

CHARACTERISTICS OF VIABLE ORGANIZATIONS

As Predicted by an "Open Systems Framework" and Demonstrated in Neighborhood Block Associations

by

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Preface

Why do some associations keep going while others die out? What can be done to help associations survive and become more effective? This working paper was written to provide some background on keys to an effective association. I suggest that all human groups (including coalitions and consortia) have characteristics that influence their viability and success. This paper uses an "open systems framework" to describe what characteristics are related to whether an organization works or not. An open systems framework can be hard to understand -- therefore I use examples from research which followed the life (and sometimes death) of block associations. I use in-depth examples to give you a better sense of what these organizational characteristics are like. This understanding should be helpful to understanding the next working paper, *Understanding Coalitions and How They Operate: An Open Systems Organizational Perspective*.

This paper is based largely on articles by Prestby and Wandersman (1985) and Wandersman, Florin, Chavis, Rich and Prestby (1985). See the Reference section at the end of this paper.

Introduction

Thousands of voluntary associations form (such as block and neighborhood organizations, crime watch programs and coalitions), but many quickly die out. For example, in a study of some 500 block associations, Douglas Yates reported more than 50% of the associations failed to move beyond the simple clean up-level and subsequently declined. Two questions that are consistently raised are: Why do some groups keep going while others die out? What can be done to help associations survive and become more effective?

I propose that all groups (from self-help and neighborhood organizations to coalitions, churches, and businesses) operate along the lines of an open systems framework. All organizations require resources; all need a structure in which people work with the resources and perform activities. The activities may achieve goals or outcomes. If the

group is successful in obtaining resources, working together to perform important activities, and these activities are successful in accomplishing goals, then the organization (coalition, consortium) is likely to continue. While this sounds simple, it is not. Many groups and organizations die after a brief beginning and others die a long, drawn out and painful death. What do we know about the viability of groups?

In the next section, I will describe the open systems framework and the important characteristics of a group or organization that were found to be related to viability and effectiveness. While the research that is reported in this paper is based on neighborhood (block) organizations, I believe that the basic dimensions are relevant to consortia and coalitions.

I do recognize that the W. K. Kellogg Community-Based Public Health (CBPH) consortia are different from neighborhood block clubs. CBPH consortia are groups that coalesced largely in response to a grant initiative, and have paid professional and staff and community members, while block clubs are voluntary groups of residents. Whereas many block groups are notable for their homogeneity and common interests, CBPH consortia engage members from very different backgrounds, sometimes living in very different parts of a city or region, and participating for different reasons. Even so, the research reported here is important for several reasons:

- It took a model or theory (based on the organizational development literature) of what any organization needs to survive and tested it out with some 17 different blocks clubs in Nashville, Tennessee. In fact, the model predicted pretty accurately which clubs would still be meeting one year later, and which ones wouldn't. Many of these results were replicated in a study of block clubs in New York City [Florin, Chavis, Wandersman & Rich (1992)].
- Even though some CBPH members are paid, others are not. Even though the joint membership of academic and public health practice partners and community groups was required by the grant initiative, many of the

participants are (as I understand it) volunteering their time. It also sounds like many people are contributing effort that goes above and beyond the strict definitions of their role. Thus, participation is not guaranteed, and factors influencing participation become critical.

- Some CBPH consortia apparently include sub-groups or coalitions at the grass roots level, such as resident housing councils and neighborhood task forces. These groups are very similar to block clubs.
- Last, but not least (as stated in another article on this study), we consciously decided to focus our research on block organizations for several reasons. "Not only are block organizations often the basic unit from which neighborhood organizations are formed, but they have been found to have a higher impact on community conditions than other community structures -- such as advisory boards, multiservice centers, model cities programs, community corporations, and school boards."

While there are probably many different ways to conceptualize group activity, perhaps our scheme will be helpful to you as you build and assess your CBPH consortium. We feel the basic dimensions are so relevant to all types of consortia and coalitions that Bob Goodman and I are using these ideas to investigate the characteristics of effective coalitions in the CSAP (Center for Substance Abuse Prevention) community partnerships for substance abuse prevention.

What is an Open Systems Framework?

An open systems framework is a model that two researchers, Katz and Kahn (see References), developed in the late 1970s to describe how organizations function -- especially in how they maintain momentum and interact with the surrounding environment. (The framework doesn't describe how organizations form.) The framework, which is based on what organizational development experts call

an "open systems" perspective (because it is open to and interacts with the environment), proposes that organizations can be seen as mechanisms for processing resources obtained from the environment into products which affect that environment. Other researchers, such as Knoke and Wood (1981), have used variations of this model for other studies of voluntary organizations.

