

# A University-Community Partnership to Change Public Policy: Pre-Conditions and Processes

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**SUMMARY.** This paper describes a project aimed at promoting major change in government policy toward the growing problem of food insecurity in Israel. The project was initiated by Ben-Gurion University in collaboration with community service and social advocacy organizations. This joint action led to a dramatic change in government activity. The problem of food insecurity moved from a state of obfuscation to the establishment of a special ministerial committee mandated to develop policy guidelines for a national school lunch program. For higher education to contribute to the community, necessary preconditions must exist: Is the faculty committed to promotion of social change? Do the organizational and community environments legitimize university-sponsored activity for such purposes? Is the faculty competent to act effectively in the community and adopt strategies for political influence? Are there organizational mechanisms, action frameworks, and community contacts that enable collaboration for the purposes of social change? This case discussion uses the

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analytical framework developed by Taylor (1985) to evaluate the preconditions for action and the processes involved in facilitating university-community collaboration for promoting policy change. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2004 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]*

**KEYWORDS.** University-community partnership, public policy, social change, community organizing, food security, hunger

### **INTRODUCTION**

The decline of the welfare state in Israel, the conservative political climate, the erosion of social services and benefits, and the ongoing economic recession have exacerbated social problems such as unemployment and poverty, and have generated new ones, such as food insecurity and hunger. This situation is not exclusive to Israel, but is a global phenomenon the roots of which lie in economic globalization (Riches, 1997). The moral imperative that the social work profession promote social justice and demand activism (Mary, 2001) is embodied in the social workers' codes of ethics around the world (National Association of Social Workers, 2000; Mansbach, & Kaufman, 2003). In light of this imperative and of changing social conditions, social work organizations, including schools of social work and universities, must adapt their modus operandi to the new reality. One way higher education shows its involvement is through activity designed to solve social problems and promote social justice (Boyer, 1990; Hackney, 1986; Bringle, Games, & Malloy, 1999). Some schools have risen to the challenge by offering specializations in political social work and moral practice (Fisher, 2001) or by training students to work in social-change organizations and political frameworks (Moore & Johnston, 2002). Other institutions combine new curricula with innovative teaching methods, such as social activism, action research, and coalition building (Mizrahi, 2001).

The growing trend toward academic involvement in improving the community, and the imperative to teach community and social change intervention strategies to social work students, have given rise to the development of university-community projects integrating academic and community social change approaches. Through field experience and class work, students experience methods of social activism and contrib-

ute to meaningful community change while their teachers act as role models providing past knowledge, skills, and values. This enhances the students' commitment to act as social change agents after completing their studies.

In collaboration with eighteen local community human service agencies and two national social advocacy organizations, a community project for the promotion of social justice was initiated by faculty members and students of the Social Work Department at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev (hereafter: the Department). Aimed at promoting the right to food security in Israel, the project was designed to change the professional and public discourse on the subject, raise awareness, activate university and community agencies and organizations, and pressure policy makers to address the problem.

The project is described based on the experience of the author of this article as observer-participant, on documentation of the activity and publication in university newsletters, local and national newspapers, and on twenty detailed reports by students who took an active part. The experience gained in this project helps answer practical questions regarding higher education mobilization for social change: What conditions favor university-community collaboration for social change? What roles can schools of social work play in promoting community action aimed at influencing public policies? How can the impact of the intervention on the social problem, the community, and the university be evaluated?

### ***PRECONDITIONS FOR ACADEMIC MOBILIZATION***

Community-university collaboration for social change, like other collaborations and partnerships, should meet the traditional standards and roles of the university and community organizations. It should also confer benefits such as prestige and legitimacy on the parties involved within the university and the community (Battistoni & Hudson, 1997; Bailey & Koney, 1995; Zlotkowski, 1998).

Schools of social work are involved in the community as part of their traditional missions to train students, promote service and conduct research. Generally, however, they have not been involved in promoting social change because social activism by institutes of higher education can generate conflict. Both dissimilar organizational cultures, as well as power struggles can cause conflicts between university and community agencies (Austin et al., 1999). In addition, the activity requires a consid-

erable investment of resources, and tends to be controversial due to different organizational priorities and agendas within the university and its departments, and even among faculty members (Staudt & Thurlow, 2000). Like universities, community service agencies do not see their main role as social change agents (Specht & Courtney, 1994). In particular, community services that are government-sponsored, as are most Israeli service organizations, traditionally shrink from involvement in social activism (Mansbach & Kaufman, 2003).

