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THROUGHOUT THE WORLD, THERE is A GROWING interest in the American "nonprofit sector." But what exactly is this sector? A look below the surface reveals that there are nonprofits, and there are nonprofits. A misleading tendency, I believe, is to confuse democratic, voluntary, membership associations with social agencies and public interest organizations. Both groupings are part of "civil society," and both play important roles, but the two function quite differently.

First, imagine a group of nine socially concerned people, perhaps well-known civic figures, or perhaps new faces from a minority community, getting together to do something about unemployment. They incorporate as a nonprofit organization, get foundation grants,

hire an executive director who in turn hires a staff, and initiate a program that may include developing educational materials, arranging for job counseling and placement, or testifying before legislative panels in order to influence policy. Research, education, advocacy, litigation, direct services, or perhaps all of the above are the center of this type of program. Such groups exist for virtually every social problem we can define: environment, drugs and alcohol, unemployment, affordable housing, minority rights, women's rights, children's rights, animal rights...the list goes on. This is what I refer to as agencies and public interest organizations.

Second, imagine a democratic organization; its income comes "from the bottom up" through grassroots fundraising activities and active member dues (as distinguished from "canvassed" or "direct mail" dues). The members meet regularly to debate and decide their policies, strategies, and tactics. The leaders are elected, accountable to a regular assembly of the membership, perhaps at an annual convention. The organization seeks to include more and more of the people in its constituency so it can more democratically and powerfully speak in behalf of the people it claims to represent. In doing so, it addresses whatever are the concerns of the residents/members of the organization — that is, it is "multi-issue" in character. At best, such an organization is unquestionably the voice of those for whom it claims to speak. In my experience, such organizations usually — almost invariably — either begin with or soon hire a full-time organizer. This type of organization is what I have in mind when I talk about democratic, voluntary membership organizations, and although few real groups approximate this ideal description, it is nonetheless their aim.

These are two very different types of organizations, and the former should not be treated as a substitute for the latter. But not only does this increasingly happen, worse still, agencies and public interest organizations sometimes act antagonistically toward democratic membership organizations, viewing the groups as a threat to their

"turf."

THERE: ARE BOTH "PLUSSES" AND "MINUSES" TO AGENCIES and public interest organizations. On the positive side, these groups often are:

- innovators of new ideas and programs;
- effective advocates for new ideas and for powerless constituencies;
- sensitive deliverers of needed services;
- opportunities for new careers for the low-income people they serve;
- wedges into the establishment to create openings in wider audiences for new approaches;
- pioneers of the best in personnel and organization development practices: flex time, flat wage structures, participatory management, and so forth;
- important technical assistance providers to democratic, voluntary membership organizations;
- sponsors, or enablers, of community organizing in its early stages of development, and subsequent partners and supporters of such organizations.

For all their value, however, the negatives of agencies and public interest organizations should not be overlooked.

- By and large, these groups have little accountability beyond a self-selected board of directors and its external funders (usually foundations or "angels"). If the organization claimed only to speak for its board and staff, there wouldn't be a problem, but that is not usually the case. More often, the organization claims to speak for "women," or "children," or "the environment." To give some credibility to this claim, it may create advisory councils. Or it may

"mobilize" people — but its mobilizations are limited to specific issues and strategies predefined by the staff.

- "Service providers" tend to define their beneficiaries as "clients" — as people to be served. The danger here is that it can undermine the ability of people to do for themselves; it also substitutes the notion of "client" for that of "friend," "relative," or "neighbor." For advocacy organizations, the problem is that they define those in whose behalf they claim to speak as people to be mobilized, or worse as "markets" to be targeted by direct mail, phone, or canvass. In no case are the constituencies active creators of the agenda of the organization. The result is that active citizenship is undermined.
- Often, particularly in low-income and minority communities, agencies and public interest groups function as brokers and buffers between "the establishment" and "powerless constituencies." Here, the first type of nonprofit may become an actual adversary of the second, finding its hidden role as outpost for "downtown" threatened by bottom-up organizing. Saul Alinsky once described this phenomenon as "welfare colonialism." It is laudable, for example, for a public interest organization to speak on policy matters regarding the effects of inadequate diet on the development of children. It is not, however, appropriate for this same group to say, "we know what children want because we are experts on their needs" — that must be done by children, their families, and their communities.
- In some of their employment practices, these groups can be anti-union, low-paying, and self-righteous.
- Agencies and public interest groups have an inclination to substitute the delivery of services for more basic solutions to the problems of the poor, namely, jobs, income maintenance, and empowerment.

