Alter Terra: Building Capacity for Community-led Transformative Change

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Abstract

In vulnerable communities with limited public infrastructure, the strongest asset is usually organized citizens who mobilize to solve local problems. This article analyzes the case of Alter Terra, the Mexico-based civil society organization that developed a methodology for participatory governance that helps to build capacity for community organizing. Starting with an assessment of the social and environmental context, the organization then strengthens grassroot leadership to develop lasting solutions to local problems. They involve the wider community to create an enabling environment for this process and facilitate connections with authorities to lobby for support and collaboration. The article illustrates this methodology in action through the example of Los Laureles, a community in Tijuana, Mexico supported by Alter Terra to develop solutions to curb waste pollution in the river basin. Five principles are drawn from this case to advance citizen-led transformative change. These include positioning citizens as leaders through capacity-building; involving local authorities from the start; promoting multi-stakeholder collaboration; understanding root causes; and acknowledging the inter-dependence of people and the environment.

Introduction

A key lever to achieve transformative change is modifying existing power relations to consciously and strategically disrupt the status quo. This requires observing the dynamics of the system, identifying the stakeholders involved, the relationships of power and dependency between them, as well as understanding their environmental context. Once analyzed, these relationships can be reorganized to shift the balance of power and catalyze positive, radical change for both, the people and the planet.

This is the case of Alter Terra, an organization that promotes community-led change through three pillars.

1. Creating conditions for strong and sustainable community organization;
2. Building citizens' skills and confidence to be changemakers;
3. Establishing and strengthening connections for co-creation across sectors.

The Importance of Community Organizing

Community organizing is necessary to cultivate grassroots leadership. In the process of mobilizing communities, leaders who can spearhead local solutions and ensure their sustainable implementation over time emerge naturally. Therefore, strengthening the social fabric to support organization is essential to empower communities for changemaking.

Mexico-based NGO Alter Terra follows this premise to create smart social and technical methods for promoting community-led solutions. They encourage vulnerable communities to take an active role in addressing local problems. They do so by fostering shared, organized, and skilled leadership, while also enabling long-term collaboration with other stakeholders.

Los Laureles, a border town in the municipality of Tijuana, faces a myriad of basic infrastructure gaps, serious health challenges linked to pollution, and complex social problems. The government response to these needs is practically non-existent. A baseline assessment of the physical, ecological, and urban environment highlights the lack of residual and fluvial water management infrastructure, the lack of basic urban services, the existence of human settlements located in high-risk areas that are prone to earthquake damage and/or flooding, and legal uncertainty regarding property titles and rights.

Every election period, local candidates parade the streets of Los Laureles and excited citizens approach them with multiple personal requests to improve their quality of life. Unsurprisingly, no real changes result from this form of citizen engagement; instead, it generates false expectations and frustration, which further eroded the government's legitimacy in the area.

To change this dynamic, Alter Terra created the 'Building Assets Through Community Organizing' program. The program leveraged an existing urban planning law that makes municipal funds available for citizens to propose and implement community projects. Over the course of one year, leaders representing the seven micro-basins received training and support to empower and organize their community to use these funds.

From Grassroots to Systemic

The first step was to partner with the local government to approach the community, thereby ensuring the involvement of both sides from the start. Alter Terra collaborated with them to conduct detailed assessments of Los Laureles' social and environmental context. Through this process, they sourced community leaders and influential people who would mediate between the community and political parties and public institutions.

The community decided to focus on cleaning the river basin to protect the health of the community and the environment. Most of the residents of Los Laureles had developed ecological awareness, as well as an understanding of the hydrological cycles, due to the lack

of adequate infrastructure. During the rainy season, if the channels were blocked with garbage, the sewage overflowed and affected their quality of life. The river was also carrying the community's waste across the border, creating severe environmental damages in a US National Reserve. Therefore, with Alter Terra and both US and Mexican government support, they mobilized to:

1. Raise awareness regarding the impact the community's waste disposal practices have on the river;
2. Build capacity for long-term basin sanitation and preservation;
3. Instill a culture of shared responsibility for keeping the river clean.

Once these leaders began training, the team quickly realized that the importance of including their families, friends, and neighbors. They noticed that participants were more engaged and performed better when they had a supportive environment in their community. Leaders who could not read or write were supported by their children. Friends provided encouragement and helped in whichever way they could. Moreover, neighbors created a space to care for participants' children so they would not miss training.

