

Christiane Schraml

Berlin Institute for Christian Ethics and Policy (ICEP)
c/o Catholic University of Applied Sciences Berlin
Köpenicker Allee 39-57
10318 Berlin
schraml@icep-berlin.de

Community Organizing in Germany – A Reflection on Ethical and Professional Principles

During the past years, the debate over civil society or *Bürgergesellschaft* has reached social work. At the center of the discourse lies the challenge to develop a new relationship between state, society and individuals. In Germany this development is characterized by the reorganization of the social welfare system and the perception that the *Bürgergesellschaft* could offer a solution to the ongoing social and financial crises. In the search for sustainable strategies the community, as an opportunity for local problem solving and participation, is going to play a substantial role in the debate. Growing social segregation, processes of exclusion and the lack of a comprehensive integration of migrants characterizes the general framework in German cities today. Within the context of an “active social policy” and “activation programs” lies the risk of individualizing social problems, reducing them to a territorial level and governance strategies (Kessl/Otto 2007).

In German social work the field of community work (*Gemeinwesenarbeit*) has traditionally developed strategies for community problem solving and participation. In the recent years this social practice mainly took place within government programs of social activation like “Soziale Stadt” (*social city*) or in form of the so called “Sozialraumorientierung” (*social space orientation*) to reorganize the public programs especially youth welfare services. However, these approaches expose different tensions for professional community work, e.g. between activation and empowerment or intermediate and partial strategies. Social work has to reflect on its theoretical, ethical and professional principles in order to enhance the professional identity of community work in the context of an active social welfare system.

Beyond community work, there is a growing practice which is rooted in the tradition of Broad-based Community Organizing as an empowerment strategy for local civil society. The German Institute for Community Organizing (DICO) is building community organizations (*Bürgerplattformen*) in the tradition of Community Organizing as a broad and power based approach in the manner of the Industrial Areas Foundation and its founder Saul Alinsky (Alinsky 1974). Broad-based Community Organizing is characterized by methodical, professional and normative guidelines. The approach aims to empower people – especially people who are marginalized in society, or as Alinsky put it, the “have nots” – to act together on their issues. Thereby community organizations are citizens’ organizations by creating a

democratic culture within local communities and providing a chance for real participation. Community organizations try to connect the different groups of a local area in action beyond the boundaries of race, religion, ethnicity or economics and enhance a culture of understanding and solidarity. As a professional strategy Community Organizing is guided by the principles of empowerment and capability building. Community Organizing claims to be financially, party political and ideologically independent.

In Germany the theoretical development of community work was always influenced by the discussion of this kind of Community Organizing. However, it had only a very limited influence and most practice was and still is orientated on moderate forms of local development or social planning rather than on political action. The practice of Broad-based Community Organizing in Germany began in the late 1990's in East-Berlin in the district Schöneeweide. In April 2002 thirteen local organizations founded the community organization "Organizing Schöneeweide – Menschen verändern ihren Kiez" (*Organizing Schöneeweide – People changing their neighbourhood*). The community organization „Impuls Mitte" in Hamburg was founded in 2006 and in 2008 the so far largest and most diverse community organization with forty organizations was founded in Berlin Wedding/Moabit. In these community organizations local organizations and groups like mosques, congregations, social corporations or self-help groups are working together on different issues to improve the living situations in their communities (Penta 2007).

Against this background the doctoral research project aims to analyze and reflect on Broad-based Community Organizing as a professional approach to generate impulses for the theoretical discourse of community-based social work. Guiding questions within in this project are: What is Broad-based Community Organizing in Germany? What are the normative and professional principles of this practice? How can these principles be understood in the context of democratic-ethical and social profession theories? The project is based on explorative qualitative research by participant observation of the community organizations and expert-interviews with the community organizers. The qualitative research aims to reconstruct the normative and professional principles at work Broad-based Community Organizing in Germany. The delineation of these practice-based fundamentals leads to reflection on their political-ethical and professional theoretical framework. Finally there will be a discussion of how these theoretically grounded principles can inspire community-based social work.

References:

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