DEMOCRATIC, VOLUNTARY MEMBERSHIP ORGANIZATIONS have strengths and weaknesses as well. Without going into them at length

here, clearly in many cases their "plusses" correspond directly to agency and public interest groups' "minuses." The two types of nonprofits should not be confused. But what should the relationship between them be?

Agencies and public interest groups could contract with independent organizing groups to organize the people they intend to serve. To take an example, a lot of community housing corporations currently claim to "organize" their tenants, but they do so in the most manipulative, "company union" manner. Suppose instead they contracted with a democratic, voluntary community organization or an organizing center that forms and assists such community organizations to do the organizing.

Agencies and public interest groups could sponsor the development of democratic, voluntary community organizations. This involves a fundamentally different perspective on the relationship of the nonprofit agency or public interest organization to the community or constituency it wants to serve. In the 30-plus years that I've been organizing, I've found a wide variety of nonprofits willing to play this role: "Y's," poverty-program-funded community-based agencies, and even community action agencies, church-related agencies, United Ways, legal service programs, and others. They are, however, a distinct, and small, minority. The role I am talking about is something like the role settlement houses played in relation to the union organizing of the CIO in the 1930s.

Over the years, I have had occasion to meet with directors of various nonprofit agencies and public interest groups or their associations. Some of them have been committed supporters of community organizing, courageous advocates in important areas of public policy, innovators of major new programs, and in their internal organizational operations living examples of the type of society they seek to build. Too often, however, they are parochial, selfish (as distinct from self-interested), and invested in a project only from the point of view of

what it will do for their funding. They are almost incapable of seeing that a broad, democratic movement for freedom, equality, and justice and community is what is needed if we are to reverse the growing inequalities and injustices that are so pervasive in our nation and in the world.

The challenge we face is to find ways that the nonprofits can do what they do best without undermining what powerless communities must do for themselves to become full participants in democratic citizenship.

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By Mike Miller

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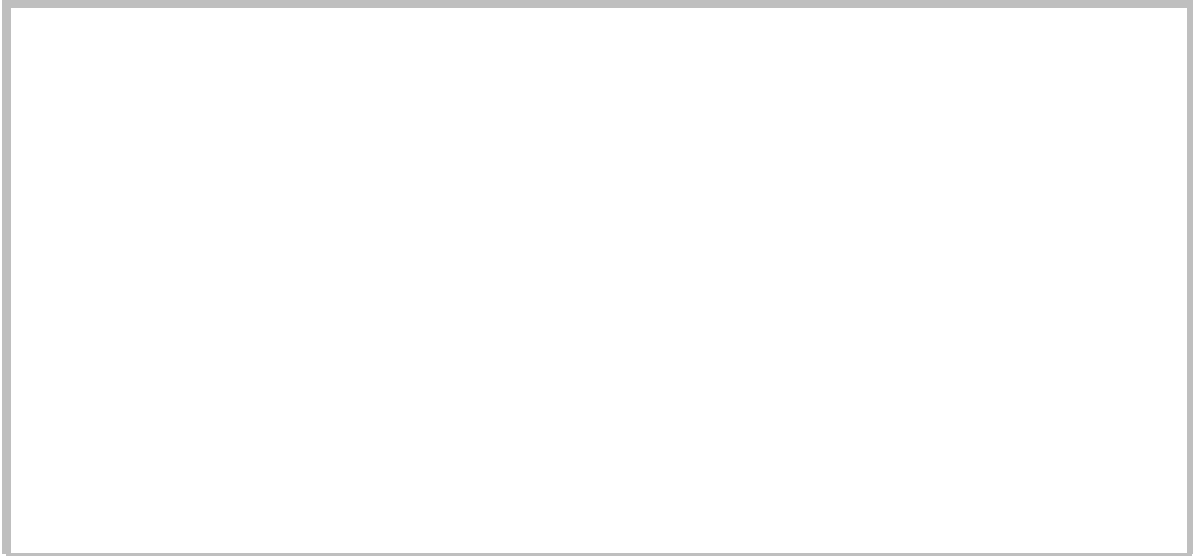
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