REPORT ON THE POWER ANALYSIS
PREPARED FOR THE SLOVAK ORGANIZING PROJECT

Prepared by Jerry Morrison

INTRODUCTION

Before discussing the analysis that was conducted in Trencin, Slovakia, a brief description of the term "power analysis" is necessary. The phrase was coined by Saul Alinsky as a way of distinguishing the analysis he conducted for the Back of the Yards Community Organization in the 1930s from standard sociological studies that were being conducted in inner city communities throughout the United States. While he utilized the same professional interviewing and research techniques as his academic counterparts, he did not see his work as impartial or detached from the larger community. In Alinsky's approach the "power analysis" is used by an indigenous organization to develop a plan for direct action. Jackie Kendall of the Midwest Academy has described "power analysis" as the "Professional systematic gathering of political and economic intelligence….which is evaluated, interpreted and utilized by an organization to develop a plan for direct action." To a trained organizer, the "power analysis" is the essential first step in a successful organizing campaign.

While the difference between a "power analysis" and research may appear slight, it is important to distinguish between the two activities. An organizer preparing a "power analysis" of a community gathers intelligence that can be used to the tactical advantage of his/her organization while a researcher remains impartial and open minded as he/she gathers information. There is no such thing as impartiality to an organizer conducting a "power analysis". Impartiality is a luxury the professional organizer cannot afford. All organizers should always look for ways that the organization can use the intelligence gathered to further its organizing objectives. Basically, the "power analysis" is a purposeful process that should directly benefit one's host organization.

GATHERING DATA

'The "power analysis" for the Trencin project took approximately six weeks to complete. It was specifically designed to help identify local organizations interested in forming a coalition and the issues around which the group might organize. To get the program up and running as quickly as possible, NDI hired two local college students to assist the field representative with gathering and translating data about the Trencin region. Since NDI hadn't had a program in Slovakia prior to the community organizing project in Trencin, the field staff needed to gather a great deal of basic information. First, the City of Trencin provided statistical information that had been assembled by the Slovakian Statistical Institute in 1993. It included population, macro and micro economic, and institutional data. The statistical information gave a general overview of the region as, by Slovak standards, a relatively prosperous, well educated and institutionally diverse community.

Other sources of general information included The Slovak Republic Briefing Paper prepared by NDI. The Overview of Czech and Slovak Public Opinion Poll of November 1993 and The Focus Polling Agency's 1993 biannual national and regional polls. This data helped NDI staff begin to understand the basic beliefs and values of the Slovak people.

Since the success or failure of most organizing projects depends on the organizer's ability to assist leaders in identifying their own self interest, it is paramount that staff have a working knowledge of their leader's value system. Along with the ability to motivate leaders, it is important to understand the societal values because these will help determine the tactics and strategy adopted by the organization. This is a critical point in organizing terms. In suggesting a tactic or strategy that is outside the values of the leadership, an organizer risks losing legitimacy and trust. If an organizer loses the trust of the leadership, he/she may not be able to ever get it back. This is especially true with a new organization such as the Trencin NGO Coalition. So, it was imperative that the NDI staff had a strong understanding of the basic historical and cultural realities of Slovakia, and more specifically of Trencin.

It is also a good idea to buy detailed maps of the organizing turf, including legislative districts. The organizer should use different color pins to identify schools, churches, parks, police stations and other significant community institutions and landmarks. The best way to complete such a map is to walk through the community daily and fill in new institutions as you go along. Organizations should be added to the map as they are interviewed. Armed with basic statistical and attitudinal surveys, NDI staff was ready to begin a more accurate "Trencin specific" investigation. The basic questions that needed to be answered were the following:

1.   Who holds official power, i.e. elected officials and administrators?

2.   How is that power exercised?

3.   How is government structured?

4.   Who holds unofficial power?
        a.   Institutional leaders
        b.   Business leaders
        c.   Church leaders
        d.   Celebrities
        e.   Moral leaders

5.   How is unofficial power exercised?

6.   What is the relationship between those who have power and those who don't?

The first order of business was to know who ran the City of Trencin and what power they had. The part-time assistants spent approximately one week in City Hall and the regional government center filling in names on a governmental flow chart and defining, as best as possible, what each official and administrator did. While the specifics of the Trencin government structure were being gathered, a general survey of the rights and responsibilities of local government was undertaken. The Local Authority Services provided a 1994 report prepared on the structure and role of local government in Slovakia. The Regional Association of Towns and Villages also assisted NDI in outlining the role of local government as well as providing a proposal for the decentralization of political power in Slovakia.

