

Chapter 22

Democracy from Below

Final Draft, August 2009

Most people understand democracy as a system of free and fair elections along with various kinds of civil rights that make such elections meaningful – freedom of association, freedom of speech, freedom of the press. This kind of democracy is called *representative* democracy because the process by which citizens are involved in actually making the collective decisions carried out by the state is by choosing representatives to make those decisions.

Representative democracy is, of course, a critical way of translating the ideal of democracy into practical institutions in a complex society. But it does not fully capture the ideal itself and it does not exhaust the empirical ways in which democracy takes place in American society. Throughout American history there has been a second conception of democracy which has influenced both the ideals and their practical realization: *direct* or *participatory* democracy in which citizens are directly involved in different ways shaping public policy and its implementation.

FORMS OF DIRECT CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN DEMOCRACY

Direct citizen participation in democracy takes many different forms. Here is just a partial list of examples:

1. *Juries*. In a jury, the task of deciding court cases is handed over to ordinary citizens. Such decisions are a direct exercise of a critical the power of the state – the power to decide on the guilt or innocence of people accused by the state of crimes and sometimes decide on their punishments as well, and the power to resolve disputes among parties in civil cases. In many countries such decisions are made by professionals employed by the state, trained in the law and judicial rules, but in the United States defendants and litigants have the option of choosing to have these decisions made by ordinary, fellow citizens. This does not mean that juries invariably make reasonable decisions. Jurors can be heavily biased in various ways and can be manipulated by judges and attorneys. Nevertheless, where the jury system is strong and jurors feel a strong sense of civic obligation to act in a fair manner, they embody the ideal of equality before the law that is central to democracy.
2. *Referenda*. Most laws in American democracy are passed in various kinds of legislatures – city councils, county boards, state legislatures, the U.S. Congress – by elected representatives. But in some states citizens have the right, if they can get a sufficient number of signatures on a petition, to get a proposed law put on a ballot in which citizens vote directly the proposed legislation. In some states like California, Oregon and Washington, hundreds of laws have been passed in this matter. Referenda have been championed by people who believe that professional politicians are likely to be beholden to special interests and elites and that ordinary citizens are in a better position to vote for the public interest. Critics argue that referenda are subject to the same kinds of

distortions of money in politics that plague ordinary elections, particularly since referenda are often on the ballot in special elections with very low turnout. The problems of rational ignorance that plague voting for candidates can be even more serious in voting for complex legislative measures, since the cheap information voters receive through political ads will tend to be simplistic. Referenda are a form of direct democracy, but one which is potentially easily manipulated by many of the forces that also distort representative democracy.

3. *Open public hearings.* Particularly in local political contexts, public hearings can be a vibrant way for the public to directly affect public policy. When a city council or a school board holds a public hearing on a controversial matter and hundreds of citizens line up to speak about the issues, it can be more difficult for the elected officials to make their decisions through back-room deals. Of course, public hearings can be packed by well organized small groups that give the impression of much broader support for some side of an issue than actually exists. They can also sometimes be just a symbolic side-show, window-dressing to create the appearance of responsiveness. But they can also contribute to genuine public input that affects decisions of politicians who are prepared to listen and take them seriously.

4. *Public issue campaigns.* In a public issue campaign, citizens mobilize petitions, letter writing, telephone calls and other means of communication to express their views on some specific issue to public officials. The general idea is that a well-organized campaign of this sort creates a sense of the strength and passion of public opinion around some issue. Since elected officials want to be re-elected, they are particularly sensitive to instances of strongly held views since groups with passionate views are more likely to mobilize for or against them in electoral campaigns. This sensitivity to the potential of mobilized constituents also opens public issue campaigns to manipulation by well-financed groups, especially under contemporary communications technologies where it is easy to organize millions of emails.

5. *Social protests.* Throughout American history people have engaged in public rallies and demonstrations, and sometimes in civil disobedience in various forms, in an effort to shape public policy. Public protests potentially do a variety of things: they can bring to the attention of a passive public a moral issue which has not gotten sufficient attention, and thus contribute to changing public opinion; they can raise the specter of disruption and disorder, and thus force elites to take some kind of action; they reaffirm to the protestors their sense of solidarity and purpose, and provide a context for recruiting new participants; they can demonstrate the seriousness of commitment of a particular constituency and thus, like public issue campaigns more generally, make elected officials concerned about reelection.

