

Some Preliminary Findings Concerning Community Centers in Israel

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IN planning the Joseph J. Schwartz Graduate Program for Training Center Directors and Senior Personnel, of the Schools of Education and Social Work at the Hebrew University, there was an obvious necessity to determine what centers exist in Israel, what they are like, and what they do. Consequently, one of the first steps to be undertaken was a survey of community centers in Israel. This article is concerned with the results.

The Sample

It is almost impossible to say with precision how many centers of various kinds exist in Israel. It is difficult to determine the very magnitude under discussion — whether there are hundreds, thousands, or even tens of thousands. They range from rented rooms and apartments, wooden shacks, basements, air-raid shelters and parts of school buildings to elaborate physical establishments with auditoriums, swimming pools, and stadia. These are sponsored by a bewildering array of governmental, public, and voluntary bodies in various combinations. It seems fairly safe to say, however, that there is no locality, no matter how small, and there are few neighborhoods in places large enough to have subdivisions which do not have at least one center of some kind.

Since there is no central registry of centers, the exact number is not known, and although it was tempting to try to investigate the entire gamut, a definition of community centers was used in an effort to delimit the area.

This definition, which was arbitrarily constructed by the researchers, includes five elements:

- 1) conducts at least part of its activities in its own building;
- 2) deals with more than one age group;
- 3) carries on more than one activity;
- 4) is open to everyone who wants to join or participate;
- 5) is concerned with the geographical neighborhood in which it is located.

This definition was intended to exclude centers only for youth; or for sports; or for the mentally ill. It was also intended to exclude "pure" services, such as street corner work and private recreational facilities, like country clubs.

One of the interesting methodological findings to emerge, however, was the prestige which has become attached to the title "community center," and consequently the effort which many agencies made to fit the definition. Thus, a youth center which occasionally invites parents to a meeting, defined itself as "dealing with" more than one age group. A sports center which sometimes has a picnic for members called this a variety of activities. And so it went.

From the answers received to preliminary questionnaires, plus a newspaper advertisement, a sample of 175 centers calling themselves community centers was drawn. Questionnaires were mailed to each; a follow-up mailed to non-respondents; and personal visits

paid to a sample of those still not responding. No significant differences were found in the answers of original respondents, tardy respondents, and those who had not intended to respond. A total of 76 responses were received as follows:

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| Youth, Sport, and Cultural Centers (of the Ministry of Education — henceforth called <i>Matnassim</i> , which is an acronym for the Hebrew title) | 18 |
| Working Women and Working Mothers Organizations (henceforth — Working Mothers) | 15 |
| Youth Centers (of the Ministry of Education's Youth Department) | 6 |
| Ministry of Social Welfare Centers (henceforth — Social Welfare) | 5 |
| Amidar Housing Authority and Workers' Councils' Center (henceforth — Amidar-Workers' Councils) | 21 |
| Amidar Housing Authority and Local Authorities' Centers (henceforth — Amidar-Local Authority) | 6 |
| Others | 5 |
| Total | 76 |

Since community centers are considered by the researchers to be *sui generis*, and since little information concerning them is available, the questionnaire covered the following areas:

1. Sponsorship and finances
2. Governance and participation in governance
3. Manpower — numbers, education, specialized training, and turnover
4. Types and extent of membership
5. Major activities conducted
6. Age groups using centers
7. Major problems
8. Role in community

No attempt was made to check the facts reported, and this article should accordingly be seen as a report on responses received.

Findings

Since probing the eight areas listed above resulted in a large amount of

data, this report deals with some selected findings only. Further, as a first preliminary survey, no hypotheses were tested, rather — as is customary in exploratory studies — many areas requiring further investigation were uncovered.

Background

The growth of the community center movement in Israel is indicated by the fact that 50 percent of the centers responding had been opened within the previous three years, and 81 percent during the previous eight years. Budgets range from a center which reported expenses of IL.400 and no income, to one with an income in excess of IL.2,000,000 per year. The median budget is IL.60,000 per annum with most *Matnassim* above this figure, and most centers of Amidar-Workers' Councils below it. Staff averages range from centers with three staff members to those with 29. The full-time to part-time ratio varies from one center with one full-time member to six part-time members to centers with an equal proportion of each — although these tend to be small centers with one or two full-time people and an equal number of part-time staff. Finally, the number of members ranges from centers with over a thousand members to those with less than fifty. However, there are centers which do not have formal membership, and could only estimate the number of participants; while others have both members and non-member participants.

