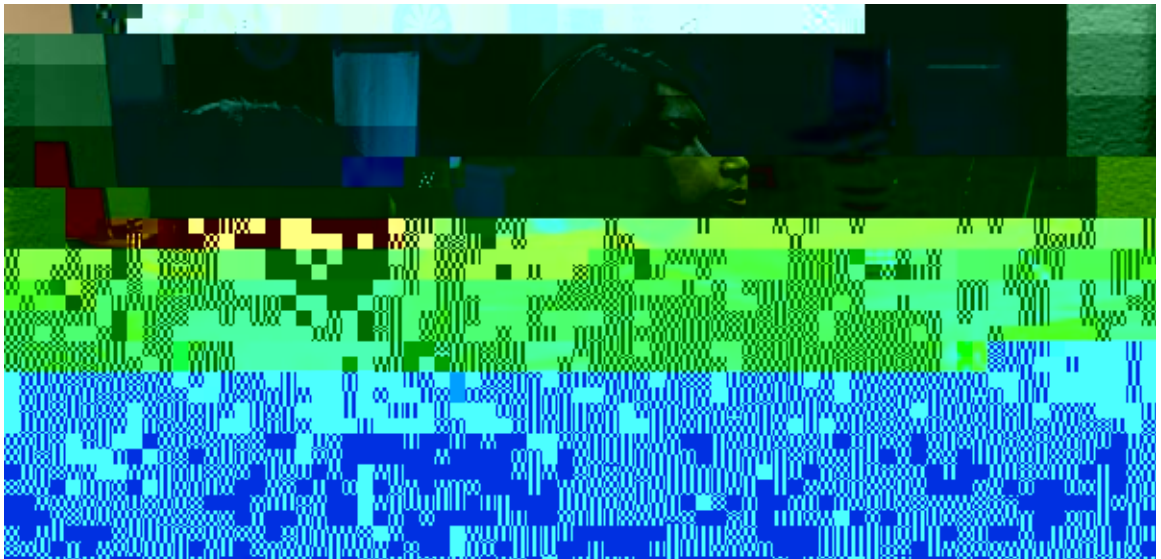




Newsletter of the Anti-Poverty Community Organizing and Learning Project

Learning Changes

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Israt Ahmed leads a discussion on the City of Toronto budget process during an APCOL training session.
Photo Courtesy of Joseph Sawan

Welcome to the
second issue of

IT'S WHERE WE LIVE:

HOUSING AND ANTI-POVERTY ORGANIZING IN SCARBOROUGH

by Joseph E. Sawan



Anti-poverty organizing takes on many forms, but I believe that successful movements share some key qualities: hope, perseverance and enthusiasm. The residents in East Scarborough, specifically in the Kingston Galloway – Orton park (KGO) neighbourhood, go above and beyond in their organizing efforts. From the Market to Community Speaks to its busy East Scarborough Storefront office on Lawrence Ave., this is a place where it seems an increasing number of residents are working to engage more people in their work and encourage social change in their community.

Beyond my initial meetings with residents and organizers along with the rest of the APCOL KGO case study research team, my first real introduction to KGO was during a Housing Consultation with MPP Margaret Best. Israt Ahmed, a Community Planner with Social Planning Toronto and the community co-leader of the case study, was one of the organizers for the event and together with a number of other community activists decided to take the consultation to another level. Prior to the event, Israt put together a housing tour with MPP Best to better illustrate what residents would speak of later that evening. Taking us throughout East Scarborough, the disparity became clear, beginning with Scarborough Village near

Eglinton and Markham, we witnessed the overcrowding of Cougar Court apartments, “motel row” on Kingston Road and the Guildwood community on the other side of the tracks, literally.

The response was profound. During the consultation, it was clear that our earlier tour had provided the necessary context for the MPP to visualize the frustrations presented by the 150 residents later that evening.