What are the conditions and factors conducive to activism by institutes of higher education? Borrowing from an analytical framework developed by Taylor (1985), three main preconditions for the involvement of mainstream social work organizations in social-change activities. These include commitment, legitimacy, and individual and organizational competency. These three preconditions can be applied to universities and communities in the process of their collaboration for social change. First, university administration, dean, faculty members and students must feel a *commitment* to promoting social change, wish to take an active role on social issues, and be prepared to change their priorities to enable the activity to take place. Second, the target community must perceive social activism by the university as *legitimate*, positive (fostering good relations), and innocuous (not endangering the status of organizations that already exist in the community). Legitimacy is particularly important because the university's involvement in social change could disrupt the balance of power within the community. Nonetheless, commitment and legitimacy are not enough for the success of academic social activism. To effectively exploit these factors requires *competency*, including expert knowledge of the issues involved, the processes of social change, and community organizing. In addition, structures must be developed to foster university-community collaboration, and to assume leadership and responsibility (c.f., Austin et al., 1999). The development of these preconditions for action and the way they facilitated university-community collaboration for promoting policy in Israel are described.

## **BACKGROUND**

### ***The Problem of Food Insecurity***

By 1999, following reports by students and service agencies that clients were suffering from hunger, faculty members of the Social Work Department at the Ben Gurion University of the Negev became aware of

the increasing severity of the problem of food insecurity and hunger. The increase in poverty among low income people in Israel, of which hunger is a new and extreme manifestation, is not surprising. It is the outcome of major cuts in social services and National Insurance allocations in recent years (Swirski, 2002). The Negev area, one of the most socially and economically vulnerable regions in the country, has suffered greatly from these policies. It has the largest number of income-supplement recipients in Israel, and the Bedouin population (25% of the region's population) is the poorest in Israel (Korazim, 2003).

Although hunger in Israel is an unfamiliar problem, the Israeli government responded by ignoring or obfuscating the problem. It made no efforts to measure the extent of the problem, identify populations at risk, or devise solutions and programs to eradicate or reduce the problem. The government's only response was to encourage community and voluntary activity, as demonstrated by then Prime Minister Ehud Barak's request in 1999 to "open their hearts to the needy." The feeling among the public at large and among professionals and policy makers was that this was a passing crisis that could be solved by voluntary activity (Kaufman, 2001a). No community agencies or even social advocacy organizations demanded a change of policy.

In March 2000, the Department sponsored a public conference titled "Is there hunger in Israel?" at which members of the community and experts debated the problem. Following this conference, the problem of food security and hunger became a major focus of investigation in community intervention courses both on the graduate and undergraduate levels. The more the problem was investigated, the clearer it became that something should be done. The problem was increasing and needs were not being met. Since no institutions, agencies, or policy makers were taking action, it became clear that the Department would have to take a leading role to change these dynamics. This conviction reinforced the faculty and student commitment to social justice as a necessary precondition for social action. Faculty also saw this as an opportunity to integrate the theoretical teaching of social change and community organizing with real life practice.

Three developments, two of which were not directly connected to the problem of hunger, also occurred in 2000 and contributed to fulfilling the preconditions that enabled mobilization. These developments were the addition of social change courses to the curriculum and the promotion of action research, the establishment of a faculty-student forum for social justice, and the start of a university-community sponsored soup kitchen. The Department added social change oriented courses to the curriculum to enhance the willingness and competence of the students

to engage in social action. Since then, all first-year students are sent for their field placement to voluntary social-change organizations. In addition, courses that compliment field experience, such as "Building Community Coalitions and Partnerships" and "Community Action Research for Social Change" have been added to the BSW and MSW programs. Community action research integrates academic research with activities to promote change (c.f., Stoecker & Beckwith, 1992). Research of this type helps the community to define problems in an operative manner. It provides needed data for action, empowers the participants in the research, establishes foci of power within the community and activates a previously passive community (Rubin & Rubin, 1992). "The Joint Forum of Faculty and Students for Social Justice" (hereafter: the Forum) was also established in 2000. It continues on a voluntary, informal basis, and is headed by a faculty member with experience in the field of community organizing. The Forum initiated a number of community action activities on issues of social justice. In varying degrees, most of the Department's students and faculty participated in these activities. The more active students gained practical experience in community mobilization for social change. In addition, working relations evolved between the Forum and agencies in the community, such as the Union of Social Workers, social services in the Negev, advocacy organizations, clients' organizations, and the local and national media.