Board Composition

Eighty-four percent of the centers reported that they had governing boards, and both the *Matnassim* and the centers of Amidar-Workers' Councils reported wide representation on their boards. In almost every case, of all centers, there was some representation

from the local authority on the board. Representation of center members was greatest among the centers of the Working Mothers organization, while neither Social Welfare centers nor Youth Centers had members or public representatives on their boards.

Directors

Given the growth of centers mentioned above, it is not surprising that 71 percent of the directors have held their jobs three years or less. When tenure is compared to the age of centers, however, it appears that almost a third of the centers opened within the last three years have already had at least one change of directors, and in the case of Amidar-Workers' Council centers, Youth Centers, and Others, only one-third of the directors have been with the centers since they opened, regardless of when that was.

About 45 percent of all directors have only a high school education or less, while 19 percent have a university degree or more. Since the *Matnassim* require a university degree, removing them from the sample results in 60 percent of the directors having a high school education or less, and only 8 percent having a university degree. Forty-five percent of the directors had some kind of training for center work other than their academic education, and 40 percent had taken part in more than one training program. This included one director who had been in four such programs; seven who had attended three; and three who had been in two.

Center Activities

The most prevalent activity in centers is sponsorship of study and activity groups (28 percent), while the second concerns social groups (21 percent). Other activities include sport, art and culture, dealing with personal prob-

lems, vocational guidance, and some miscellaneous activities. When the responses of individual centers are examined, however, 57 percent conduct only two types of activities, and another 24 percent conduct three. Thus, over half the reporting centers base this part of their claim to be community centers on the fact that they offer two types, rather than one type, of activity. The most-served age groups are adolescents and adults, with *Matnassim*, Amidar-Local Authority, Social Welfare, and Youth Centers serving more of the former; and Working Mothers, Amidar-Workers' Councils, and Others serving more of the latter.

Community Activities

Centers had trouble determining what community activity properly consisted of. Sixty percent mentioned working with committees or councils, and 17 percent specified developing local leadership, but others reported "Raising the level of women and dealing with women with problems," and "Direct help and advice to mothers and to large families," as community activities. One center simply noted that it had attempted a community development project and failed.

Centers' Problems

Asked to specify two major problems which they faced, 57 percent responded as requested. Eighteen percent reported only one problem, and 25 percent either had no problem, or did not answer the question. Of the exactly 100 problems listed, 20 percent reported that the building is too small; 15 percent complained of lack of budget to expand social and cultural activities; and 10 percent reported insufficient budget to employ professional staff. No other single item amounted to 10 percent of the problems reported. Grouped differently, 27

percent of the problems concern physical facilities; 26 percent concern budgeting; and 20 percent concern difficulties with clientele. Manpower problems account for 11 percent of the total.

Discussion

One of the problems in this study was in making contact with the 175 centers in the sample. However, this was not a problem confined to using the postal services. Experience indicated that even attempts to visit the centers were fraught with difficulties other than insufficient addresses. Many centers are open for only a few hours a day, and not every day. In some smaller centers, if the director cannot be present at a given time, the center is simply not opened. Nor are times and days posted anywhere; considerable asking around the neighborhood is necessary to find out when someone in authority might be present at some of the centers.

In short, the picture presented by community centers (or those that define themselves in this manner) is not only one of imposing buildings with receptionists, secretaries, and staff working shifts; it also includes a large element of small buildings open for limited periods and staffed by one or two people at a time.

Insofar as sponsoring organizations are concerned, the picture is also very fluid. Few agencies have centralized control of any kind. Some of the agencies have local branches, some of which may conduct one or several centers, but the affiliation is center to branch to national agency — there is usually no affiliation of or between centers directly.

There has been a considerable growth in the number of centers within the last three years, if the growth rate of the sample centers is an indication. With twenty-nine centers in the sample alone opened during that period, there

may have been well over a hundred new centers of various kinds established during the same period. This raises the question as to how and where the decision to open a new center is made; on the basis of what data; and with what plans or goals in mind. It also raises the question as to whether centers are enabled to learn from the experience of others — are buildings with fewer mistakes erected, programs improved, manpower better selected? This, in turn, raises the question as to whether and how the experience of centers is documented and available to others. Each of these is a legitimate research question which deserves investigation.

