

CASE IN POINT

Taking the Pulse of Practice...

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Community Engagement as Effective Community Development: The Case of Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata's Community Based and Community Driven Practice

by Amy Jordan in Collaboration with Scott Stephens

OUTLINE:

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Synopsis

Within the field of planning, specifically the arenas concerned with community building and development, there is much discussion regarding public participation and its significance for good process and subsequent product in any community initiative. In practice, the level to which community development initiatives embrace public participation varies. Often there is plenty of rhetoric regarding the engagement of community in program development and delivery, but few examples of it working successfully on the ground.

In this context, Ma Mawi is well-suited as a case study given its embrace of values inherent in post-modern theory and its consistent encouragement of public participation. Since this reevaluation and reorganization during the late 1990's, the organization has become truly community based with community participation at its core. In the development of programming and delivery of services community members are partners in the process to strengthen and service the community. The success of the organization illustrates the capacity inherent in the local community and pays more than lip service to the ideal of community participation and involvement in their organization.

Ma Mawi illustrates the ability for a large bureaucratic institution to restructure in order to be responsive to the community. Not only is Ma Mawi an inspiring best practice, its commitment to working with the community at every stage contains lessons for the wider planning community.



Ma Mawi's Former Location on Broadway



One of Ma Mawi's Three Community Care Sites

Challenge of Postmodern Planning

The domain of City Planning, both as an academic discipline and a field of practice, encompasses a breadth of activities and components all geared towards the development of thriving urban spaces. A major aspect of this work requires community development and building initiatives that enable the fostering of urban dwellers who are healthy and productive citizens. Similar to other aspects of city planning, the method in which community development occurs has become of considerable interest to planning theory. To ensure accountability and effective programming, a push towards community based programming and the utilization of public participation methods have ensued.

Leading theorist Leonie Sandercock champions these ideals of community based practice and further outlines a process by which planners may embrace community knowledge and capacity. Specifically, Sandercock advocates a shift towards a new paradigm in planning with a requirement to incorporate a greater and more meaningful role for participatory planning. Within this requirement is a push towards community based planning and services as opposed to top-down bureaucracies, and the recognition of multiple publics with varying needs and requirements.

Further expanding on these ideas, and more specifically in the field of community development, Gail Hochachka discusses the requirement to include the interior dimension in community development in her article, *Integrating Interiority in Community Development*. It is recognition, that community development requires an understanding of the human dimension and the emotional component of community work. Although we often focus on the economic or physical wellbeing of people and place, the emotional health is often a precursor to being able to tackle these other issues.

Ma Mawi, through its evolution and efforts appears to be embodying the ideals of both Leonie Sandercock and Gail Hochachka. As described in the following sections, Ma Mawi has a focus upon individual and community wellbeing, and recognizes the need to be flexible and adaptive to the diverse and changing needs of community. To realize this goal, Ma Mawi incorporates community participation throughout its organization and program development.

About Ma Mawi

Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata was founded in 1984, through the efforts and organization of Aboriginal groups, particularly Aboriginal women. Its establishment was primarily a response to a Child and Welfare system that was seemingly failing the Aboriginal population in Winnipeg. The mission of Ma Mawi was and is to provide culturally relevant services with the aim to support Aboriginal families. Through its continued evolution and innovative work, Ma Mawi is considered one of the most successful Aboriginal organizations in Winnipeg.

Ma Mawi's Process of Restructuring

By 1997, however, a number of staff felt that Ma Mawi had lost touch with the community and became another institution to which they were initially trying to provide an alternative. It was felt that the organization had become overly bureaucratic, and had lost touch with the community. Physically, it was located on Broadway Street, amidst an array of businesses and government offices, far from the homes of the community they were professing to serve. More crucially, however, they had become simply another professional organization with staff serving 'clients' through a case and needs based approach.

Out of this realization arose a desire to rethink the way Ma Mawi was operating and find a way to get back to the community they were charged with serving. The result was a three year consultation process with the community to determine what they envisioned and desired Ma Mawi to be. The process began at the 1997 Annual General meeting and continued with formal consultation processes and informal discussions and meetings with staff, sister organizations and community members.

