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Power to the People: A Guide to Community-Based Initiatives

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Abstract

The term "community-based" has become a buzzword with organizations and individuals using the phrase as a self-proclaimed badge. Oftentimes, initiatives that have the intention of assisting a vulnerable population with a social problem further subject the community to being victims of the 'system'. Communities posed with social injustices are led to believe that institutions are outside of their influence. The powerlessness induced by this belief promotes the notion that individuals are destined by chance, removing self-agency and initiative from the people. Communities have been alienated from institutions and self-action, causing a lapse in communication in discussing social issues with the affected community. In combination with not properly engaging and discussing the issue with the population, organizations assume the needs, methods, and solutions required of a community, leaving out the most vital component of community-based work: the community. Not only do these self-styled 'community-based' initiatives lack the consideration of the community, but they lack any philosophical thought or theoretical ground. This is to no fault of the organizations, but an overall deficiency in accessible guidelines and criteria that address what community-based work really entails. Thus, the need for establishing a theoretical framework that embodies a community-based philosophy is evident. In this thesis, through the exploration of community-based supportive theories, power is found in the people. In order to adapt a community-based philosophy, initiatives must allow organizational operations to be fully guided by the community. Local knowledge and local control are paramount to community-based work. This begins with communities defining themselves and utilizing individual and community realities to inform the direction of the initiative. Organizations are required to facilitate dialogue that interprets community members in the manner in which they wish to be understood. Dialogue serves as the foundation to understanding the needs and lived experiences of a community. Community-based instruments are explored and a critique of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) addresses the cardinal flaws of NGOs and the fundamental traits of community-based initiatives. This thesis concludes with an action-oriented handbook to being community-based.

Keywords: community-based, community knowledge, local control, community initiatives, non-governmental organizations, community-based theory, and community-based instruments