Using Katz and Kahn's work as a departure point, John Prestby and I developed a framework of organizational viability which suggests that there are four components of organizational functioning: (1) Resource Acquisition, (2) Maintenance Subsystem, (3) Production Subsystem, and (4) External Goal Attainment (see Figure 1, next page). While these terms may sound like they describe manufacturing companies rather than human potential or health coalitions, here's what they basically suggest:

Any organization that fails to (1) obtain adequate and appropriate resources, (2) develop an organizational structure for obtaining resources and conducting work, (3) mobilize resources efficiently and effectively, (4) turn out appropriate "products" (e.g., actions, benefits to members), and/or accomplish something, will eventually cease to operate.

Because maintaining participation is so critical, especially in voluntary groups or in initiatives that require persistent effort in the face of relatively high costs of participation (e.g., demands on personal time), we felt it important to see whether this framework could help us understand, or even predict, the viability of citizen associations. Specifically, we focused on the organizational characteristics that distinguish block organizations that survive from those that die out. (The study also looked at leader and member characteristics, but in this paper I focus on the characteristics of the organization as a working group, rather than its people.)

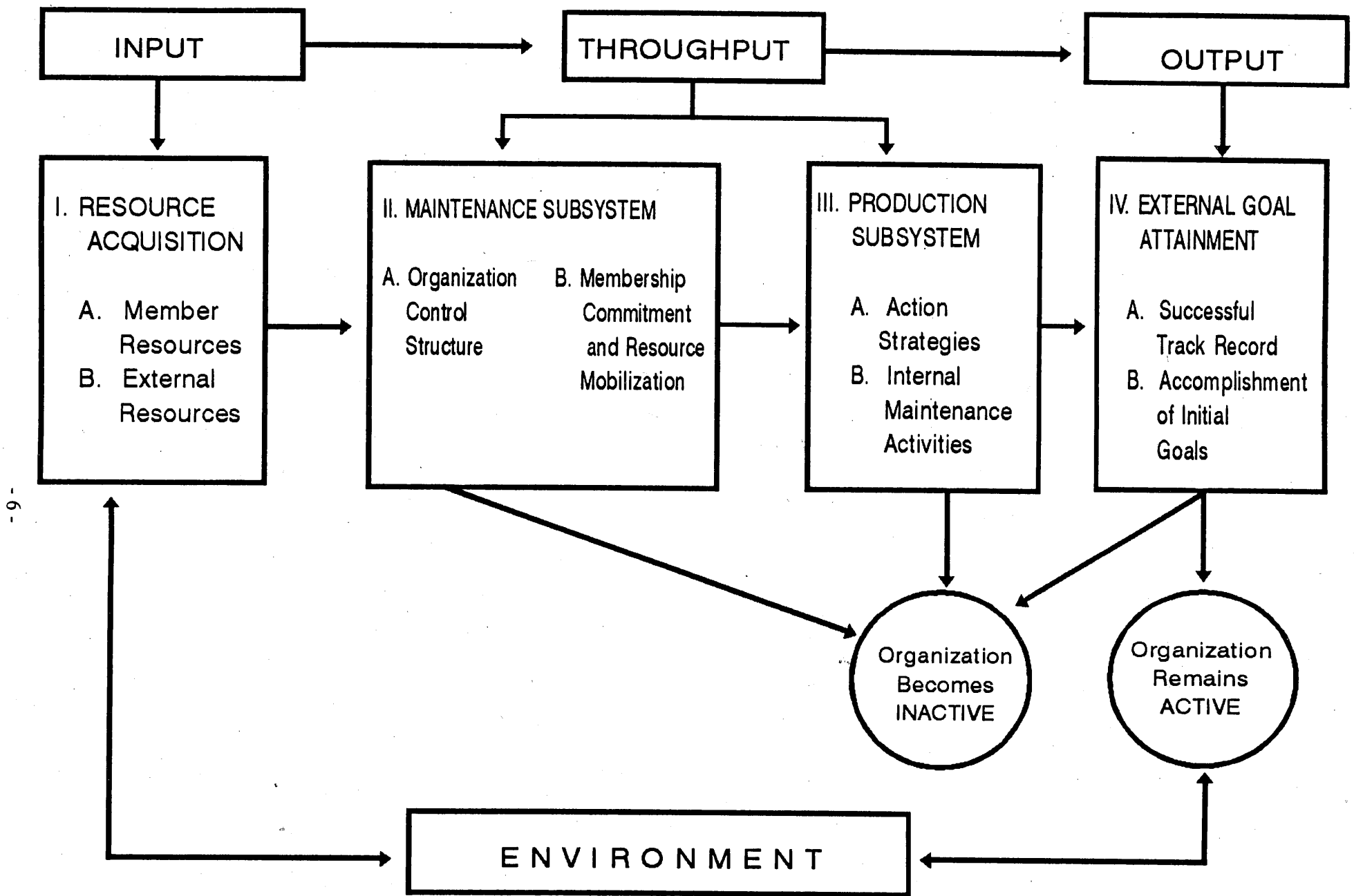


Figure 1. An open-systems framework of organizational characteristics related to block organization maintenance.

Organizational Characteristics Related to Viability

Block associations are voluntary organizations that employ strategies of collective action on the block level. ("Blocks" are defined as dwellings fronting a single street between two cross streets.) The 17 block associations involved in this research are in the Waverly-Belmont neighborhoods in Nashville, Tennessee. This area, like many transitional urban neighborhoods, had deteriorated both physically and economically after World War II when middle class residents began moving into suburbs. A resurgence was being felt in the late 1970s, when we began our study. Neighborhood Housing Services (NHS), a coalition of citizens, bankers, and government officials, were trying to revitalize the area. NHS worked to generate citizen action by having community organizers help residents form block clubs.

Our study team interviewed adult residents in the 17 block club areas twice: one in 1978 as the clubs were formed, and then one year later in 1979. About 538 people, total, were interviewed. Most of the people in 11 of the 17 clubs were African American; all but one of the remaining blocks had a largely white population. Two-thirds of those interviewed in 1978 were female.

In 1979 during the second round of interviews we learned that only eight of the 17 block organizations were still functioning. We then compared characteristics of the eight surviving organizations (which we called Active Block Organizations, or ABOs) with features of the nine organizations that had not met for six months prior to our second survey (we called these the Inactive Block Organizations, or IBOs). Our purpose was to see how well our open systems framework explained their survival or failure.

Below I report some of the findings, by way of examples from these actual organizations. The findings are organized by the major components of the open systems framework, as diagrammed in Figure 1. *(Please note: Throughout this section, the names of the organizations have been changed to protect their identify. The information is authentic, however, and was obtained from the Neighborhood Participation Project.)*