Within the three years, Ma Mawi listened to the community and began its journey of becoming the community based and driven organization it is today. The evolution began to take shape in 1998 with Ma Mawi committing to becoming a 'learning organization' where internal capacity is built through reflection and collective learning. The same year, the organization began to alter its approach from a case and needs based service approach to a community capacity building model. To achieve this, Ma Mawi closed case files and began the development of programming and support services. In 1999, the organization undertook the physical component of becoming community based by relocating its central downtown office to three neighbourhood sites. The first draft of Ma Mawi's strategic plan was developed and internally reviewed and refined. By 2000 the plan was presented to the community and community organizations for their input. The fall of 2000 completed the transformation with the adoption of Ma Mawi's strategic plan, which is treated as a contract with the community.

Ma Mawi's Commitment

Through this process of reconnecting with the community, Ma Mawi has developed three key centerpieces for their organization. One is the Four Directions which guide the work of Ma Mawi and the related four strategies. The other is their Code of Honour.

Four Directions

To continue to guide the program delivery, Ma Mawi identified four directions the community wanted Ma Mawi to follow. They are Community Based, Community Involvement, Capacity Building, and Leadership Role.



Community Based:

This direction refers to being physically located in the neighbourhoods where the families they service live. Being community based also requires that Ma Mawi work collaboratively with other community organizations and remains a visible force in the community. This direction essentially addresses Ma Mawi's promise to become accountable and responsible to the community above all.

This is realized through the physical location of Ma Mawi. They have moved from a centralized location on Broadway, to three community care centres located in residential areas *where their need is highest*.

Community Involvement:

This direction requires Ma Mawi to provide

opportunities for community input in the design and delivery of Ma Mawi's organization. The aim of this direction is to promote community ownership and a sense of responsibility for the organization and each other. Ultimately, Ma Mawi is striving to create opportunities and develop a community resource base.

Capacity Building:

Building upon the other two directions, capacity building seeks to increase the skills, knowledge and ability within the community to promote self care. To realize this goal, Ma Mawi provides opportunity for community members to realize, harness, develop and share their gifts. To follow this direction, Ma Mawi continues to build on strengths as opposed to the former model of providing services based upon needs.

Leadership Role:

This direction is two pronged. It discusses the leadership role of Ma Mawi in advocating and working towards changing the way in which social services are delivered as well as provide leadership opportunities for community members. Through volunteer opportunities, in which community members receive training and experience Ma Mawi is creating opportunities and transferring knowledge and skill to community members.

Four Strategies

To realize these four directions, Ma Mawi adopted four fundamental strategies. They are Neighbourhood Councils, Community Training and Learning, Strategic Relationships, Community Leadership Role.

Neighbourhood Councils

Each site has developed a neighbourhood council to advise and steer the community care

site. The council will be comprised of community members, including those that utilize Ma Mawi's services. This approach fosters community participation and ownership in the organization.

Community Training and Learning

Through workshops, volunteer opportunities, annual learning conferences, as well as skills training, Ma Mawi works towards the identification and development of skills and knowledge as required by the community. This strategy is aimed at individual and collective learning and capacity building.

Strategic Relationships

Through a process of information sharing, community outreach and visibility in the community, Ma Mawi seeks to form lasting relationships with community members as well as other agencies and institutions working in the communities where they are located. The aim of this strategy is to work collaboratively in order to share resources and share responsibility for the needs of the community.

Community Leadership Role

The aim of this strategy is to reduce the need for interventions and the number of Aboriginal children in care by building leadership potential in the community. Through the realization of this strategy, Ma Mawi is working to communicate to policy makers, that the community has the ability, skill and desire to take on a leadership role in provide care for families, particularly children, within the community.

Code of Honour

Internally, the organization has strived to eliminate hierarchy and instead work from a place of mutual respect. A Code of Honour was developed to replace the former union contract,

which often left the staff divisive rather than working towards a collective goal. The code was developed by youth in the community during a leadership building program, and is utilized as a guide for the way in which staff interacts with each other and with the community members. It is also a guide for community members to follow with the staff and each other.