Some of the most fundamental political issues in American history have been heavily shaped by mass movements that engaged in a wide range of peaceful and disruptive protests. The Abolition Movement against slavery in the 19th century contributed to the rising sense of political crisis that culminated in the Civil War and the eventual end of slavery. The Suffragette Movement for the vote for women was a key force that ultimately resulted in getting men to be willing for women to vote. The Civil Rights movement used illegal sit-ins in segregated facilities and mass marches to dramatize to the world the moral failings of racial oppression in the United States. This put

tremendous pressure on the Federal Government to intervene in the Southern States and eventually to pass the Civil Rights legislation of the 1960s.

Protests and demonstrations do not only have political effects on the most visible stage of national politics. Many kinds of struggles over local political issues also involve public protests, sometimes with clear effects on policies. City councils are sometimes quite responsive to public demonstrations and picketing over zoning decisions and development projects. Universities introduced Black Studies programs in response to demands and demonstrations by African-American students. Protests in the late 1990s on campuses over the use of sweatshop labor in producing apparel with university logos lead some universities to adopt labor codes of conduct in the contracts for such products. Countless other examples could be given.

Social protests can serve to advance the principles of equality and democracy, but they are also tools for highly motivated exclusionary groups to exert pressure on public officials. At times in American history the KKK used social protests to enforce and extend laws of racial domination. Social protests are often tools by NIMBY movements (not in my backyard) which result in placing undesirable public facilities like toxic waste dumps close to vulnerable, disadvantaged populations who are less able to mount an effective protest. While probably, on balance, public protests by social movements have enhanced democracy in America, the record is not unequivocal.

6. *Empowered participatory governance*. This is the least familiar form in which direct democracy exists in the United States and it has yet to be given a widely used label.¹ In empowered participatory governance, certain kinds of government activity which would otherwise be controlled by government bureaucracies or elected officials are delegated to decentralized bodies in which citizens directly participate in making the decisions. The oldest form of this kind of empowered participatory governance in the United States is the New England Town meeting. In the traditional New England town meeting, important local policy matters are decided not by an elected town council but by citizens in a meeting who directly vote on things like local taxes, town spending and town ordinances. Mostly as communities grew larger and more heterogeneous, and as issues of local government became more complex, this kind of direct democracy has disappeared. In the last decades of the twentieth century, however, new and innovative forms of empowered participatory governance have emerged. As we will see below, this potentially creates opportunities for a much more deeply engaged process of democratic citizenship in solving pressing and difficult problems.

All of these constitute forms of democracy from below in which citizens attempt to directly influence the shape of public policies. Mostly they have the character of either having very limited scope of action – as in juries – or of primarily being a way of applying periodic external pressure on the real centers of power. Only the last, empowered participatory governance, constitutes a way of bringing citizens inside of the decision-making process of government in a regular and on-going way.

¹ The term “empowered participatory governance” to describe these kinds of institutional arrangements was coined by Archon Fung and Erik Olin Wright in *Deepening Democracy: institutional innovations in empowered participatory governance* (London and New York: Verso, 2003).

The rest of this chapter will explore these new forms of democracy from below. We will begin by explaining how this kind of direct democracy can fit into a modern, complex, political system. The key to this is understanding the relationship between “passing a law” and “implementing a public policy.” This will be followed by a discussion of a striking example of this new institutional form: the development of urban participatory democracy in one section of the city of Boston.

THE PROBLEM OF TURNING LEGISLATION INTO FUNCTIONING POLICIES

The normal, simple way that most people think of democratic government is that laws get passed by elected legislatures and then they are carried out by administrative organizations that implement the laws that have been passed. There is, however, an immediate problem which this simple idea faces: what is called “implementation” of a law often involves creating a very wide range of concrete rules and programs. This is an issue even in cases where legislatures pass laws that seem very straightforward and uncomplicated. Consider, for example, what happens when a law is passed which says the speed limit is 65 mph on highways. Here the administrative task of implementing the law is fairly straightforward: putting up speed limit signs and instructing police officers to enforce the limit. But even in this case there are still issues in implementation that are not specified in the law itself: how strict or lax will the enforcement be? Will motorists be stopped if they are driving at 67 mph, 70 mph, 73 mph, or what? How many police will patrol the highways and what technologies will they use to measure driving speed? These decisions made after the law is passed in the legislature will determine how rigorously and effectively the rule is actually enforced. Anyone who has traveled through many states knows that there are some places where the speed limit is quite rigorously enforced, and others in which you can consistently exceed the speed limit by 15 mph without worrying even though the laws on the books are the same.