RESOURCES

(The resources that are available to the organization)

The Beechtree Block Association had a total of 25 members. Eighty percent of the adults on the block were members. The President of the association was an officer of four local neighborhood and community organizations, who helped elect a city councilman, and had received formal leadership training. In addition, the block association president reported that the residents had a strong sense of community. The block association established formal ties with neighborhood organizations that the president was involved in and worked in coalition with other block organizations.

In contrast, the Belmont Block Association had 10 members. The president reported that the residents had a low sense of community. In particular, the organization had difficulty getting tenants to participate. The president held office positions in other community and political organizations, but established no formal ties with them and received no assistance. Additionally, the group did not establish any relations with any other block organizations.

In order to maintain itself, an organization must continually acquire the necessary energy or resources to keep it going. For block associations (and most community organizations), resources consist primarily of those brought to the organization by its members and those recruited from outside sources. To assess the strength of the block association's resource acquisition efforts, we examined their membership and their contacts with other organizations.

With respect to member resources, we wanted to know the number of members, their degree of attachment to the block, their sense of community, and the degree of personal efficacy they felt, since each of these factors has been shown to be related to the contribution which members make to an organization. We found that the associations that remained active attracted more members than those that failed. In addition, the ABOs had recruited members with significantly more of the personal skills and attitudes associated with active involvement. ABO

members were more likely to feel that they could influence conditions on the block and that residents had the power to solve problems on the block. They were also more likely to have a set of personal attitudes associated with community activism and to have been active in other community organizations.

Block associations can also acquire external resources from other community organizations (churches, neighborhood associations, etc.), public agencies (police departments, schools, etc.), private foundations, and city government. These financial and in-kind resources can be essential to the success and survival of small voluntary groups. Leaders of the ABOs reported both more links and more productive relationships with larger community organizations, and were far more likely to report that their organizations had received advice, funds, or other assistance from other organizations.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

(The part of the organization that obtains the resources and organizes the members)

The Maplewood Block Association had a formal structure of officers who were elected for a one-year term and had bylaws which specified the duties unique to their respective positions (e.g., president, vice president, secretary and treasurer). The goals and tactics of the group were determined by a democratic decision making process whereby leaders generated ideas, presented them to the members and decisions were made by consensus.