The third useful development was the establishment of a soup kitchen in 2000 by the Department faculty and students in collaboration with the university administration and community service agencies. The soup kitchen, the first of its kind in the region, was highly regarded by the community because it provided a needed service (Dafna-Tkoa & Witenberg, 2001). The soup kitchen also provided an opportunity for interested students and faculty to study the problem of hunger. However, an evaluation of the soup kitchen's activity and limitations (Kaufman, 2001a) as well as an assessment of the literature in fighting hunger in the US and other countries (c.f., Eisinger, 1998; Riches, 1997), led faculty and students to believe that voluntary activity can provide only a partial solution. Faculty and students who investigated the issue concluded that a new strategy must be developed to respond to the growing needs in the community. Taken together, these developments strengthened the Department's sense of commitment and sense of the legitimacy, while enhancing individual and organizational competencies.

## ***THE MOBILIZATION PROCESS***

### ***Setting Objectives***

In 2001, graduate students, most of whom were experienced field workers and directors of welfare agencies in the region, conducted a comprehensive analysis of the problem of hunger as a part of their community field placement. Aimed at changing the public state of inactivity regarding the policy aspects of the food security and hunger, the plan had three main objectives. The first objective was to define food insecurity as a social problem, thereby engendering a commitment to solving it. This meant fostering processes that would lead to a measurement and definition of the problem in a way that would transform the public and professional discourse. It was essential to cease treating food insecurity as a minor, episodic problem that could be handled by volunteers, and begin seeing it as a major growing complex social problem. Hunger needed to be seen as social problem that required a comprehensive public policy response. In order to define food insecurity as a problem, it was necessary first to collect data, to identify the population at risk, and to devise necessary concepts (Eisinger, 1998).

The second objective was to frame solutions based on the principle of social entitlement, thereby legitimizing the effort. According to Riches (1997), existing programs for combating hunger and food insecurity are, to a greater or lesser degree, associated with stigma. For example, programs based on voluntarism, such as soup kitchens, are perceived as stigmatizing. Programs based on social rights, such as income supplement allowances, are perceived as furthering choice and dignity. It was therefore important to develop alternatives to local and national policy, predicated on “the right to food security.” By defining food security as a social problem, the Department legitimized the participation of various community organizations in the public discourse regarding alternative solutions and services for victims. The third objective was to mobilize the university and community for policy change. The aim was to identify potential partners within the university and within the community, and to encourage them to collaborate and to take action to promote change.

### ***Researching the Problem***

In December 2002, under the supervision of faculty members, students conducted a community survey to measure levels of food security.

This was the first survey of its kind in Israel to use the Food Security Core Survey Module (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1999), an instrument widely used to measure food insecurity and hunger (Holben, 2002). The students surveyed 953 clients of 23 social services in 11 localities in the Negev, including cities, development towns, and Bedouin settlements. The goal of the survey was to examine the degree of food security among various population groups that are potentially at risk (Kaufman, Slonim-Nevo, & Anson, 2002). The questionnaire, which included the Food Security Core Survey Module and other questions, was developed by Department researchers and a group of students from the Community Action Research course.

A major challenge in conducting the survey was to secure the cooperation of the community services whose clients were the target population. In order to overcome concerns, especially among governmental service agencies, a strategy combining formal and informal tactics was used. The formal tactics included sending a letter from the Dean to all the service agencies in the region that provide field practicum placements for the students. The letter explained the importance of the research and its implications for policy change. It also offered the agencies several forms of assistance. These included the services of students to conduct the research, help with data analysis of the food security situation of the clients of each service, and faculty supervision and consultation for agencies interested in developing projects to promote food security for their clients. Informally, especially in the case of governmental service, graduate students employed in the service suggested to their superiors that the students conduct the survey as part of their academic work. This tactic was very successful and the students formed the bridge that enabled the mobilization and cooperation of eighteen agencies.