Many pieces of legislation pose enormously greater problems than speed limits, and the distinction between passing the legislation and implementing the actual policy begins to break down. Think of legislation that provides funding for urban redevelopment, or public transportation, or education, or legislation that protect endangered species or regulate pollution. In these instances legislation creates a program with general guidelines and principles, but this is still very far from actual, functioning policies in the world.

The traditional way of solving this problem of implementation is to empower an administrative agency to create the detailed rules and programs and put them concretely into practice. The term that is used for this sort of approach is “bureaucracy”. The style of implementation that corresponds to bureaucracy is what is often referred to as “command-and-control.” The procedure is this: At the top of the bureaucracy are political appointees who are responsible to the elected executive of the government – the president in the case of the federal government, governors in the state, mayors in cities. The political heads of the bureaucracy oversee the process of rule setting and implementation. Often they set up special advisory panels of experts to help with this rule-setting task. In some instances these panels include representatives of powerful interest groups, but sometimes they are just experts of one sort or another. Below this political directorate of the bureaucracy are professional, career civil servants who do most of the practical work. For example, in the case of the endangered species act these include scientists of various

sorts responsible for studying the problem and identifying endangered species, field agents who monitor sites, and of course lots of people we commonly call “bureaucrats” who manage the paperwork involved in all of this.

This kind of system is called “command-and-control” because the rules are imposed from above by centralized command, and then the bureaucratic staff controls the practical implementation of these commands. Of course there are lots of variations, but this is the basic idea. This kind of structure is used in most policy areas: pollution control, health and safety regulation, welfare policy, public housing, parks and recreation, community development, and so on.

Suppose that legislation is passed to give cities funds for urban development projects to deal with the problem of deterioration and blight in parts of a city. The money can be used for a very wide range of purposes: improving urban infrastructure like sewers, lighting and streets; demolishing dilapidated buildings and providing subsidies of different sorts to build apartments or office buildings; renovating parks, libraries and other public amenities; improved public transportation; etc. The question then becomes how the city decides precisely what sorts of things to do. Typically there is a planning office in the city, and often for big projects a special commission will be set up by the planning department to develop the basic contours of a long term plan. This commission will consist of experts from the planning department, possibly other city officials, sometimes civic leaders of different sorts, sometimes outside experts. Initial plans will be prepared and public hearings organized. Proposals for particular projects will be reviewed by the commission. Eventually a general plan is devised from this process, and then specific projects begun. The funds are allocated and the projects are monitored (more or less effectively) by city officials.

Democracy enters this bureaucratic process in three ways: First, the bureaucracy is accountable to the elected executive, and thus there is an electoral constraint on the policies implemented by the bureaucrats. Second, in at least some of the rule-setting and planning processes, public input is solicited, and sometimes this has a democratic character. And third, the bureaucracy is itself subject to rules and courts, so if you feel that a bureaucracy has implemented a rule that violates the principles of some law, you can sue the bureaucracy in court. All of these are important; it is surely worse to live in a world in which government bureaucracy cannot be challenged in courts, in which there is no open public input into implementation decisions, and in which the leadership of the bureaucracy is not accountable to elected officials. Still, the democratic constraints often seem quite weak. Many people see government bureaucracy as unresponsive and undemocratic. What is worse, because of the capacity of powerful interests and well-funded lobbyists to influence centralized bureaucracies, it often happens that the process of policy implementation gets captured by special interests, and this further erodes their democratic character.

