

APCOL Push Back, Move Forward! Conference Report

Prepared by Katheryne Schulz, November 28, 2013

What is the Anti-Poverty Community Organising and Learning research project?

The APCOL project was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council for five years and involved a number of both academic and community-based research partners. Investigating the following questions:

1. What is the nature and effectiveness of community-based anti-poverty organizing in the GTA?
2. What is the nature and effectiveness of popular education/informal learning in supporting community-based anti-poverty organizing in the GTA?
3. How can community-based anti-poverty organizing efforts in the GTA engage with, support and learn from one another?

To date there has been no systematic attempt to build citywide research perspectives on anti-poverty community organizing using a combined qualitative/quantitative design. There has been no sample surveying of community organizing in relation to the role of popular education and learning processes as key tools within the organizing process.

APCOL's research design addressed these issues by using a mixed methods, participatory approach that includes eight qualitative case studies and quantitative survey sampling in eight low-income neighbourhoods in the GTA. We are conducting community-based research (CBR) and working closely with community members using a Participatory Action Research (PAR) model. APCOL's research is generating profiles of current local knowledge, attitudes and available resources in relation to the four major anti-poverty organizing pathways we have identified - housing, school completion, access to living wages, and nutrition/health. We are also co-developing organizing and educational tools for eight neighbourhood-based anti-poverty popular education campaigns.

APCOL's Second Community Conference 2013

Over one hundred and sixty people participated in APCOL's second conference entitled *Push Back, Move Forward! Learning, Organising and Building Community*. The conference was held on October 18 and 19, 2013 at Metro Hall in Toronto. It was co-sponsored by APCOL and the Toronto Community Development Institute (TCDI). Assisted by Toronto Social Planning (an APCOL research partner), the Institute provides support to groups and projects that promote equity and social justice through community development activities.

The focus of the conference was on how collective action can right the balance as disparities of income and power continue to widen across Toronto. More specifically, the conference was an opportunity to advance the following project goals:

- 1) Increase community ownership of the APCOL project by partnering with Social Planning Toronto (SPT) to organise the conference. SPT has agreed to use the conference registration list to invite participants to a follow-up meeting focused on building cross-neighbourhood

alliances and strengthening low-income neighbourhoods. These neighbourhoods need to develop a critical, collective ability to negotiate with each other as part of their local capacity building.

2) Disseminate the results of the APCOL survey by providing information on our survey findings to all participants through a research handout included in the conference package and a workshop that gave participants the opportunity to discuss APCOL's findings in more detail with our Primary Investigator, Grace Edward Galabuzi.

3) Invite experienced community organisers as keynote speakers and panellists to share their knowledge with participants.

4) Provide a collective space for community activists and students to come together to reflect on their work and to connect with one another.

5) Organise participatory workshops for community members and students to share and improve their community development skills.

6) Recognise community researchers for their contribution to the project.

Conference Design

Planning

Planning for the conference began in May 2011 and the first step was to assemble a conference planning team and identify a conference coordinator. The conference coordinator worked with the planning team to produce a conference plan including the venue, the budget, a timeline, identifying speakers and recruiting project teams. In addition to the planning team, there were three other conference teams:

1. Training team
2. 11 Workshop Facilitation teams
3. Conference Volunteer team

*See Appendix 1 for a list of conference teams and their members.
See Appendix 2 for a list of conference speakers.*

Facilitation training

A one day training session for workshop facilitators was held on September 14, 2013 at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. The trainers included popular education specialists from the Catalyst Centre Deborah Kulkenny, Bob Isenberger and Mandy Bergman. The session focused on using popular education techniques to assist 9 students and community members to improve their facilitation skills using equity principles and participatory techniques.

Conference program

The conference committee wanted a balance of speakers, interactive plenaries and workshops. To this end, the conference opened with a key note speech by Uzma Shakir, Director of the Office of Equity, Diversity & Human Rights, City of Toronto. In her address, Ms. Shakir explained the City's current directions in anti-poverty policy and encouraged participants to become active in City issues.

Ms. Shakir was followed by Naomi Tessler and the KGO Spoken Forum Collective who presented an interactive theatre performance on housing issues. It was a lively performance with strong audience participation. The Spoken Forum Collective was organised with the support of APCOL as part of its arts-based research initiative and includes resident actors from the Kingston Galloway neighbourhood.

The following morning, the opening plenary featured a key note speech by Nina Wilson, one of the original founders of Idle No More. Ms. Wilson explained to conference participants how Idle No More began, some of the challenges she has confronted as a community organizer and the key environmental and political concerns facing Aboriginal communities in Canada today.

Participants then attended the morning workshops of their choice. They reunited at noon for lunch and to witness the recognition awards for APCOL community researchers who were instrumental in making the project a success.

After lunch, three experienced community organisers participated in a panel to discuss strategies for combatting social inequality. Crystle Sinclair (Toronto Idle No More), Nigel Barriffe (Etobicoke educator and community organiser) and Jennifer Huang (Labour Council organiser) discussed their experiences as Toronto community organisers on a variety of campaigns from challenging TTC fare increases and working to increase the minimum wage to supporting Aboriginal communities.

Workshops

The conference planning team reached out to APCOL survey team members and case study participants, and invited them to share their research with conference participants. One of the survey teams and four of the case studies teams responded by presenting community research workshops. The fifth research workshop was a more general exploration of the relationship between research and community organising.

The APCOL survey team provided conference participants with updated analysis and information on the APCOL survey findings on a handout that was provided to all conference participants and through a workshop that explored the survey findings in more depth.

Community groups presented the remaining five Popular Education workshops. These sessions focused on strengthening neighbourhood coalitions and organisations, and improving organising and media skills.