The findings of the survey (Table 1) caused tremendous repercussions. They received abundant media attention, including a front page headline article in one of the national newspapers (Sinai, 2002). The findings showed that only 28% of the households surveyed enjoyed food security, and that 50% of the children were at risk. The survey also found that twice as many Bedouin households suffered from food insecurity and hunger as did Jewish households (Kaufman et al., 2002). The report and the research findings were disseminated among community groups, professional agencies, and political institutions.

### *Strategies for Organizing*

In the wake of these findings, a conference titled “The Right to Food Security” was sponsored by the Forum at Ben Gurion University. The

TABLE 1. Food Security Among Welfare Services Clients in the Negev Area

	Food Secure	Children–Not At Risk	Food Insecure– with Hunger Evident	Children–At Risk
All sample	28%	50%	72%	50%
Jewish households	33%	40%	67%	60%
Bedouin households	10%	87%	90%	13%

purpose of the Conference was to discuss the findings and implications of the survey. The Conference was organized in collaboration with the community service organizations that participated in the survey. Speakers at the conference included the President of the University, representatives of service organizations, a representative of food-insecure and hungry families, social policy and public health experts from the university, food pantry heads, and community service organization directors. The conference proposed an alternative to voluntarism in the fight against hunger among disadvantaged populations in Israel (Alush, 2002, December, 26). Following the conference, the Forum launched a public campaign to promote the right to food security. The campaign strategy included the collection of signatures for a petition and the formation of a public lobby of organizations and institutions to campaign for eliminating hunger among schoolchildren. The petition demanded that the government take steps to measure the level of food security in Israel and to develop programs to help the food-insecure and hungry. Signatures were collected from both social services employees and their clients in an attempt to transform the professional discourse on the issue and encourage clients to organize. Hundreds of students rallied round the petition drive, and more than five thousand signatures were collected.

The Forum began the formation of a public lobby by convincing the leaders of two major national social change organizations, Yadid (The Association for Community Empowerment in Israel) and Shatil (The Empowerment and Training Center for Social Change Organizations in Israel), to collaborate in promoting the right to food security. The collaboration was established following another conference at the University which focused on child food security. This specific issue was selected because it was evaluated as meaningful for many in the community, widely felt, and potentially winnable (see, for example, Bobo,

Kendall & Max, 2001). The collaboration led to the formulation of the National School Lunch Program Bill, drafted by a lobby of Knesset (parliament) members from both the opposition and the coalition. The lobby was led by Knesset members Yuli Tamir (Labor–opposition) and Eti Livni (Shinui–coalition) (David, 2003; Yadid, 2004b). In addition, a pressure group consisting of parents' groups and professionals was organized for a campaign aimed at mobilizing grass roots support for the bill.

The joint campaign led to impressive results. A three month national petition drive in support of the school lunch bill secured one hundred thousand signatures (Yadid, 2004a). The growing public support for the bill led the Israeli Prime Minister, Arik Sharon, to establish a special task force which includes four ministers, among them the influential Treasury Minister, Bibi Natanyahu. The task force is mandated to develop guidelines for the operation of a national school food program (Alon, 2004). The vote on the bill and the presentation of the recommendations of the Ministerial Committee are expected soon.

Finally, based on collaboration between the services that participated in the research and interested faculty members, a number of community and research projects were developed. Those graduate students who were also agency workers played the role of a bridge between the university and the community. As part of their course work, they developed projects to promote research and food security at the local level and for special populations. One such project was a task force established in the city of Dimona to promote community food security whose recommendations won the support of Dimona's newly elected mayor (Azulai, 2003). Another was a study focused on food security problems among Bedouin populations and on alternative ways of addressing the special needs of this unique population (Bader & Saai'd, 2003).