While it is still not exactly clear what local government can and cannot do in the fledgling Slovak Republic, NDI has as good an understanding of the situation as most Slovak experts in the field. The fact that even local elected officials were unsure of their role says a great deal about the state of local governance in Slovakia.

It soon became clear that unofficial channels and non-elected leaders probably played an important role in the life of Trencin. This is usually the case in a small town, but it was especially true in Trencin because of the highly centralized state power. With approximately 75 percent of money collected from taxes remaining in Bratislava and no authority to levy new taxes, Trencin city government was hard pressed to do much more than shuffle the cards they already held.

All the data suggested that traditional avenues of redress were confused, if not entirely blocked. Oddly enough though, Trencin seemed to run quite smoothly. The Trencin business sector was booming and the social life of the town appeared vibrant. The only conclusion that could be drawn was that an unofficial network "got things done" in town. Personal relationships superseded the official structure and insured that the business of governing went on no matter what the actual political situation may have been. This was actually a good sign for the Trencin organizing project. If the influential "unofficial' leaders could be convinced to take part in the project, the Coalition would have a direct link to the decision-making process.

At this time the main purpose of the "power analysis" became identifying the nongovernmental institutions and assessing their significance in the community. The goal was to work with what existed in the town rather than waste a lot of time and energy "creating" a new institution. The question that had to be answered was, "Where do people gather" in an institutional sense. Which social clubs, fraternal organizations and issue groups truly represented the residents.

The key to this process is to determine what is meant by "representative" organizations. From a community organizing perspective, representative means that the residents recognize an institution and its leaders as understanding their best interest. People allow others to represent them because an organization espouses the same values as the community, has a shared history or life experience, acts in a democratic fashion and serves the self interest of people in the community. In short, one should not go to the institutions and ask if they represent the community. Just as in elections for government posts, representation is not determined by the potential leader but by the constituents. One should talk to the residents and ask them directly who the leaders are in this community. This may take asking a series of questions rather than just the one mentioned but the process is the same. An organizer can become confused meeting with institutional leaders, all of whom claim to truly represent the citizens. A good test is to ask for the names of ten people in the community who see that institution as representative. The organizer should them meet with some or all of these residents.

Other questions that may be helpful in determining if an institution is representative are:

1.   How many members do you have?

2.   How many people attend your meetings or activities?

3.   How are the leaders of your organization selected?

4.   What is the structure of your organization?

5.   Where does your funding come from?

6.   Demographically does your organization "look" like the community?

7.   How are the issues your organization works on selected?

8.   How long has your organization existed?

Once NDI staff had a good idea of who was running things in the local NGO scene, a series of introductory meetings was arranged. These "one on ones" were designed to accomplish several goals. First, they served to introduce NDI staff and the Trencin organizing project to local leaders. Secondly, it gave NDI staff the opportunity to begin to identify potential organizing issues. Lastly, the interviews were used to broaden the base of the project by having leaders identify other, community people that should be interviewed by NDI. Interviews were arranged with leaders whose names came up most often. Probably the most significant aspect of the interviews, aside from the valuable intelligence gathered, was that staff began the all important task of relationship building with local leaders.

To the non-organizer the phrase "relationship building" may evoke images of lazy field staff soaking up the local ambiance at the nearest tavern. However, as most organizers know, "relationship building" is an all important prerequisite to a successful organizing project. One builds relationships with leaders not by conducting Washington, D.C. or Western-style "power meetings" but by slowly gaining the trust of these people. This is done by being seen in the community. A good organizer will never turn down a dinner invitation, can be seen at church on Sunday, at the pub in the evening and is involved in the social life of the community. The initial time investment put into relationship building is large but will pay off with huge dividends later in the campaign. The first interview is merely the formal introduction of the staff and the project. Leaders won't really commit to an organizing project until they feel comfortable with the staff and the other participants. This process cannot be ignored. The organizer must conduct themselves in a professional manner so that their organization is seen as a legitimate and serious institution, but professionalism without personality and caring will yield very little in the way of results.