The organization also had an annual budget of over 200 dollars which was raised through membership dues and fund raising activities like garage sales, block parties and raffles. These funds were used to provide assistance to sick residents on the block and to buy groceries for block residents who couldn't pay their bills. A committee was formed for membership recruitment, which contacted block members and new residents by personal visits, word of mouth, and mail. Block club representatives even took food to new residents when

informing them of the block association. The Maplewood Block Association survived.

The Payton Block Association had no formal structure of officers. Rather, the group was run by a husband-and-wife team. These two made most of the decisions about the goals and tactics of the group with little or no membership input. The organization had a limited annual budget of one dollar and did not pursue any fundraising activities. The association attempted to recruit new members only through publicity and word of mouth. It had no membership committee and no efforts were made to contact potential members on a personal basis. The Payton Block Association failed to maintain itself.

If groups are to survive they must be able to set goals, provide mutual rewards, and mediate between members' individual needs and the task requirements of the organization. Leadership, decision making and representation, and the organizational climate are important mechanisms for accomplishing these tasks. We found that ABOs were more likely to use a democratic decision making process and were more likely to have a formal structure of offices with a clear division of responsibilities and to select officers through election. IBOs, by contrast, tended to have more autocratic decision making and no formal offices; and, when they did have offices, to fill them by appointment. ABOs were also better able to ensure continuity of leadership by replacing officers than IBOs. In addition, leaders of ABOs felt more politically effective, were more likely to be involved in other community organizations, and were more visible to members than leaders of IBOs.

RESOURCE MOBILIZATION

(The actual involvement and commitment of members and actual resources used)

The Beechtree Block Association was successful in mobilizing all the block residents for block improvement activities (e.g., sidewalk repair, painting houses). The association involved the majority of its members in crime control activities and socializing. Approximately half of the members were active in efforts to help the elderly. The association had a core of eight

highly committed members who could be counted on to run the day to day activities. In terms of outside assistance, the organization acquired funds, leadership training, home improvement supplies, and additional person power from local community organizations and other block organizations.

The Belmont Block Association had only 2 or 3 highly active members. It was unsuccessful in generating member participation in its efforts to improve the block, reduce crime, and increase socializing. In fact, the President and her husband did most of the work. The block association received no assistance from outside organizations.

We found that ABO members were more likely to report heavy involvement in the organization, to devote time to the organization as needed, and to report that they joined in order to contribute their abilities to the objectives of the organization. In short, ABOs provided more opportunities for participation, and, in return, ABO members provided more active support for their associations than did members of the groups that became inactive. ABO members also demonstrated higher levels of commitment. They were significantly more likely to report that they were satisfied with the progress of the organization and enjoyed being a member. Moreover, they described an organizational climate which was far more compatible with effectiveness in that they saw their leaders as more supportive and their organizations as more cohesive, orderly, task oriented, and effectively managed by its leaders than did members of the inactive organizations.

PRODUCTION

(The activities the organization does to get something accomplished)

The Jerguson Block Association set up committees to increase police protection and to fight crime. City services were utilized to improve sanitation services and to improve the physical appearance of the block. A community trust fund was developed to maintain local control of the area property. Block cleanups were organized, school parties were planned, and efforts were mobilized to regulate traffic speed on the block.

The Haley Block Association was involved in fewer activities. The group attempted to reduce crime by joining a neighborhood based crime prevention program, and organized group cleanups to improve the block appearance.

Some community organizations have a relatively informal structure. They may produce (initially) some warm feelings due to shared interests and common objectives among their members. It can therefore be easy to overlook the fact that they are engaged in production. Even the most internally cohesive organization must eventually produce some results or face declining support from its members and other organizations.

Action strategies are the activities the organization performs to obtain organizational resources. We found that those associations that remained active were more "aggressive" than those that were inactive after one year. ABO members reported that their organizations were involved in more activities and in a wider variety of activities. Moreover, ABO projects were more likely to address block problems directly, or to relate the block association to the larger community (e.g., having city council members attend block meetings or sending representatives to zoning commission hearings). Interviews with block association leaders revealed that the ABOs more often focused on activities that would bring external resources into the block to alleviate problems (petitioning city agencies for better services, for example) and were more likely to attempt to meet some of the immediate needs of block residents (creating "emergency funds" or helping the bereaved and sick, for instance).