See Appendix 3 for the APCOL Survey Research Handout

See Appendix 4 for the Workshop Program

Closing plenary

Keisa Campbell, Manager, Neighbourhoods and Community Investment at the United Way of Greater Toronto acted as the conference reporter. She told conference participants that the workshops generated a great deal of dialogue about how to initiate change in local neighbourhoods, and she highlighted the challenges people face including the lack of resources and appropriate supports for local activists, and the need for more opportunities for activists to connect across neighbourhoods to share their experiences.

Financial summary

See Appendix 5 for the Conference Budget

Evaluation, follow-up and dissemination

Anonymous participant evaluations of the conference were overwhelmingly favourable with the speech by Nina Wilson and the interactive theatre performance named as plenary session highlights. There were favourable comments about the diversity of the conference's participants and its content. Some participants also noted that the issues discussed in the workshops focused on real long-term roadblocks to successful neighbourhood organising that need to be addressed, while others appreciated the opportunity to hear about what works and what doesn't in resident groups.

Participants said that the conference made them feel comfortable because of its participatory and informal nature, its small group sizes and the opportunities for role-play. They also said that they were treated respectfully and that they felt encouraged to ask questions and engage in discussion. Many comments focused on the importance of having ongoing opportunities to discuss neighbourhood and community organising.

A number of participants would have liked the opportunity to attend more of the workshops, while others wished there had been more use of the arts in addition to the interactive theatre performance and the democracy wall. Participants unanimously agreed they would come to a similar conference if it were organised again.

As part of their partnership agreement with APCOL, TCDI agreed to sponsor a follow-up meeting after the conference for participants interested in establishing an ongoing Toronto

network for community organisers and educators. The meeting was held on November 28, 2013 (asked Deborah what came out of it).

APCOL published a summary of the conference proceedings in its newsletter along with excerpts from Nina Wilson's speech. The conference proceedings were posted on the APCOL website along with photos and links to audio and video recordings of Nina Wilson's speech. The APCOL website link was sent to all conference participants by email. Ms. Wilson's speech was also posted on YouTube and sent to Toronto Idle No More organisers.

Appendix 1 Conference Teams

Conference Planning Team:

1. Peter Sawchuk, University of Toronto
2. Katheryne Schulz, Coordinator, University of Toronto
3. Richard DeGaetano, Social Planning Toronto
6. D'Arcy Martin, University of Toronto
7. Sharon Simpson, Labour Education Centre
8. Gabrielle de Montmolin, University of Toronto

Training Team

1. Darcy Martin, University of Toronto
2. Deborah Konecny, Catalyst Centre
3. Bob Isenberger, Catalyst Centre
4. Mandy Bergman, Catalyst Centre

Facilitation Teams (comprised of academics, community members and students)

Research Workshops

1. Knowledge to Action by Access Alliance.
Julie Chamberlain
Pinky Paglingayen
Sheila Htoo
2. Community Worker Training Program Case Study by Anishnawbe Health
Brenda Wastasecoot
Tsitra McKay
3. Surveying in the City of Toronto by APCOL
Grace Edward Galabuzi
Bari Samad
4. Community Benefits Agreements by the Mt. Dennis Labour-Community Coalition
James Nugent

Rick Ciccarelli

5. We're Positive You should Listen to Us by the Ward 6 Community Action Team
Abbe Edelson
Carolyn MacLeod
Robin Salt
6. Community Development and Activism Among Youth in St. Jamestown by the Yonge Street Mission
Agnes Thomas
Gabilan Sivapatham
Nivethan Amirthalingam

Popular Education Workshops

7. Neighbourhood Backbone Organizations by East Scarborough Storefront
Anne Gloger
Janet Fitzsimmons
8. The People United by the Toronto Community Development Institute
Deborah Konecny
Jaclyn Isen
Winston Tinglin
Cutty Duncan
Gail Matthews
9. Building Towards a People's Social Forum by Common Frontiers
Nigel Barriffe
Raul Burbano
10. Campaign Organizing – Lessons from Community Housing by Public Interest
Effie Vlachoyannacos
11. Media Basics by Public Interest
Desmond Cole
Katrina Miller
Laura Buccioni

Conference Volunteer Team (comprised of students)

1. Jaclyn van Laar, Volunteer Coordinator, TCDI
2. Bari Sumad, University of Toronto
3. Youssef Sawan, University of Toronto
4. Abbe Edelson, University of Toronto

5. Rakhat Zholdoshalieva, University of Toronto
6. Gabrielle de Montmollin, University of Toronto
7. Ushnish Sengupta, University of Toronto
8. Miranda Saroli, York University
9. Hani Ali, TCDI
10. Sarah De Gasperis, University of Toronto
11. Agnes Thomas, University of Toronto
12. Gita Madden, University of Toronto
13. Aryan Esgandanian, TCDI
14. Jaycel Murphy, George Brown College

Appendix 2 Conference Speakers

1. MCs Professor Peter Sawchuk, University of Toronto and Sharon Simpson, Labour Community Services.
2. Uzma Shakir, Director of the Office of Equity, Diversity & Human Rights, City of Toronto.
3. Naomi Tessler, Artistic Director of Branch Out Theatre and six members of the Spoken Forum Collective.
4. Nina Wilson, one of the original co-founders of Idle No More.
5. Panel Facilitator Jaclyn van Laar, Toronto Community Development Institute. Panelists Nigel Barriffe, Etobicoke educator and community organizer; Jennifer Huang, Toronto and York Region Labour Council; and Crystal Sinclair, Toronto Idle No More.
6. Keisa Campbell, Manager, Neighbourhoods and Community Investment at the United Way of Greater Toronto.

Appendix 3 APCOL Survey Research Handout

Appendix 4 Workshop Program

Appendix 5 Conference Budget