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## **Social Consortium: A Partnership of Community Agents**

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## Social Consortium: A Partnership of Community Agents

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### Social Consortia in the Social Policy Context

Policies and programs generated by government for communities are supposed to achieve positive transformations. The policies and programs are usually carried out by specialists with centralized decision-making power. Implementation within communities, however, may be riddled by difficulties caused not only by technical aspects, but by the the misunderstanding of the people they are supposed to benefit. Unexpected problems may derail what should have been a solution for certain social problems, and the beneficiaries end up feeling deceived or unsatisfied with the results; or it will take substantial time for them to understand or to accept what was supposed to be an improvement in their lives. This is a concern related to social policy that community psychology has been studying since the 1990's, and that has been considered as a difficult problem, not only for the communities but also both for the institutions responsible for those policies, and the agents external to the local community trying to carry them out. Lack of communication between those agents and community stakeholders has been identified as one of the causes for policy and program failure, but it is not the only or primary cause. Policy aims, actors and technical challenges constitute a complicated web that may be misdirected by policy agents that do not have enough information about who the intended beneficiaries of a certain policy are; community agents (stakeholders and all sort of insiders) do not understand or have not been informed about what was going to happen, and why.

One way to solve this kind of problems in the public (policy) domain is a type of negotiated agreement incorporating two types of external agents and a local community (or several communities in coalition) that was introduced in Venezuela, in the early 1990s, called Social Consortium (SC). The SC is tasked with executing social policies aimed at providing housing to low income sectors of the population; mainly people settling in the outskirts of cities. This type of local policy tool succesfully moved communities to the center of participation, with the capacity not only to provide input, but with decision-making control over the administration of funds. It has proved a useful and economic way to carry out and develop a social policy, that quickly spread throughout the country. The description that follows shows how different types of agents can work together to produce the desired results. There are difficulties

that can emerge, as is always the case in human tasks; specifically, if one of the three types of agents that should be collaborating fails to do so, the consortium stops. All the agents are necessary and all of them have to carry out their specific tasks in the appropriate way.

### Background

It is usual for communities to develop economic systems exchanging services, information or goods. Such exchanges only need a community internal organization, although a common language and culture also are useful in order to do that. This short information brief refers to social consortia, a type of organization less common than coalitions, consisting of a system of relationships among different types of agents, working together in order to obtain a result desired by a community, that otherwise would be impossible due to the amount of resources needed.

A social consortium (SC) is an alliance between different types of agents of social change, including in first place the community internal agents (IAs) such as stakeholders, leaders or key informants. They are joined by external agents (EAs) that collaborate with the community providing their knowledge and know-how. Among the latter are psychologists, social workers, anthropologists, sociologists, medical doctors and nurses, architects, engineers, and lawyers, according to the type of work needed by the community. And thirdly, but very important, there is a final agency provided by the State, acting from its public policies, providing the necessary funding.

Once a social consortium is organized from the community, according to its needs, by the two first types of community agents, it has to become a legal organization, able to demand governmental funds that will be used and administrated by the consortium. Once the State enters in this accord, providing the funds, it will keep control of the way the funds are used.

The document describing what probably is the first Consortium created in Venezuela (Catuche Social Consortium, 1993) defines Consortia as "the union of actors organized in order to impulse a common project, organized for coordination and negotiation, with the effective participation of an organized population" (Villanueva & Baldó, 1996). In legal terms a SC is a civil association, with no money-making aims. In Venezuela, this type of organization was traditionally created by external

agents who would be co-opted or appointed as members of Neighbours Associations and, Communal “Juntas” (boards). Such groups were used for external interest, and had very little to do with community people and their problems, except when elections were near and votes were wanted. That created a kind of phenomenon known as “political clientelism.”

### The Social Consortia Structure

Social consortia are probably a common fixture in trade, banking, commerce and the like. But in community psychology carried out with a participatory and reflective direction, they were employed for the first time in Venezuela at the beginning of the 1990's. A consortium is an organization created out of the convergence of organized communities and the voluntary participation of universities, NGOs, churches and other social institutions. Both the internal agents (IAs) and the external agents (EAs) need to generate an accord in order to produce a clear specific organization, with feasible goals that can be part of an existing public policy.

Besides the needs of a community and the capacity of community people to participate in the work to be carried out, there is the necessity to have professional knowledge, as well as funds that communities, especially those who are poor, lack. The funds provided by the State make possible the transformations the community needs; the know-how and professional capacity of the external agents make sure that whatever is going to be done will be carried out in a proper way, and the community will not only participate in the work but also control the decisions to be taken. Because even though the community may not know how to build, or how to cure, they know what they need and how they want that to be. So they are in charge. They are not passive receivers; they have control over the direction of the process.