AN ALTERNATIVE: EMPOWERED PARTICIPATORY GOVERNANCE

Empowered participatory governance is an alternative way of creating concrete implementations of legislation for some kinds of public policies. The basic idea is this: There are many public policies, including national policies, in which the actual implementation of the policy can be significantly decentralized to quite local units and in

which ordinary citizens can become actively involved in working out the practical details of implementation. The idea here is not simply to remove certain policies from centralized bureaucracies, but to create new participatory mechanisms for citizens to become directly involved in policy formation and policy implementation. This will be especially feasible in instances in which citizens have formed civic action groups of various sorts engaged in trying to solve in practical ways various kinds of problems faced by their communities. The trick is to figure out institutional arrangements in which such civic associations can become actively linked to government administration in ways that genuinely empower them to shape the process of rule implementation and program development.

The United States has a very long tradition of civic activism and voluntary association. The 19th century French social commentator, Alex De Tocqueville, saw this penchant for Americans to join voluntary associations as one of the defining characteristics of American society, one of the things that contributed to the vibrancy of our democracy. Such associations contributed to a dense, collectively organized civil society in the 19th century and into the 20th.

Many sociologists believe – we think incorrectly – that there has been a sharp decline in such participation in voluntary associations over the last 50 years and that this has led to a serious weakening of civil society in the US.² What has for sure happened is a decline in certain traditional forms of association – especially organizations like fraternal clubs and traditional civic associations – but there has also been a rise in a new kind of association, grass roots associations organized around particular social, environmental, and political issues. Often these associations function mainly as pressure groups, protesting policies and putting pressure on public officials. This is certainly the traditional way that civic associations play a role in democracy. But in halting and uneven ways they have also taken on a more energetic role in the actual process of governance.

The best way to understand what this is all about is to look at a particular example in some detail. We will then discuss the broader implications of this kind of participation for a revitalization of democracy.

THE DUDLEY STREET NEIGHBORHOOD INITIATIVE³

The Dudley Street neighborhood is an area with about 23,000 residents located two miles from downtown Boston. Demographically it is a racially and ethnically diverse community made up primarily of African Americans, Hispanics and Cape Verdeans.

² For discussions of the possible decline in civic associations in the United States, see Robert W. Putnam, *Bowling Alone* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000) and Theda Skocpol, *Diminished Democracy: from membership to Management* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004)

³ This account draws heavily from a superb account of the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative by Peter Medoff and Holly Sklar, *Streets of Hope: the fall and rise of an urban neighborhood* (Boston: South End Press, 1994) and from a documentary film, *Holding Ground*. For additional information on this experience, see the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative website, www.dsni.org.

Only about 4% are white.⁴ Economically, it is one of the poorest neighborhoods in the city of Boston with unemployment and poverty rates roughly twice as high as for the city of Boston as a whole.

In the early 1980s the Dudley Street neighborhood was also one of the physically most devastated parts of the city. As a result of highly discriminatory urban housing policies in the 1960s and 1970s, chronic neglect by the city, and a persistent problem of arson, by 1985 21% of the parcels of land (1,300 parcels) in the area were vacant. The Boston Arson Prevention Commission argued in 1985 that much of this arson was probably the result of development interests wanting to displace people from the area. The Commission wrote, “Many of the buildings which have burned in this area [in 1985] were among the approximately 75 abandoned buildings which area residents would like to see developed by and for local, low-income residents. Other fires have occurred in buildings currently occupied by low-income tenants that appear destined for Condo Conversion...It is obvious that this increase in serious fires in the Sav-Mor area [part of the Dudley Street neighborhood] is directly related to the increased speculation due to the [Boston Redevelopment Authority] Dudley Square Revitalization plan.”⁵ The vacant lots created by abandonment and arson became a dumping ground for all kinds of trash and garbage. Private contractors for city garbage collection routinely – but illegally – used some of the lots as trash transfer stations. Residents of Boston also dumped refuse in the area. Streets were littered with abandoned cars.

This was the context in which the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative was founded in 1985. A private foundation, The Riley Foundation, had been involved in making grants for various kinds of projects in poor sections of Boston for some time. In 1984 it helped create the Dudley Advisory Group to formulate a broad strategy for development for the area. This group had roughly 30 regular members from various community organizations and agencies connected to the area. The group met regularly to formulate proposals and create a clear agenda which would facilitate funding from the Riley Foundation and other sources. It formally renamed itself the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative (DSNI) in January 1985.