Organizing must always take on a multi-dimensional approach, which Israt explained very clearly; “We must take every opportunity we get to show our politicians the condition of housing in KGO and demand that residents be a part of decision-making for more accessible and affordable housing, but it can’t stop with politicians. The first priority really must be organizing in the community itself. Building from who and what is there.”

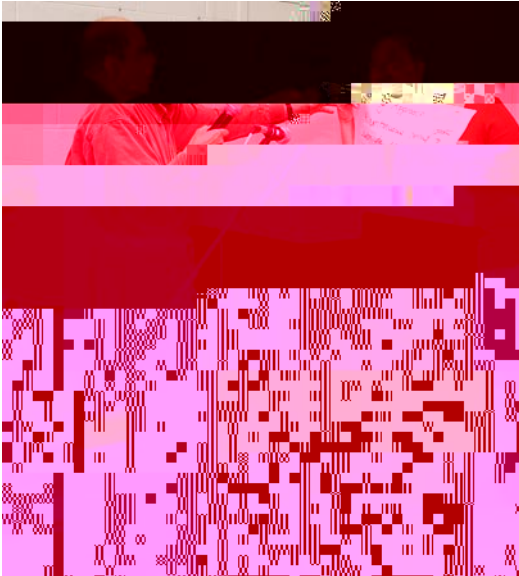
Ultimately, it is a question of providing necessities for a community to thrive and prosper, not simply to survive. As one participant during the housing consultation explained, “Housing is a necessity, like healthcare, so why isn’t it a right for all?”

CHANGING PERCEPTIONS OF POVERTY

When thinking about anti-poverty organizing, a significant portion of the work is about changing perceptions. As we complete

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our interviews, focus groups and training sessions, one of the consistent themes is related to the power of perceptions both within and those directed toward the KGO community from outside. Since the City of Toronto established its 13 priority neighbourhoods, a new level of attention has been brought to areas that have experienced a variety of issues.



While residents and organizers are happy to finally see attention brought to their community that can provide necessary resources, they are also wary that it may deepen negative perceptions of their community. Ultimately, it's about engaging residents and the public as to what can be done to improve the conditions residents face and to highlight the inspiring work being done by residents in the KGO community.

Part of the APCOL project is to provide spaces for these discussions and training opportunities for emerging leaders. But, the project's goals also include studying anti-poverty activism in action as well as in reflection. So far, we have had weekly meetings with recently hired organizers and animators from the KGO community.

In our first APCOL training sessions, led by Israt Ahmed, we discussed the wide array of issues surrounding "poverty" and the potential solutions that we can envision. Israt challenged our team to reconsider what is poverty and who is affected by it. Beginning to articulate the challenges we face on a daily basis provides another tool to change perceptions and to demand resources to encourage social change.

BUILDING LEADERSHIP

Poverty and anti-poverty action is a dynamic process that demands multiple approaches. The APCOL project has been focusing on a number of different anti-poverty activism pathways including educational completion, good jobs and health/nutrition. But in KGO the focus begins (but doesn't end) with the matter of housing, starting with the development of their own local housing strategy.

The general question that weaves into the work of KGO activists as much as it does with the other anti-poverty activist groups across Toronto is: What does it take to build and sustain a movement for change? While

Wow! We marched! The Storefront didn't disappear and we still have it. And now it's actually growing!

campaign or a movement, sustaining them is much harder. For residents and organizers in the KGO community, the solution is in action. Sustaining a movement requires a balance between service-delivery and empowering residents to take action not as clients but as members, activists and leaders.

The Storefront has become a hub for service delivery, and has expanded to provide opportunities for community development in East Scarborough. Their vision sums it up clearly:

“East Scarborough is a safe, well educated and prosperous community. The Storefront contributes to making the impossible possible by providing accessible sites for community members of all ages and cultures to find and share solutions they need to live healthy lives, find meaningful work, play and thrive.”

In collaboration with the Storefront and other local organizations, KGO's Residents Rising Community Association is a “grass-roots community development team” that works to engage residents with community events and create new strategies for community change. Such an array of projects and organizations provide residents with diverse opportunities to engage in their community.