The fact that only 20 of 68 centers (30 percent) have representation of members on their boards is a significant factor. If the centers are sincere in desiring to encourage leadership, and in letting members determine the activities of the center, then lack of member representation on the policy-making body of the centers does not bespeak such sincerity. Rather, the picture which emerges is that of one group which decides what another group wants, needs, or should be given. These impressions are worth checking further through investigation of the role of members on the boards where they do serve, and the role of boards in general.

It is interesting to speculate as to what the low ratio of full-time program staff to part-time program staff in many centers means. One possibility is that there is parallelism — that all the workers do essentially the same task, such as group leading, teaching, or handling the logistics of meetings, rooms, supplies, etc., but that some of them are full-time employees and others are part-time. A second possibility is that of hierarchy, with the full-time workers having supervisory and administrative functions, while the

part-time workers are engaged in giving direct service. Another possibility is that the full-time staff are first among equals, doing the same jobs as part-time staff, but also having supervisory and administrative responsibilities. Finally, it is possible that full-time workers (or some of them) give direct service, while the unit heads or supervisors or directors come in on a part-time basis.

To the extent that full-time workers have supervisory or administrative responsibility that part-time workers do not, the question is raised concerning their additional training or skill for such functions. In short, does one become a full-time program worker in a community center because one is better trained, experienced, or otherwise qualified for the position; or is it a function of being willing to work full-time rather than part-time?

Again, if it is found that part-time workers tend to be specialists in program areas, such as teachers of languages, sports teachers, ceramicists, or social group leaders, the question of how the non-specialist full-time employee supervises such specialists and evaluates the effectiveness of their work is an interesting one.

Although it is logical that educational attainments have become more important during the last few years, and that with increasing sophistication concerning the possibilities and problems of community centers, formal education beyond high school has been an increasing requirement, the data do not bear this out. Of the 23 directors with only a high school education or less, 11 (48 percent) were employed since 1970, and 18 (78 percent) since 1965.

The relatively small percentage of directors who have more than a high school education (40 percent) may seem to indicate limitations on the performance of community centers, but this study contains no data to support this

conclusion. Determination of the quantity and quality of community center activities requires evaluative research concerning center goals and accomplishments, and complex attempts to link these to the education of the directors. If, however, it is assumed that an effective community center director needs skills in administration, supervision, program development and community organization, it is difficult to believe that these can be acquired through the normal curricula of Israeli elementary and high schools, and, consequently, attention must be paid to the content of further education.

Insofar as this further education implies teachers' seminars or universities, some general principles of dealing with people, institutions, and communities might be acquired, depending upon the actual course of study or specialties. To what extent this is actually true requires both a listing of the courses taken, their content, and how much has been retained.

Beyond this, the necessary knowledge and skills must have been acquired — insofar as they were acquired — through experience, in-service training, and other kinds of courses.

Thirty-one of the 69 respondents had been in some sort of training course in addition to their academic education, and 11 of these had been in more than one course. Although attendance at more than one training course may be taken to mean additional attainments, the system of in-service training, *yomei iyun* (seminars), and short courses in use in Israel does not mean that this necessarily follows. Few such training courses are based upon an analysis of what the participants bring with them, what the job requires, and the content necessary to fill the gap. Particularly in the case of respondents who participated in more than one course, these were probably not progressive, building

upon each other; and may not have been complementary, but dealing with different content.

Courses reported by respondents range from a full-year course with supervised fieldwork (the Joseph J. Schwartz Graduate Program for Community Center Directors and Senior Personnel, of the Hebrew University); two years part-time, to a series of lectures given sporadically. Further research is necessary to determine the efficacy of these various types of training programs. Insofar as the activities and client-groups of the organizations dealt with in this study show great similarity, the possibility of a generic, or core, course of training for all of them should be explored.

It would be interesting to know how centers define membership, since centers within the same organization report both existence and absence of formal membership. Although the questionnaire specifically mentioned formal membership, and gave the opportunity to indicate that the center had no formal membership, it is nevertheless possible that some centers considered, for example, that payment of fees to participate in courses or classes constitutes membership. Others may have defined participation itself as membership. There are also centers which have both member and non-member participation — lower fees for activities for members, a members' lounge, and other benefits denied to mere participants.