Opening training sessions to the wider community also allowed the residents of Los Laureles to witness their leaders' progress. Close involvement made them more confident and empowered, and therefore more prepared to assertively face authorities if necessary. However, some groups were more difficult to engage in the program. As a border town, Los Laureles has high rates of irregular migration. Undocumented persons were wary and afraid to become involved. To overcome this, Alter Terra conducted awareness-raising campaigns to inform them about international Human Rights and national laws that protected their right to participate. Many decided to join, and some even became leaders.

The training process was done in collaboration with teachers and students from a local university. Public servants from different institutions were also involved. They taught participants the skills, tools, and processes needed to submit formal petitions. This included how to map and identify needs, gather the data required for filling official forms, and the appropriate channels to communicate with representatives at each institution. In addition to these mid-level officials, community leaders also had the opportunity to meet with the highest authorities at the institutions' headquarters. These in-person encounters ensured that both sides could start building closer ties. Establishing trust was key for long-term commitment and cooperation.

Impact

The end of the program resulted in the emergence of a network of well-trained leaders who are recognized by the authorities and the community. Now, Los Laureles continues to work towards change independently, even after Alter Terra concluded its involvement.

Meanwhile, the municipal government extended the program to three additional communities and 12 more afterwards, all of which developed the capacity to grow projects on their own. It also launched a competition where community leaders could submit up to two proposals for projects led by and for their community. The competition was to receiving funding and encourage initiative. The outcome was a catalogue of government-approved projects that are ready for implementation.

At the root of the program's success was the development of local governance through a comprehensive training model that involved the whole community. This process created the conditions for community organizing and for identifying, strengthening, and legitimizing local leadership. It also bridged the gap between the community and public institutions, which enabled the transfer of greater power to citizens.

Further, the creation of 125 government-funded community projects significantly enhanced local infrastructure and services. These also increased property values and raised the quality of life. As a result, the program strengthened bilateral cooperation between Mexico and the U.S., contributing to lasting partnerships that continue to improve conditions for communities on either side of the border. Residents were not the only ones to benefit; improving the preservation of the river basin contributed to protecting local wildlife.

Based on this success, the program led by Alter Terra and its founder, [Ashoka Fellow Óscar Romo](), can be considered a best-practice example of participatory governance. It set up collective impact initiatives that influenced new laws and policies with full community approval. It also helped community leaders strengthen their skills and capacity to influence change, to the extent that some of them went on to hold leadership positions in the local government. Ultimately, 'Building Assets Through Community Organizing' generated a better-informed municipal government, empowered communities, and created higher living standards for all.

Principles

We can draw several principles from Alter Terra's experience that might help others replicate similar changes:

1. **Position citizens as leaders through capacity-building**. This includes, but is not limited to, technical training. Alter Terra could have hired technical experts as consultants to develop proposals for the local government. Instead, they decided to develop technical expertise in community members themselves. This enabled them to lead the design of proposals and recommendations in accordance with their priorities and intimate understanding of their local context. The ultimate goal should be to create a shared understanding of the roots of the problem and how to communicate solutions, validate them with the community, and identify paths to fund and implement them.

2. **Involve local authorities from the start**. This is essential not only to prevent opposition, but also to co-design solutions. Local governments are gatekeepers of resources such as funding, technical expertise, and the power to change and enact laws and policies. Engaging them at all stages of the process promotes buy-in and increases the likelihood of success. It also helps to build trust between citizens and public servants; something that is key to long-term collaboration.

3. **Promote multi-stakeholder collaboration**. Involving government institutions, private organizations, and academia generates tangible results that respond to the community's social and environmental needs.

4. **Understand the root causes**. The initial assessment should be implemented through deep listening, empathy, and actively engaging the community and local authorities. It should also incorporate an environmental analysis. Identifying and addressing root causes from the start will ensure the sustainability of solutions implemented.

5. **Acknowledge the inter-dependence of people and environment**. Understanding the environmental context is key to ensuring that community projects will not have unintended effects on local ecosystems. Noticing how the community interacts with its environment can help design more comprehensive solutions and find innovative ways to leverage local resources. For instance, Alter Terra teaches participants to use waste like discarded tires and plastic bottles for their projects.