In February 1985 the DSNI organized a large public meeting to present its ideas to the community. The organizers of the meeting fully expected to be greeted with enthusiasm by local residents. After all, they were proposing a broad agenda for neighborhood improvement and for the infusion of significant funds for a variety of constructive community development projects. Instead, they were greeted with considerable skepticism and even hostility. Some of the neighborhood people at the meeting expressed deep resentment at being told what was best for their community by do-gooder outsiders. As one of the participants in the meeting declared, “Who the hell are you people and what do you want?...Who is Riley? Why should we trust you?”⁶ Many people were especially incensed by the composition of the proposed 23-member

⁴ Data are for the year 2000, reported in the “Dudley Neighborhood Profile”, June 2003, prepared for the Urban Village Working Group, DSNI, available at www.dsn.org.

⁵ Quoted in Medoff and Sklar, p. 68, from the City of Boston Arson Prevention Commission, *Report to the BRA on the Status of Arson in Dudley Square*.

⁶ Quoted in Medoff and Sklar, *op.cit.* p.53

governing board of the DSNI, which was dominated by outsiders and had only 4 positions reserved for community members.

Many residents were extremely cynical towards these kinds of lofty plans for neighborhood revitalization. They had heard such things before, but nothing much changed. In the specific case of the Dudley Street neighborhood in 1985 this general cynicism had been intensified by the recent release of the city of Boston's own development plans for the area. As described by Peter Medoff and Holly Sklar, the Boston Redevelopment Authority's "Dudley Square Plan" was a classic urban development project that would lead to gentrification of housing and a large-scale displacement of existing low-income residents:

The BRA proposed a "New Town" strategy with a \$750 million complex of office towers, hotels, housing, historic parks and light manufacturing in the northern Dudley areas. The plan called for building high-, moderate- and low-income housing – with "home ownership opportunities for families with incomes as low as \$20,000." That wasn't very low. Boston's median family income was only \$22,200 in 1984....Many saw the "New Town" strategy as the old "urban removal" ... The Bra admitted that its strategy "could lead to displacement of existing residents, the gentrification of existing single-family neighborhoods, and jobs for 'new' residents at the expense of current residents."⁷

Given that the DSNI was dominated by educated white outsiders, it was perfectly reasonable for residents of the Dudley Street area to think that in some way the DSNI the part of this larger scheme.

In a situation like this one might have predicted that the organizers of the meeting and the financial backers of the project would have abandoned their efforts, feeling that they were not wanted by the community. Instead, they acknowledged that they had screwed up by not involving ordinary members of the community from the start. So, instead of retreating, they proposed that the whole process be restarted on a new footing, with a new governing board in which a majority of the seats would be held by people directly elected by the community:

...there would be a 31-member board, with a resident majority – a minimum of 12 community members and 4 additional spots designated for residents. The multiracial, multiethnic character of DSNI was reaffirmed. Equal minimum representation was provided for the neighborhoods four major cultures – Black, Cape Verdean, Latino and White – rather than representation based simply numerically on Dudley's population. Equal minimum representation was chosen to strengthen collective action and underscore the common stake of all people in rebuilding Dudley. The Riley Foundation, the dollars beyond DSNI at this point, never sought a seat on the board and, in keeping with the spirit of community control, it never occurred to the DSNI members to propose that they do.⁸

The result of this restructuring was the emergence of a community organization that was genuinely controlled by the members of the community and whose projects grew out of intense discussion within the community over their most pressing priorities.

At this point the DSNI was already an interesting example of an inclusive community association working in a democratic manner for improving the conditions of

⁷ Medoff and Sklar, *op. cit.*, p. 51-52

⁸ Medoff and Sklar, *op.cit.* p.57

life for people in a poor area of a large city. But it was not yet, really, an instance of deepening democratic through empowered participatory governance, for it still had no systematic relationship to city government. This was to change over the next several years.

Ray Flynn was elected Mayor of Boston in 1984 after a bitter election campaign against a popular Black politician, Mel King. In the aftermath of the election, Flynn was eager to find allies in the black community that could ease some of the racial tensions generated by the election. The DSNI suited this purpose well. While it is probably also the case that Flynn did see the DSNI as a constructive effort to do something positive in one of the most blighted parts of the city, the level of city support was also clearly motivated by political considerations. The activists involved in the DSNI were not naïve about this, and there were concerns about being “used” by the city, but nevertheless they saw this as an opportunity to increase the real power of the association and its capacity to accomplish meaningful change.

