1207 West Oregon Street), Urbana, Ill. 61801.

This paper was prepared for the Neighborhood Health Advisory Board Training Program, University of Chicago Center for Continuing Education, and submitted for publication in October, 1969.