

Building Community by Lloyd Robertson

"Dick and Jane" stories did not cut it in the Amerindian communities of Guatemala. Instead adult educator Paulo Friere asked his adult literacy students what they wanted to learn to write. Suddenly questions like "Why does the church have all the land and we have none?" began appearing in large letters on church property. The army was called in. Friere barely escaped with his life. A law was passed making it illegal for aboriginal Guatemalans to read and write.

Before there was bureaucracy, there was community. Each community survived on the basis of how well community members were able to pool their knowledge and work together. Then, approximately 5,000 years ago, came the civilization of the Sumerians in what is now Iraq. Slaves were needed to maintain and expand the new civilization based on large scale irrigation. A standing army brought back people who escaped to the hills. A priestly caste taught them that this was the will of their gods.

The priests told the peasants when to plant, what to plant and when to harvest. They educated the children. They healed the sick. The people gradually forgot that at one time they were able to accomplish all this within their communities. They became dependant on a priestly bureaucracy. They thanked the army for defending their way of life.

The Europeans who colonized the continents of America thought they had a superior civilization. None-the-less many of their sailors and colonists kept running away to join the native populations. These "White Renegades" were hunted down, tortured and killed. Caucasians "going native" were seen as a major threat to the European way of life.

A business bureaucracy, the Hudson Bay Company, played a major role in destroying aboriginal communities. One official wrote that the Crees were a "lazy" and "unfit" race. He then went on to say:

The love of rum is their first inducement to industry.
They undergo every hardship and fatigue to procure a
skinful of this delicious beverage. And when a nation
becomes addicted to drinking, it affords a strong
presumption that they will become excellent hunters.

Translation: the early Cree communities were largely self- sufficient and they did not need much of what "the Bay" had to offer. Destroying communities with alcohol made the people more dependant on the company.

Bureaucracy is a process of making people dependant on "higher" authorities and outside experts. People may even come to believe that they are not responsible for their own health. In

some communities, if someone dies the health nurse is not doing her job. Diabetes is a major, but largely preventable, problem in the North. But people must become responsible for living healthy lifestyles.

People dependant on bureaucracy will become distrustful of each other. People are in competition with each other to obtain money or services from the bureaucracy. People report on and intimidate each other. Gossip abounds.

Bureaucracy teaches that some people are bosses. Self-esteem becomes tied to who you can "boss around". Spouses become abusive to each other and their children.

Community development is a process reversing the effects of bureaucracy. The first step is to have the community define itself. Any people who share a common bond may form a community. If an outside bureaucracy declares who is a community member and who is not then the process stops even before it begins.

Paulo Friere wrote that knowledge is power. The community decides what knowledge it needs and how it should be gathered. Often a needs assessment becomes part of the process. Any expertise required must be responsible, not to a bureaucracy, but to the community itself.

During this process community members learn to trust each other. They learn to work together cooperatively. In the end, the community decides on it's needs and the strategies required to meet those needs. Dependency is replaced with self-sufficiency. Individuals develop pride in their communities and in themselves.