Production must be supported by internal maintenance activities such as recruiting new members and raising funds to keep the organization going. ABOs more effectively supported their production efforts with internal maintenance activities. For example, every ABO reported that they regularly contacted new residents to inform them of the organizations's existence while few IBOs did this. In addition, ABOs were more active in fund raising and had substantially larger operating budgets than IBOs.

OUTPUT

(The products, consequences or accomplishments that are the result of the organization's activities)

The Kilmore Block Association was able to reduce the level of crime on the block, improve block sanitation, prevent a local library from closing, and improve the block's physical appearance. The group also increased the neighborliness and enthusiasm of residents, cared for the needs of the elderly, and fostered a greater sense of community among block members.

On the other hand, the Texas Block Association generated very little output. Efforts to repair sidewalks on the block, to obtain a caution light for traffic control, and to improve the block appearance through cleanups failed. Though crime was identified as a problem, the association was unable to generate awareness or action from the members.

Community organizations produce both concrete and symbolic outputs. Their products may include improvements in neighborhood conditions, or more symbolic rewards -- such as the opportunity for neighbors to come to know one another, or feel as though they are contributing to their community. Those organizations that accomplish their initial goals and can establish a successful "track record" are more likely to survive than those that do not because success raises members' expectations about organizational effectiveness.

Our measures of whether or not block organizations achieved their objective were limited, but they do suggest that the ABOs were more effective. In the first place, when we asked organizations that had become inactive why their club stopped meeting, the most common answer was that it "did not accomplish much." In addition, ABO leaders were far more likely to report that their organization had secured service improvements from the city, reduced crime, and increased the sense of community on the block. More importantly, ABO leaders more often reported that the initial objectives of the block club had been accomplished, thus satisfying members' expectations about the benefits that would follow from supporting the block organization.

Summary

The major lesson to be derived from this research seems to be that it takes organization to keep an organization alive. At a theoretical level, the results suggest that our model is a useful way to assess the organizational viability of community groups. The major components in the model successfully predicted organizations that remained active from those that did not. (Most of our results were based on the surveys conducted when all 17 block organizations were operating). As a group, organizations that became inactive were weaker than those that remained active in all of the areas (Resources, Organizational Structure, Production, and Output).

At a more practical level, our findings suggest that no one factor will guarantee organizational viability. Indeed, the model presented in Figure 1 indicates that an organization can disband as a result of failure in any of the areas of organizational activity. As a result, we recommend that organizers and citizen activists attend to each area and devise strategies which insure balanced development on all fronts. Specific questions you might want to consider:

- Which types of resources are needed by your CBPH consortium?
- How and where can such resources be obtained?
- Does your consortium provide adequate opportunities for members to actively participate?
- Are leaders' behaviors, the decision making process, and the social climate of the consortium effective in facilitating participation and influencing members to respect organizational norms and commit their time and energy?
- Is the consortium channeling member commitment into relevant activities?
- Does the organization's output meet the member's needs?
- What contacts with other organizations will increase available resources?
- Are there ways to improve the consortium's relationship with the political and social environment so as to make that environment more supportive of the organization?

SUMMARY OF KEYS TO AN EFFECTIVE ASSOCIATION

Resources

- | | |
|----------|---|
| Internal | Groups need enough members with the skills and contacts necessary to get the job done. |
| External | Groups need adequate assistance in terms of money, information or supplies from other groups. |

Structure and Maintenance

- | | |
|-----------------|--|
| Leadership | Elected leaders should be responsive to members' ideas. |
| Committees | Interested persons should have a chance to participate, and the workload should be widely distributed. |
| Decision-making | Everyone should have a say. |
| Incentives | Members need good reasons for joining and staying involved. |

Mobilization

- | | |
|-------------|---|
| Time/energy | Many members commit themselves fully. |
| Assistance | Outside assistance from other community groups is obtained when needed. |

Production

- | | |
|------------------------|--|
| Action strategies | The organization needs to produce the activities it was created to perform. |
| Maintenance strategies | Recruiting members, building team spirit, developing new leaders and fund-raising make an organization strong. |

Output

- | | |
|----------------|---|
| Reaching goals | The group must meet its initial goals and establish a track record. |
|----------------|---|

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