It is here specifically that KGO's APCOL case study is seeking to contribute the most. What are these opportunities? What types

of opportunities for engagement are most effective for building community strength at the grassroots level? And, who finds their way into these opportunities and how?

In KGO, momentum is building with a dual perspective: building leadership by providing spaces for existing leadership to be recognized and, building new leadership that broadens the representativeness of activism on the housing question. In either case, it is the contribution of the APCOL case study project to encourage both existing leaders and new ones to take their leadership to a new level.

WHAT IS THE RESEARCH BEGINNING TO SHOW?

What is so often missed in community anti-poverty research is the fact that activism almost always has a long history. As we carry out our research work with residents, this is certainly the case for the KGO community. In understanding anti-poverty activism in KGO, the research is documenting a previously unwritten history – one activist story at a time.

These stories tell how people learn from their activist experience in other places and on other issues. The stories reveal their involvement and growing awareness of organizing and anti-poverty, from petitioning for transit changes in KGO to making changes

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in police services and social service provision on “motel row.” These stories tell of the many ways that activism emerged in the course of the community taking greater control over the uses of public spaces where people could meet and begin working together. Taken together, the dense fabric of past and present activism is gaining a new level of appreciation for researchers and residents alike.

But, what are the real origins, supports and barriers to activism? What are the roles of the unique individual, family, street and neighbourhood “biographies” that seem to fuel anti-poverty activism at its deepest levels? How are the rich social networks that form the foundation of an activist community infused with memories and deep commitments? Each of these matters, and more, are coming into ever sharper focus in the research.

One of the many activist leaders who sat down with our university and community researchers to be interviewed described such

things when asked – Has she seen changes in anti-poverty organizing in KGO in the past decade?

Yes, absolutely. And I think everybody who involved would say the same thing. You know we started off feeling like – “Can we change anything?” Especially when you are in Toronto Community housing... Well, we had a march in this community when the Storefront lost funding. This was 2005-2006 and so we had the march on the hottest day in June and Oh my Gosh we had hundreds of people. Now that was very empowering to residents!... So that was another way of community feeling: Wow! We marched! The Storefront didn't disappear and we still have it. And now it's actually growing! So, in some ways, we must have done something to affect that change. So yes I would say that from the time I started in this community in the crime prevention aspect, to now 10 years later, it is a whole different ballgame for residents. They're really starting to know that they have a venue and have an ability to speak out. It's all collaboration. It's not just Residents Rising

it's not just Westhill organizing, it's not just the Storefront – it's all of us together doing this and that's why I think it's been successful because it's not one core group that is doing all the work, it is expected of everybody.

Clearly, KGO “must have done something to affect that change.” But what exactly was it, and what were the kinds of visions of change that animated activists? Organizing, campaign tools and a strong network of community groups are impor-

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tant. But, what is at the heart of anti-poverty activism? It is summed up by two other interviewees who, in discussion together with us, posed a series of questions and concluded by offering a vision of activism that on top of all the nuts and bolts of organizing work, may be as simple as it is powerful.

Interviewer:

Every time we think about poverty we think about it in terms of money. Now if we think about this community with ten million dollars poverty be done?...

Omar:

With ten million dollars where would poverty be? I feel like if you do that it might create construction jobs: Lots of big buildings and other downtown then. So, I think: What really want? We want to live in peace. In the place where, I dunno... Some nature, some people and some simple things.

Alice:

Yeah simple things! That's what I want. [For instance] I like our market. Our Festival Market. It's green. You see the kids playing. You watch the seniors just sit and gather. That's what it is for me when I think of anti-poverty... Like me for instance, I do volunteer work around the neighbourhood. And I can't seem to say no. I like it... But I'm living on a month on what I usually make in a week. And I've been successful for six years, seven years. It's wearing me down. But then again I can't see me getting too burnt out with this because I love it. I feed off it... It's when my friend went through a tough time this week. I say, "Call me. If you need to talk, just call me". And that's where [anti-poverty] starts

think a problem shared is a problem cut in half. doesn't solve the problem, but at least you can see to where the action is!