The interview process continued for approximately six weeks with the potential leadership network constantly expanding. At this point no thought was given to weeding out organizations. That was a job that would be left up to the coalition members themselves. The entire focus of "one on ones" was to identify existing alternative institutions of power and to make contact with as many potential leaders as possible. The first round of introductory interviews was followed up by a second set of meetings. The purpose of the second round of meetings was to get firm commitments from leaders to attend an organizing committee meeting. Prior to this first meeting of the Trencin NGO Coalition, NDI staff analyzed the data and interviews conducted over the previous six weeks.

ANALYZING THE RESEARCH

Analyzing the data had a dual purpose. The first was to give NDI staff a clear picture of the official and unofficial power structures of Trencin. This meant answering all of the power-related questions laid out in the initial research phase. The second purpose was to help staff identify general themes that could be used to move the NGO leaders to take action. As is the case in many "power analysis", the interview process did not bring to the surface any single, clearly defined community issue. Instead two or three major areas of concern began to emerge from the interviews.

At this point it is important to point out that a written summary of all interviews and meetings is essential to the analyzing process. An organizer should never try to analyze the interviews while they are still being conducted. Notes should be taken following each interview and written up in a daily log. Each week the organizer should try to summarize their progress and assess if the project is going in the right direction. This "tweaking" of the plan can only be done if written records of meetings, phone conversations and other discussions are kept on a consistent basis. All of these reports will be used to write the final community assessment which should lead to recommendations for action. Action or tactics should always be discussed last. It is inappropriate to draw conclusions about a community before all the research is done.

The organizer should also involve key leaders in the final assessment of the power analysis. It is easy for a new organizer to misinterpret data or misjudge leaders. Often cultural differences may lead the organizer to completely misread a situation, response or discussion. This does not mean that leaders should be allowed to make strategic decisions about the formation of an NDI program, but they may be able to verify the results of the power analysis or help to explain why the organizer's conclusions are flawed. Especially in the case of single-person field offices, NDI staff should attempt to get several different perspectives on the final assessment of the power analysis before laying out a strategic plan. Remember, once the plan has been publicly announced it is very difficult to change direction without damaging the program and the reputation of the organization.

As mentioned earlier, several basic areas of concern emerged from the Trencin interviews. First, almost every leader stated that there was no communication between elected officials and the average citizens. Officials seemed to feel that once elected they were not accountable and the voters made little if any effort to make contact. Secondly, even if citizens wanted to take concerns to their representatives, they did not know how to do it. They did not understand local and national government structure nor whom actually represented their community. Lastly, leaders expressed a need to network with other NGOs in Trencin. Since the fall of communism organizations had become isolated and without mandates for action. It became clear that the upcoming national and local elections represented a great opportunity for the Trencin NGOs to mobilize their members around some of these core issues.

Having identified cadre of "recognized" leaders and institutions and knowing some general areas of common concern, it was time to bring together the different players for a meeting. The initial "power analysis" was complete. Of course, there is no guarantee of success in any organizing project. A good "power analysis" should allow the organizer to use the intelligence gathered to develop their instincts about a community, its institutions and leaders. Good research is much like a basketball player practicing free throws over and over again. The practice or research ingrains the knowledge in the brain of the actor and enables them to perform their craft instinctively.

CONCLUSIONS

To suggest that the power analysis conducted in Trenein directly led to the successes of the NGO Coalition is an oversimplification. However, it is clear that the six weeks of research and "relationship building" laid the foundation for a strong coalition. At least in the early days of a new coalition, the organizer serves as the hub of the relationship network. It is the organizer's responsibility to place his/her leaders in challenging situations in an attempt to forge new bonds between the organizations in the emerging coalition. If this can be done successfully, the organization has the opportunity to become a freestanding institution.

In these times of financial constraints and uncertainty it is essential that NDI field staff strive to empower organizations to act independently. The role of the field organizer is an exciting and vital one, but there is a great responsibility that goes along with the privilege. Organizers have a responsibility not to do anything for an organization that it can do for itself. In strictly adhering to this policy the organizer can help build a self-reliant organization that has confidence in its own abilities.