### The Catuche Social Consortium: An Example

This Consortium was created in 1993. As it was formally (legal) organized, Catuche as an organization was inserted in the Public Register in 1994, by 32 community stakeholders, representatives of their community and Jesuit priests (EAs) of La Pastora (the sector of the city of Caracas, where Catuche is placed). The registered document states that it is a “Consortium for the urban and environmental development at the Catuche river banks.” This registered document is a condition for the reception of any government funds, as well as a guarantee of order and responsibility. Because of this condition, before the register document was created those 32 stakeholders decided to create a Civil Association (also an official juridical entity) called “Civil Association, not-for-profit, for the urban and

environmental development of the Catuche River margins” (1993). Although originally, only 32 community members were included in that association, those stakeholders did inform and consult beforehand with the different sectors of the Catuche community (about 10.000 inhabitants at that moment). The same process of consultation and information took place between the stakeholders and the external agents (professionals that would work in the project).

Other formal and very important activities were carried out at the same time. These included:

1. The formalization of internal agents as members of the Catuche Community General Assembly.
2. Every form of participation, as small as it may be, is accepted and fostered. That is a way of generating engagement and being informed of what is being carried out. All members of the community are part of the Assembly.
3. There are three aspects of the management of the SC in Catuche: the **first** one is decision-making. All decisions are taken by the Community Assembly. The assembly incorporates members of the civil association (base of the SC); they keep watch over the accomplishment of goals; they hear complaints and problems, providing solutions and, they approve or do not approve any changes that need to be made.

The **second** is the consortium body. It is in charge of developing and executing the projects; they administrate and manage the projects as well as payments and expenditures (accountancy). They make plans, obtain credit and, provide legal assessment. They also participate in the organization of community meetings to give information about progress made and results of the projects.

The **third** is the general operation. This concerns the organization of community participation, planning and general direction of the SC, and putting into action the decisions taken by the General Assembly. They also check the use of funds (usually that is carried out by three or four people).

Besides community members, there is a group of Consortiated Partners, including NGOs, universities, and professionals providing their knowledge and know-how, contributing in the same way as community members. Currently the 32 original creators of the SC have grown to 64 stakeholders. There are two delegates from each participating NGO (Fe y Alegría – Faith and Joy-, and FUDEP: Foundation for the Development of Popular Economy), plus an architect from Venezuela Central University, who has been in

charge of directing the construction of seven buildings (three four-stories high, four ten-stories high; plus 30 houses). The houses and the flats have been given to people who lost their shanties when the river flooded.

#### Psychological Results of the Catuche SC

- It has promoted community self-management.
- It has generated a sustainable community project, creating a territorial organization of the community space, plus establishing control of private and public areas, as well as organizing and retaining public services.
- It has supported the local economy in Catuche.
- It has fostered the creation of networks, as well as new alliances within the community.
- Quality of life has been improved.
- The voice of the community has been made relevant. The people and their leaders are very proud of being considered by International Organizations as a model. When in 2000 the Governor Office refused to provide the funds, the community association sued that Office, winning. The Governor had to provide the funding.

These results were possible due to the accord of the agents engaged in the SC, community, NGOs, the Catholic Church, professionals and workers, leaders, and stakeholders, all who joined the project, contributing to each activity, respecting the work being carried out. They all believed that in spite of the flood, the lack of money at a certain moment, and everyday difficulties, they were going, and are going to have a better place to live in. Engaged participation was fundamental. There is no such thing as low participation. All ways to participate are necessary, no participation is smaller.

Another important aspect was that both external and internal agents shared the same hope, have had the same belief in a future created by themselves, out of their work. Believing in the capacity of the community to conduct the project has also been an important asset, as has been the transparency in the use of the money and in the adjudication of flats (women with many children; families with elder kin and with many children, those who had lost their places). Having committed leaders, clear rules and a symmetrical conception of power allowed the members to file a suit against the government and win it.

#### Last (critical) comments

Catuche is not a paradise, it is just an example of a way in which EAs and IAs may join forces to do something useful and well carried out. Catuche has a community clinical psychology intervention programme, because many things happen that should not be happening, in that community. Their

leaders, who work for the community every day, are tired but at the same time they do not want anything that could be considered as bad, to be known out of Catuche, because that could be bad for their prestige as a community. The community deserves to be considered as perfect, because it has undertaken such a wonderful effort. That excess of care makes difficult the clinical work. Life goes on, bringing the good and the bad, the ugly and the beautiful, and the SC should not be seen as the solution to everything. But it is a good example of how when community agents of change manage to get together, understanding each other in service of a community, doing everything with the community, the specific results desired can be obtained.

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