Organizational Capacity Building Through Empowerment Planning: Lessons from East St Louis, Memphis, and Sicily
Session Participants

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East St. Louis, Illinois
From All-American City to Beirut by the River

- In 1959, ESL was designated an All-American City by NML and Look Magazine
- Between 1960 and 1980, the city’s lost 3/4s of its businesses – 12,000 well-paid industrial jobs
- By 1990, unemployment was 31%, poverty was 42%, and ESL had the highest violent crime rate in the US
- Prompting a HUD Official to refer to ESL as “America’s Soweto”
Just Another “Rust Belt City”

• Devastated by a combination of deindustrialization, suburbanization, and public and private disinvestment

• Whose residents suffered from what William J. Wilson called a new and more virulent form of American poverty

• Dominant urban policy approach towards severely distressed communities was Roger Starr’s “urban triage” or “planned shrinkage” – withdrawing resources from communities thought to represent “terminal cases” of urban decline (Necropolis)
“Wherever human beings are concerned, trend is not destiny.”

Rene Dubos
Birth of the East St Louis Action Research Project (ESLARP)

- Emerson Park women decided to transform the area surrounding their children’s child care center – Result: Shugue Park
- Undertook the development of a comprehensive plan that won an AICP National Award but generated no local investment
- Residents and students launch volunteer cleanup of illegal dump sites without funding
- Moved on to organize volunteer scrape-up, paint-up of elders’ homes
- Established a linked deposit program to support moderate rehab of “at risk” homes
Building Upon Initial Successes

• Formed a Habitat-like “infill housing” initiative
• Established the ESL Farmers Market
• Secured an extension of the Metrolink into East St. Louis
• Completed the Parsons Place Development Project
• Established Youth Build Charter School and Neighborhood College
• Re-opened the Katherine Dunham Centers for Arts and Humanities
Citizen Participation Techniques

- Formed a representative Steering Committee of local stakeholders
- Initiated an aggressive community media campaign
- Undertook several physical conditions surveys
- Conducted movers and shakers interviews
- Pursued door to door interviews with residents
- Organized monthly data analysis meetings
- Culminating in a well-attended Neighborhood Summit
Social Inventions for Citizen Participation/Empowerment

Adoption of “Ready, Fire, Aim” approach to community planning – undertaking meaningful action projects throughout the planning process to overcome residents’ skepticism regarding the possibilities of change.

Paint-up, scrape-up work weekends
Construction of Illinois Avenue Playground
Development of the ESL Farmers Market
Establishment of the ESL Neighborhood College

- We are not even the flea on the tail of this dog – *Richard Settle, EPDC*
- We want similar training as your graduate students are receiving
- Decision to create the neighborhood college
- 200 ESL residents complete 8 non-credit courses on the fundamentals of bottom-up, bottom-sideways planning
- Classes cover community organizing, non-profit management, grantsmanship, resident-led crime prevention

First class on direct action organizing – 15 expected, 35 attend.
Key Outcomes of this Social Invention

- $40 million in improvements
- Ended population and income losses
- Encouraged organizing in other East St. Louis neighborhoods
- Popularized “empowerment approach” to resident-led revitalization planning
- Led to successful replication in other severely distressed urban communities
- Provided a transformative professional education for hundreds of planning and design students who have gone on to become key “opinion leaders” in the fields of affordable housing and community development