The pivotal steps that consolidated a new kind of relationship with city government occurred in 1987 and 1988. Two things were especially important. The first was the adoption of a comprehensive strategy of participatory community planning to generate both a long-term vision for the revitalization of the community and an inventory of concrete plans for specific development projects. Participatory planning meant creating a community planning committee and the holding a long series of community-wide meetings in which both visions and projects were discussed. The result of this process was the *Dudley Street Neighborhood Comprehensive Revitalization Plan* which was subsequently adopted by the city as the official framework for future development of the community.

The second decisive development was a solution to the problem of how to control the 1300 parcels of vacant land in the Dudley Street area. The disposition of this vacant land for constructive community purposes was critical for the revitalization plan. The city of Boston owned a significant number of these parcels, and many of the private parcels were delinquent in paying taxes to the city and in various stages of the process of foreclosure, but much of the land remained in private hands. The question was: who would control the actual disposition of this land and what would be the process through which it could be used for community development? The solution was dramatic, controversial and unprecedented. It had two components: granting the DSNI the power of eminent domain by the city over the acquisition and disposition of the land, and creating a community land trust for the long-term ownership of the land.

Initially the residents of the community were very suspicious of the idea of the DSNI having the power of eminent domain, for in the past eminent domain had been used by planning authorities to displace people from their homes in order to demolish existing structures for purposes of “development”. Often this resulted in low-income housing being replaced by office buildings and luxury apartments. The Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative was committed to development without displacement, and after all of this was explained in a series of community meetings, the community enthusiastically embraced the idea a community-controlled power of eminent domain.

The idea of community land trusts was completely unfamiliar to most people. Most people assume that ownership of buildings and ownership of land go together. What a community land trust does is break apart these two aspects of real estate. This enables the community to remove from the pressures of the market the land, and therefore exert significant control over the price at which the buildings on that land are sold. This provides a way of building affordable subsidized housing and then ensuring that it remains affordable as it is bought and sold over time. The DSNI set up a new nonprofit association, Dudley Neighborhood Incorporated, as a community land trust authorized by the Boston Redevelopment Authority to acquire lots via the power of eminent domain.

By the end of 1988 these elements were in place. In the years that followed, the DSNI embodied the ideal of empowered participatory governance by involving members of the Dudley Street community in the actual exercise of power over a very wide range of decisions concerning the use of resources and land. As summarized on the DSNI website, by 2008 over half of the 1,300 vacant lots had been rehabilitated for homes, gardens, parks, an orchard, playgrounds, schools, community centers and a Town Commons. Over 400 new homes for low-income people had been built and over 500 housing units rehabilitated.⁹ The demographic profile and economic conditions of the residents themselves had not changed much. Average incomes are still very low and the community is still composed largely of minorities. But it is no longer a blighted disintegrated crime-ridden community.

Of course, the scale of these projects would not have been possible without the infusion of a great deal of outside funding, both from the government and from private foundations of various sorts. However, the level of funding alone would not have generated such consistent positive changes on the ground. This depended on the robust forms of participation and community empowerment through which these funds were used. Gus Newport, the executive director of the DSNI from 1988-1992, describes the process this way: “The chief lesson from Dudley Street is that communities need to have complete control over the planning process. That doesn’t mean that you can’t use professionals. But you must remember that the people living there are the experts. Community people are usually taken for granted. But here they look over everything and analyze it. They ask a lot of questions. Even people with little education. There are people with little education who have great ideas.”¹⁰

WIDER PROSPECTS FOR DEMOCRACY FROM BELOW

The last quarter of the 20th Century was a period of general retreat in the United States from the democratic ideal of an affirmative state actively engaged in solving collective problems. One part of this retreat was the promotion of a wide variety of schemes to make various aspects of the state function more like markets. Sometimes this meant simply turning over to the private sector various state responsibilities, but other times it

⁹ <http://www.dsni.org/timeline.shtml>

¹⁰ Quoted by Jay Walljasper “The Dudley Street Example” *Citizen at Large*, June 2000 (www.consciouschoice.com/2000/cc1306/citizen1306.html)

involved the creation of public-private partnerships for carrying out public functions. Such partnerships had been in existence the 1960s as a way of involving various kinds of community groups and other associations of civil society in implementing public policy. While in the neoliberal era such partnerships often reduced democratic accountability, there are occasions when it contributed to the expansion of opportunities for real democratic empowerment.

The Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative is one prominent of example where this occurred, but it is not the only example. To list just a few other examples:

- The *Minneapolis Neighborhood Revitalization Program*. This program allocated in the early 1990s \$400 million in public funds for Minneapolis neighborhood groups to spend over a twenty year period in a variety of improvement projects.¹¹ While there was considerable variation across the city in the level of energetic participation, in at least some neighborhoods there was very active citizen involvement in formulating plans and implementing projects.
- *Communities Organized for Public Service (COPS)*, an affiliated program of the Industrial Areas Foundation in San Antonio.¹² COPS, founded in 1974, is one of the oldest projects of community-based participatory planning in the United States. Organizationally, it is a coalition of grassroots associations rooted in the Mexican-American community in San Antonio. COPS organizes an elaborate series of meetings of residents in homes, churches and schools to discuss the kinds of projects they would like. Initially this is an open-ended discussion, which of course means that residents want many more projects done than are possible. But this is still important for it makes people aware of the range of projects that are needed. Once this list is formulated, there is then an extended process of trimming, prioritizing, bargaining, discussions of which projects to put off for the future, etc. Those discussion take place is a variety of venues in which active citizen participation plays a vital role. The process culminates in a plan agreed upon by community leaders and city council representatives.
- *Community Policing in Chicago*.¹³ This is a very different example. The general idea of “community policing” is for police departments to operate in such a way that they cultivate closer, less antagonistic ties to people in the community. In Chicago in the 1990s there was an attempt to enhance the quality of this engagement by creating regular community “beat meetings” in which residents could interrogate the police and help set concrete policing priorities for their neighborhood. Each month the police would then have to report back to this participatory forum about what they had done in response to these priorities.

¹¹ Elena Fagotto and Archon Fung, “Empowered Participation in Urban Governance: the Minneapolis Neighborhood Revitalization Program”, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, volume 30:3, September 2006, pp. 638-55.

¹² For a discussion of COPS, see Mark Warren. *Dry Bones Rattling: Community Building to Revitalize American Democracy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001

¹³ Archon Fung. *Empowered Participation: reinventing Urban democracy* (Princeton University Press, 2006).

Many other examples could be given. And, of course, many more examples could be given of attempts at creating forms of direct community democratic empowerment which fail. While it is impossible to have a real census of such initiatives so that we could measure the rate of success, it is almost certain that the vast majority of attempts at building democratic empowerment from below fail. This is hardly surprising since most such initiatives occur against a hostile, unsupportive background. But even when there is some real support from the centers of power, building this kind of community democratic capacity may be difficult. Peter Medoff and Holly Sklar, in reflecting on the lessons from the tremendous success of the Dudley Street process, write:

Communities that are unorganized, have forged little or no consensus as to what they want to see done and have not yet identified resources to bring to the table cannot be expected to participate as equal partners with government and private sector leaders...The result of this premature partnership is almost always failure.

To forge effective partnership the community must be organized well enough to be an equal partner at the table, not a junior partner. It must participate out of strength, so that it can pursue its own agenda and not be suffocated or cooperated by the agenda of others.....

Though Boston city officials claim to have developed partnerships with other neighborhoods based on the DSNI precedent, the results have been mixed at best because no other neighborhood has yet won the community control necessity to make that kind of partnership work.¹⁴

For these innovative forms of empowered participatory democracy from below to flourish, therefore, it is essential for there to be autonomous representative community organizations in civil society capable of sustaining the arduous process of participatory planning. If such associations do not exist and if progressive city officials are serious about democracy from below, then, in Medoff and Sklar's words, they need to give "the community time and resources to organize itself and to create a representative community organization..."¹⁵ Since city officials will rarely be interested in fostering this kind of autonomous popular power, the expansion of the possibility of democracy from below will almost always depend upon the vision, commitment and skills of activists to build such capacity through community struggles and confrontations with local centers of power.

¹⁴ Medoff and Sklar, *Streets of Hope*, pp. 276-77

¹⁵ Medoff and Sklar, *Streets of Hope*, pp. 277