

***Strengthening Democracy and the Common Will  
A Model in the District of Märkisch-Oderland (Federal State Brandenburg) based on  
the US-American Community Organizing***

***- Summary -***

***Approach***

The project focuses on the question if and to what extent the US-American Community Organizing concept can be transferred to the rural district of Märkisch-Oderland in the Federal State (Land) Brandenburg. For that purpose Dr. Ulrike Schumacher, social scientist at the Technical University (TU) of Berlin, joined the Perspektive-Netzwerkstelle of the Kreis-Kinder- und Jugendring MOL e.V. for a period of one year.

The project started off with two months of empirical orientation for Dr. Schumacher in Chicago/Illinois from where Community Organizing (CO for short) as taught by Saul Alinsky (1909-1972) originates and where he set up the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF). Extensive talks with experts, attending a three-day-training, and participating in the work of professional organizers in central and suburban Chicago as well as in rural Illinois gave insight into the great variety of CO, ranging from broad based organizing in Alinsky's sense and organizations using the principles of CO to institutions with a less specific view of CO.

Back in Germany, together with the employees of the Netzwerkstelle, it was decided to choose the „Netzwerk für Toleranz und Integration“ (Network for Tolerance and Integration - NTI) to continue with the project. NTI, which had been established in Märkisch-Oderland in the year 2000, is operating throughout the entire district. The intention was to examine the extent of collaboration and commitment of its members as well as their attitude towards a more self-reliant financial basis. These tasks and its ensuing consequences shaped the following eight months of the project.

***The tools of CO – methods used in the course of this project***

The aim of CO is to put 'ordinary people' in a position to follow their own interests in public affairs and to jointly bring about an improvement in living conditions. To accomplish this, it is necessary to strengthen relationships within a community and to reach agreements with decision-makers – who might need to be reminded of their responsibilities.

The fundamental qualities of CO are cooperation of individuals, democratic participation and co-determination, formation of local leaders, and creation of power (Szakos/Szakos 2007: 1ff.). Its means of action are in general – not taking into account the diversity of views on how exactly CO is to be defined – the creation of relationships through individual conversations (Penta 2007: 220) as well as the consolidation of relationships when discussing and trying to solve urgent matters and problems. Sooner or later these attempts at solving a problem are emerging in the public and community organizations will start activities such as meetings, campaigns, or talks with decision-makers. The instruments of CO can be divided in „hard“ and „soft skills“ (Mc Neill 2007: 232), they can also be described as a set of practical tasks: recruiting new members, forming coalitions, planning and organizing meetings and workshops, or working with committees and the advisory board (Bobo/ Kendall/ Max 2001).

Principles that have been used in this project:

#### *Relational meetings, or 1:1s*

In order to find out about the personal interests, views and commitment individual talks were held with the ca. 50 members of the NTI.

#### *Discussion on strategy*

The individual talks resulted in a 'programmatic debate' on the status of the NTI, its role as a local agent and its main focus for the future.

#### *Working with the advisory board*

Dr. Schumacher examined the organizational development of the NTI with a special focus on its advisory board. In particular, the board's role within the NTI, its internal allocation of responsibilities as well as additional staffing in order to strengthen networking capabilities have been intensively discussed with the individual members of the NTI. Pursuant to those discussions, a number of measures have been implemented by the board.

#### *Rudimentary „leadership development“*

Ideas proposed by members of the NTI, e.g. joint activities to get to know each other better, have been taken up and a committee has been set up to organize summer activities. Interested members took part in an introduction to CO and joined a workshop on the subject „corporate citizenship“.

#### **Results and experiences**

The project fostered the organizational development of the Netzwerk and offered it new ideas and impulses. The relations of members to one another were elucidated; in the process, the value of the work of other members was cast in a new light. To improve the future work, it is hoped that more common activities can be carried out and that measures aimed at resolving socially problematic situations can be bundled together. The members tend to prioritize concrete actions and cooperative endeavors directly connected to the project, rather than political debate. The Netzwerk is a forum for the exchange of experiences and for mutual support; it is also conceived, however, as an early warning system where certain subjects are concerned, notably immigration and integration.

After eight months the question if Community Organizing is transferable can't be answered by "yes" or "no". It has to be measured, if the principles foster the common will and the people's potentials. The use of Organizing principles is showing results in small elements, although it hasn't been the definite goal to create a broad based organization in the sense of Alinsky. Each Community Organization should be based on the values, routines and traditions of the people, whom it belongs. A more radical reorganization should enhance the potentials in comparison with the current methods and routines.