CODE OF HONOUR

We Tell the Truth

We Seek Only Peace

We Keep Our Word

We Stand Up For What is Right

We Treat Each Other with Respect

***We First Listen with Our Heart, then
Speak From Our Heart***

***We Support One Another to Follow the
Code***

Continued Commitment

To ensure that Ma Mawi continues to reflect and respond to the needs of the community, continued informal discussions frequently occur. Beyond this, as outlined by their Four Directions and subsequent strategies, Ma Mawi provides substantial opportunities for community involvement through their neighbourhood councils, volunteer opportunities and the open Annual General Meeting. As well, the organization partners with other groups in the community to coordinate and maximize services.

In an attempt to formally reconnect Ma Mawi

is presently undergoing a process of revisiting and evaluating their programs and strategies as well as reaffirming their commitment to the community. To undertake this process Ma Mawi is once again soliciting community participation in their discussions and planning sessions. Ma Mawi is going one step further in this process by seeking community led discussions and workshops by training community members to lead and facilitate the consultation process. In this way, Ma Mawi is incorporating its commitment to capacity building simultaneous to its core direction of community participation.

Successes and Challenges

Since their restructuring, Ma Mawi has been able to adapt itself become a 'learning organization' that commits itself to continuous evolution and discovery. As a result, the organization is in a constant state of change as it responds and adjusts to the needs of the community. This makes the work undertaken very fast paced and challenging as the staff tries to ensure they are staying true to the desires and needs of the community.

These close ties to the community has made Ma Mawi relevant and embraced by the community. It enables the organization to build on the strengths of the community and also ensures that the programming reflects the needs and desires of the community.

Evolving into an organization that is community driven does pose its challenges as well. It can mean the development of programming can take more time, requiring patience and commitment to seeing the project through. It can also be difficult to balance the needs and desires of the community, with the resources available. In addition, the dynamics of community often change, which challenges Ma Mawi to continuously respond to this flux.

Ma Mawi's evolution and rapid change has meant the organization has grown from a two million to a seven million dollar operation. Although this is a testament to the organization's growing success, internal planning has fallen behind from human resources to technical upgrades. Specifically, the management structure has not grown to reflect the expanding program delivery. Certainly, if Ma Mawi is to continue to maintain its pace and effectiveness in the community, its internal management structure will require expansion as well.

Perhaps the greatest challenge facing Ma Mawi comes from external forces that have not evolved to become as responsive and community driven as Ma Mawi. Working with the community as closely as Ma Mawi does can sometimes mean a loss of 'credibility' with funders, who may view Ma Mawi as not being 'objective'. This reality is a result of a continued prevalence of modernist thought in much of our bureaucracy that believes in a rational, scientific approach to service delivery. Ma Mawi, on the other hand, considers the human dimension of service delivery to be more complicated and requires more responsive and flexible policies and structures. More critically, Ma Mawi can only do so much to build capacity and work towards social transformation, when government and market 'systems' are set up in a way that they do not see humanity in poverty and poverty related issues. Essentially, Ma Mawi can aid and assist community members, but it cannot change the reality they live within.

Lessons Learned

One size does not fit all

Human dimension is complicated and when working within the community, policies and procedures must be flexible and responsive enough to understand the diversity of community

member's needs.

Participation is Capacity Building

Not only does the incorporation of community participation enable an organization to understand the needs, desires and assets in a community, consistent and meaningful participation can be a powerful tool for community capacity building.

Continuous Learning

To be successful and innovative, an organization must be committed to continuous learning. This commitment takes time and energy and can run counter to the norm of modern society which demands quick and easy fixes.

Lived Experience does bring wisdom

To be relevant and true to the needs of the community, organizations must be open and willing to listen to the stories of their community members.

Even Large Bureaucracies can Change

The case of Ma Mawi's restructuring, illustrates that with time, and commitment, large organization's can successfully revolutionize become responsive, postmodern entities.

Amy Jordan holds an undergraduate degree in Social Development Studies from the University of Waterloo and is currently completing her Masters of City Planning degree at the University of Manitoba.

Scott Stephens is a staff member of Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata Centre.

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