NEXT STEPS

As the KGO case study on anti-poverty organizing and housing moves forward, the development of an expanding organizing team committed to their community will provide the necessary infrastructure to develop more projects and a strong network of activists in East Scarborough. A community of activists doesn't just appear – a community of activists builds it. How they do this is the type of "learning-in-action" that is at the centre of one of the first case studies in the APCOL project as a whole. It is a case that will benefit both activist across Toronto and it is a group of activists intent on finding opportunities to communicate with these other activists and organizations throughout the GTA. Their goal is to enrich the learning process and foster diverse organizing strategies to change the face of community housing and the many other activist goals that are at the centre of a Toronto anti-poverty movement in the city.

More resources:

<http://www.ourkgocommunity.com/>

<http://www.thestorefront.org/>

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In January 2010 APCOL's Guest Speaker Series welcomed Toronto activist Chris Harris (formerly of the Black Action Defence Committee,

education way, and applying classroom ideas in real life. A key difference with the Black focussed school is that we are focusing on working class learning; although Black youth experience racism and need to develop their identity we also need to focus on the survival of the community.

A lot of Black people are being pushed out of the new economy and there is no plan "B" for them. Ultimately its not just about developing the identity of these youths, but

FILLING HOLES: SOCIAL NETWORKS, ACTIVISM AND COMMUNITY MOBILIZING

by Stephanie Ross

Recently, people involved in anti-poverty policy-making, community economic development and social movement action and research have begun to focus their attention on the role of social networks in facilitating

and friendship as much as through a commitment to the issues.

Understanding the role these relationships play across workplaces, neighbourhoods, the home and the host of other groups and institutional sites in which we participate has long been part of the organizer's bag of tricks. For instance, knowing who talks to whom and who listens

look around again at this same meeting and take notice of who isn't present at all. One might think: this is a matter of people's available time, personal energies, understanding of the issues at hand and, thus, their level of commitment. But if that is the case, then all activists share it is the ability to overcome these barriers of time, energy, and understanding of the issues.

Therefore, attention to the power of social networks and social ties is central to understanding the distributive power of social capital and broadening forms of activism. In other words, where there are noticeable patterns of participation, we often find these patterns rooted in social differences such as gender, racial or ethnic background, first language, housing, educational or broader social class background. In such situation, we are likely see types of social capital development that are unevenly distributed.

In a more general sense, social networks are important to understanding the relationships between social movement organizations, and whether groups who work on a common issue – like anti-poverty activism – are able to come together in coalitions, share information and strategic knowledge, mobilize a wider group of activists and supporters, and work together in a sustained way on common initiatives.

Organizations are part of a web of relationships too, and whether they are included or excluded, central to or isolated from the movement community as a whole has a

huge impact of their potential effectiveness. Therefore, both the position of anti-poverty organizations within a broader social movement network, the particular kinds of connections between tw

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The first year of this project draws to a close in the spring. We are now compiling and analyzing the results of two case studies, one with FoodShare and the other with community groups in

the Kingston-Galloway neighbourhood of Scarborough. From this, we can already see some of the ways that food security and housing interact to reinforce inequalities, and some of the strategies to turn this around.

CASE STUDY -- The next case study will explore an initiative to provide skills training for apprenticeships, recruiting participants from at-risk neighbourhoods and providing support for moving from precarious to more stable employment. The community partner will be George Brown College.

SURVEY -- The survey has been designed in cooperation with Armine Yalnizyan of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives and Grace-Edward Galabuzi of Ryerson University. It has engaged several graduate students and provided David Livingstone with another opportunity to meld quantitative with qualitative research. This is not an effort to document the inequalities that

KEEPING IN TOUCH