In summation, the university-community mobilization to promote food security comprised two main stages. The preparatory stage (preconditions) fostered commitment, developed skills, expertise, and community legitimacy, and created the necessary frameworks for intervention. In this stage, initial contacts for contending with the problem were made, and frameworks were established to enable integration between teaching and research on the one hand, and community-based intervention for social change, on the other. Two frameworks were established: an academic framework (the Community Action Research Course and other community practice courses) and an organizational framework (the Forum for Social Justice). The intervention stage fostered research and public action aimed at influencing the professional

and public discourse. Through the introduction of new research findings and concepts, community organizations were mobilized to demand concrete solutions.

### ***EVALUATION***

The social change project attempted to achieve two different, but interdependent goals. The first was a political goal: to raise community awareness and organize it to pressure the decision makers to change policies. The second was an academic goal: to instill the values and skills associated with social activism and social change in the university community.

#### ***Public Policy Goals***

With social-change activity, it is hard to prove a direct correlation between effort invested and impact on public policy. Among other constraints, the process is lengthy, comprises many intermediate stages, and involves a variety of players (Dery, 1984). Nevertheless, this evaluation focuses on the attainment of the three objectives outlined in Forum's work plan: redefining hunger as food insecurity, framing solutions based on the principle of social entitlement, and mobilizing the community. The university-community activities helped to redefine the problem of hunger through conducting research and disseminating the findings. As a result of these efforts, the term "food security" has replaced the general term "hunger" in public discourse. "Food security" has become an integral part of the debate on the issue of poverty and deprivation in Israel. The Minister of Welfare, for example, has begun using the phrase "the right to food security" in connection with children (David, 2003). The research findings and the successful use of the food security measurement index have encouraged some major Israeli social research institutions, including the Ministry of Health, to include the Food Security Core Survey Module in their current research (Brookdale Institute, 2003).

The Prime Minister's support and the establishment of the governmental task force represent progress, but as yet the National School Lunch Program Bill has not been passed and no policy guidelines have been developed. The scale and nature of the school lunch program are undetermined. Furthermore, the Finance Minister estimates the cost of the program at 200-500 million American dollars (Alon, 2004). The government, which recently made additional cuts in social budgets,

may not allocate the funds necessary to supplement donations and parents' participation in the costs.

It was important to increase community activity in order to promote solutions to the problem. One success in this context was the mobilization of two major social-change organizations to place the struggle for the national school lunch program on their agendas and to work in coordination with the Forum on promoting legislation followed by a grass roots campaign (David, 2003). Another success was the local community food security projects developed by students based on collaboration between the Welfare Service and faculty members. There is also evidence of a change of direction in the public media debate on hunger. The debate, which in the past focused on the major role of voluntarism in solving the problem, now links social policy with food insecurity. It calls for the government to assume responsibility and guarantee food security as a social right, especially for children (Ochayon, Daskal, & Dror, 2003; David, 2003). Nonetheless, the process of formulating policy on food security is still in its infancy, and the real struggle over policy alternatives has yet to take place.

### *Academic Goals*

One of the main academic goals was to instill the values and skills of social activism and social change by offering practical experience in the field to students and the academic community. Most of the students and faculty members in the Department participated in the project to some extent. The students participating in the Community Action Research and in the Forum were the most active. Others were involved through participating in the survey, the petition drive, or by focusing on the problem of hunger in their course work. For most of the students, this was their first experience of organized activity for social change.

The expertise acquired through the project led several faculty members to collaborate in conducting research on various aspects of food security among special populations such as Bedouins, new immigrants, elderly, and drug addicts. Moreover, the extensive publicity the project received in the university newsletters, the Negev regional media, and national media added to the reputation of the Social Work Department and the Ben Gurion University administration as leaders in community involvement and social change activism.

## **DISCUSSION**

### ***The Role of the University***

This paper describes the active role played by the Department of Social Work and the University in collaboration with the community in order to promote social change. This role is not a traditional role of a higher education institution. Schools that wish to enhance their contribution to the community must first determine whether the necessary preconditions exist: Is the faculty committed to the social-change activity? Does the organizational and community environment legitimize the university sponsored social-change activity? Is the faculty competent, on both a theoretical and practical level, to act effectively in the community and adopt strategies for political influence relating to the problem at hand? Are there organizational mechanisms, action frameworks, and community contacts that enable involvement for the purposes of social change?