The effect of membership upon participation is also an open question. Do people who become members make more use of the facilities and activities? Or do people who make use of these become members? And there is the question as to whether the quality of participation is affected by the fact of membership — do members behave differently, take more responsibility,

widen their sphere of activities? This is related to an even wider question which flows from the oft-quoted maxim that people "appreciate" more things for which they have paid, and hence a policy in some centers that everyone must pay at least a symbolic fee, either for membership or to participate in activities. This whole area seems ripe for further investigation.

The problems reported by centers as among their two major difficulties can be grouped in ways different from those used in this report. For example, one could subsume *all* problems under finances, on the assumption that sufficient sums of money, judiciously spent, would solve problems of building by construction; of manpower by salaries, benefits, and training, etc. Similarly, it would be possible to attribute all ills to manpower lacks, assuming that properly trained and equipped manpower would find ways to overcome problems with clients, acquire additional resources, resolve policy problems, and so forth. If the present division is accepted, however, it is interesting that the problem of program budget is outranked by physical building problems, both of which loom larger than manpower difficulties. Even when the divisions are grouped, budgeting accounts for only 26 percent of the problems, less than physical facilities (35 percent) and not too far ahead of problems in dealing with clients (20%).

Directors evidently are not as bothered on a day-to-day program basis by lack of funds as they are by deficiencies in their buildings. If organizational rivalries can be overcome, therefore, it might be wise to build fewer but larger and better equipped centers in the future.

With the increase in numbers of centers during the last three years, it is not surprising that most of the directors began their jobs then. However, 29

percent of the centers opening in that period have already had at least one change of directors, and 45 percent of all centers have. If the rate for the past three years is constant, then the turnover rate for new centers is about 10 percent a year, while if there have been several directors during that period (which the data do not reveal), then the turnover rate is somewhat higher.

If the rate of opening new centers is maintained (an average of ten per year), and the turnover rate of 10 percent a year is experienced in each of the 175 existing centers from which the sample was drawn, then a very conservative estimate of the need for new center directors is between 25 and 30 per year.

Answers to the question concerning community organization activities indicates a wide range of definitions concerning of what these activities consist. In some cases, they were direct services to individuals, and perhaps a case could be made for it that more capable citizens contribute to the community and therefore anything done to strengthen individuals is community organization. This seems a bit far-fetched, however, in light of activities reported by other centers in terms of creating committees, councils, and self-governing bodies, as well as trying to develop indigenous leadership. It is possible that some centers employ community organizers (*Matnassim*, for example, have an agreement to this effect with Amidar) and thus define themselves as community centers. Others equate work in or with the community with other service areas, so that they have a youth department, an adult department, a community organization department, a sport department, etc.

In any case the content of that which centers call community work needs deeper investigation. For example, even those bodies which deal with

community committees need to be examined to determine what such activity actually means and does.

Definitional confusion among centers as to what community organization/development/work is can be expected — there is no consensus in the professional literature on this point. However, there seems to be little question but that the agencies involved wanted to define themselves as community centers, and therefore defined whatever they do as community work.

Summary and Conclusion

This study of 76 community centers in Israel indicates the difficulty of arriving at a generally-applicable definition of such an institution. Even when defined as consisting of a physical structure catering to more than one age group with a variety of activities, open to everyone and involved in the geographic area in which it is situated, it is still possible for agencies which are essentially youth centers, informal education centers, social welfare centers, or centers for the aged technically to fit the definition. Unless the definition becomes clumsily technical and pedantic, it remains evasive.

Perhaps the major conclusion arising from this exploratory study is that community centers cannot be defined or recognized in terms of their governance, staff, clientele, or activities. Attention should be turned, therefore, to the quality of these factors. For example, although many of the respondents to this study indicate that they work with committees, the operative question is whether these committees really represent a constituency; whether they can make and implement decisions; whether they have real authority; and whether through such committees meaningful decisions are made, leadership discovered and encouraged, and changes in the quality of life in the community achieved.

Again, although services may be given to various age groups through different activities, the question is whether these services are given with goals in mind; whether the person directly engaged in offering the service is properly trained and supervised; whether the experience is documented and the documentation used; and whether there is an evaluative procedure which is utilized to determine the extent to which the original goal was

reached.

In short, the five point definition of community centers set forth previously must be supplemented by a philosophy and a commitment; socially-desirable goals, and the skills to attain these goals; and the willingness and ability to change both goals and skills when this becomes desirable. Otherwise, the term "community center" becomes a meaningless description for a wide variety of institutions and activities.