THEory into ACTion
A Bulletin of New Developments in Community Psychology Practice
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Editor’s Note: While our outreach bulletins to date have focused on innovative community practice in the U.S., the need for community practice, and community building, is of course worldwide. In this month’s issue, we focus on some innovative community activities in Egypt, where the need for wise community practice may be especially relevant in light of recent events.

We welcome your own responses, as well as your contributions to these bulletins in the future.

Assisting Non-Governmental Organizations in Egypt

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Through the past years non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Egypt have been growing rapidly and vastly. Especially after the revolution and changes in government, many interested groups have formed, and some of them have become established NGOs. These NGOs have mainly lacked three attributes: funding, governance, and human resources. This has led to the need for capacity-building training, and a constant search for funding. NGOs in Egypt rely on external funding; they suffer and struggle to survive due to the pressure they receive to abide by government policies.

Egyptian NGOs have emerged mainly to fill the gap between the private and public sectors; more specifically, they have developed to fill the gap in services that the public sector cannot provide. Often they are the most influential and beneficial engines in their communities; therefore, helping the NGOs may be the most effective way to influence Egyptian society. Consequently, at the American University in Cairo (AUC) there have been some initiatives to aid NGOs in fulfilling their purpose and help their
communities in a more professional way. Three of these initiatives are the NGO Toolbox, Community-Based Learning, and an NGO Training Program.

* The NGO Toolbox (www.ngotoolbox.org) is a website created as a project in the Community Psychology Master’s program at the American University in Cairo. It aims to pass on the theory and practice of community psychology to benefit civic society in Egypt. This website provides a variety of resources to help Egyptian non-profits to better work with communities. These resources include information on finding out what a community needs through community assessment, designing prevention programs by identifying what works, and evaluating one’s own efforts. The sections of the website are divided into general resources, prevention resources, evaluation resources, grant writing, and NGO directories. Information about the Master’s program in community psychology at AUC is also provided.

To decide what content to include, students thought about their own experience working with communities and identified information that would be useful to them. Additionally, some NGOs were contacted via e-mail to find out what resources they were interested in seeing online. The launch of the website included a variety of partner NGOs of AUC, where they were able to share ideas and recommendations. While the website may be very helpful, it is now only in English due to lack of resources; to fully benefit the NGOs, however, it needs to be in Arabic as well.

* Community-Based Learning (CBL) is a program initiated by the John D. Gerhart Center for Philanthropy and Civic Engagement at AUC in 2007. It aims to empower AUC students, faculty, and partners to create learning environments across disciplines that facilitate academic excellence, personal growth, civic engagement, and build sustainable community capital. Recently CBL classes have become integrated as a sustainable component of the university’s core academic offerings, and have also helped build a community of partner NGOs, providing them with supportive assistance in addition to promoting civic engagement.
* To benefit local NGO’s, the Gerhart Center also created a capacity building program. It emerged from a needs assessment, in which managers and staff reiterated that their lack of skills caused wasted time and effort, in addition to burnout and putting their reputation at stake. This program trains NGO staff to enhance their work and that of their organization; the first trainings ran from November 2012 through May 2013, with 16 sessions on different topics based on NGO requests.

Evaluations conducted after each session and after the completion of the program indicated that participants valued and benefitted from the training. The main training benefits were creating networks and bonds among the NGOs. Participants also valued the diversity of training topics, which they could apply to the real world, as well the diversity and expertise of the trainers and the participants themselves. Although this training program was just a pilot, such efforts to aid NGOs will continue and advance as a continuation of the Gerhart Center’s and community psychologists’ efforts at AUC.

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This is one of a series of bulletins highlighting the use of community psychology in practice. Comments, suggestions, and questions are welcome. Please direct them to Bill Berkowitz at Bill_Berkowitz@uml.edu.