An analysis of the project demonstrates that apart from these prerequisites, other factors such as the academic context and agenda are important. In this particular case, the activity complemented and was consistent with the changes in the curriculum that promote social-change values, and with the university administration's emphasis on community involvement. This facilitated the allocation of necessary resources, especially precious time by both faculty and students. The activity also complemented the research agenda of some faculty members who were exploring various aspects of hunger, poverty, and social change. In order to ease the burden on students and faculty alike, the activity was integrated into existing curricular frameworks, such as courses, field practice, and research.

The university's main function was that of catalyst and organizer. Due to the absence of any organized activity in the outside community to define the problem or devise effective strategies, these functions did not clash with community organizations. The university's role as catalyst found concrete expression in research and public activities designed to expose the extent of the problem, and thereby change the community discourse. The Department played the role of organizer by encouraging various organizations in the community, particularly social-change organizations, to participate in defining the problem, developing alternatives, and demanding solutions from policy-makers. The success of this activity, in the short space of an academic year, indicates that the role of catalyst in conducting initial organizing activities is

compatible with higher education institutions, and can be implemented by dedicated faculty leaders. This is because the catalyst role provides a high level of control by the University over the nature of the project, its emphases, and schedule.

In this case, the main challenges were on the intra-organizational level: mobilizing and organizing students, faculty, and university administration for non-traditional university-community collaboration. A useful strategy in gaining support was the emphasis on maintaining high academic standards, particularly in research and community intervention, and the use of traditional academic practices such as research and conferences at the university.

### ***Challenges for University-Community Collaboration***

At the inter-organizational level, the challenge was mobilization community organizations to join the efforts of the university. Like the university, service organizations are not traditionally involved in social change activities. A useful tactic for promoting trust and minimizing participation costs was encouraging graduate students who were also workers in the services to act as a bridge between academia and the community. The data and analysis on food security by the university enabled the advocacy organizations, which were not familiar with the problem of food insecurity, to get media exposure. This was a meaningful participation benefit. The ongoing formal and informal relationships of the university and individual faculty members with the community services and the advocacy organizations promoted the collaboration.

The evolving partnership between the university and the advocacy organizations in order to promote the National School Lunch Bill requires changes in the role played by the university with these organizations. Acting as a partner has its own issues and difficulties both for university and community organizations. Conflicts may arise due to differences in organizational culture, pre-existing tensions among community organizations (inter-organizational rivalry, prestige, resources investment), and differences in values and modus operandi (Kaufman, 2001b). Much time is invested in trying to solve these conflicts. Therefore, the development of work procedures, the sharing of responsibility, and setting in place coordination and decision-making mechanisms is imperative (Austin et al., 1999).

Higher education practitioners who are interested in organizing university-community collaborations and partnerships for social change should be aware of the complexity of such activity. Commitment, legiti-

macy, and competency (Taylor, 1985) are the minimal preconditions. Other prerequisites are prior definition of, and agreement to, clear intervention objectives, and an obligation to continue with the activity until the objectives are met. The intervention creates expectations and elicits cooperation by various groups and organizations in the hope of receiving resources from the community change agent, in this case, the academic institution.

### **CONCLUSION**

Current socio-economic policies in Israel exacerbate social problems and even create new ones, such as food insecurity and hunger. The apathy and ineptitude of the authorities place greater responsibility on social workers, who are forced to seek answers on how to meet growing needs by increasing numbers of clients. Collaboration between the university and community agencies can modify this situation. Influencing social policy and promoting values of social justice are an integral part of the social work profession. It is the task of schools of social work to impart these values to students and to teach them intervention strategies aimed at bringing about social change. The universities' growing recognition of the need for academic intervention in addressing social problems enables faculty and students to promote social change values while conducting their traditional academic work.

Involvement in the community is not the exclusive province of the social work department. Other university departments that have links with the community, in fields such as medicine and public health, education, law, administration, and political science, also have a part to play in promoting social change. Institutions of higher education are not social-change organizations. They are dedicated to research and teaching. However, the involvement of higher education with community agencies related to social policy can result in positive outcome for both community and university.

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