GEOLGY OF COMMUNITY & THE CLAY LINE
Revised August 2018

Speaking metaphorically, every community has a kind of geology to it. Like the earth, there are layers, each with a different set of characteristics. Generally, four layers can be found in most communities. These are:

1. A top layer consisting of large institutions that have investments in the community but are not part of the community. This layer is inhabited by colleges, universities, hospitals, large national foundations, some federal and state-run programs, etc.

2. The second layer generally consists of local county and municipal government, some state-regional foundations, and some state and federal-run programs, etc.

3. The third layer is made up of nonprofit agencies that have programs within the community.

4. The bottom layer includes resident-run organizations, community-owned institutions and unorganized members of the community. It is a broad band that ranges from relatively large, stable organizations to small, unfunded/underfunded community efforts and activities. This layer also includes those residents who live below the Clay Line and are rarely engaged in the public dialogue.

The people living below the Clay Line are essentially those whose present situation and status in society present significant barriers to their engagement in the public dialogue, e.g., people living near or below the federal poverty line, people who are disabled, immigrants, undocumented, refugees, victims of domestic violence, etc.

Engaging People Below the Clay Line

Engaging people below the Clay Line requires intentionality about identifying and removing the barriers to their participation. In general, there are two sets of barriers, material and systemic. While the material barriers vary based on a person’s situation, there is an increasing awareness that the cost of participation is a significant and nearly universal barrier. Participating in the public dialogue is not free. While we don’t tend to think of having to pay to become involved in the community, we do incur costs. These costs show up in gas for our cars to get to and from meetings and events, arranging childcare, minutes on our cell phones, food for potlucks, etc. Most people don’t think of these costs because they come out of their discretionary income, i.e., money left after taxes and paying for necessities such as housing, food, healthcare, transportation, etc. In general, people living below the clay line either have zero or negative discretionary income. Participating in the public dialogue often confronts a family with a choice such as using the gas in their car to attend a meeting at their child’s school or driving to work the next day. While most organizations do provide interpretation, childcare and food, these things don’t address the core issue for many, i.e., unable to afford participation.

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1 Resident-run organization: membership is made up residents - all decisions are made and/or approved by the membership.
Community-owned Institutions: controlled by the community it serves as demonstrated by 75% of the Board of Directors being members of the community being served.
Systemic barriers to participation range from the blatant to the subtle. Not providing interpretation at a community forum in an immigrant community, for example, is a blatant exclusion of non-English speakers. Meetings scheduled based on the availability of paid staff tends to exclude residents, and so on. The more subtle systemic barriers have to do with the perceived value of the residents’ perspective, the “rules of engagement” and access to knowledge and information. The adage “where you stand depends on where you sit,” captures the heart of the barriers, i.e., different perspectives that lead to different conclusions/solutions. Where agencies tend to see the need for services, residents see the need for access to resources. The former focuses on outreach and education to make people aware of services and educating them as to how to live a healthy lifestyle while the latter focuses on bringing people together to examine the issues, come to consensus on what needs to be done and creating and implementing an action plan.

The dominance of the individual-based approach has resulted in an in-trenched system of programs, regulations, policies, laws, funding streams, mindsets, etc. to address the community’s need for services not resources. This “needs assessment” approach to community subtlety creates a picture of residents as a group of people with lots of needs and few assets. The research on our perception of people living in poverty is clear. Most people view those in poverty as lazy, ignorant and happy to live off the government rather than do honest work. While not everyone trapped below the Clay Line lives in poverty, the overlap is nearly perfect, meaning the general public’s perspective of those living below the Clay Line is viewed through the same lens as those living in poverty. Because we think so little of people trapped in poverty and/or below the Clay Line, we tend to not invest too many resources to engage them. When they become engaged there is a tendency to disregard their perspective as uniformed and/or self-serving and not worth incorporating.

The dominance of service providing organizations also means that the “rules of engagement” have been designed to meet their needs. Rules of engagement are the practices followed or behaviors displayed by the participants (players) in situations. It is the unwritten rules of engagement that determine what information is given, and what time, to whom, and in what manner; etc. Residents operate by a different set of rules. Agencies operate like machines with an expectation of steady and consistent output. They also operate in silos as determined by their funding sources and use a language determined by their profession. What residents are able to produce, on the other hand, ebbs and flows with the fluctuating demands on their families. There is no guarantee of consistent and steady output. Residents also do not live in silos and, in general, don’t understand them and see them as barriers. While their language is less technical and precise, their perspective is more contextual. Because they are enveloped in the situation, they see interconnections that are invisible to the service providers. Whoever controls the rules of engagement controls the process and the outcomes. True resident engagement would require the rules of engagement to be negotiated in order to address the realities of these two worlds.

Authentic engagement of residents in making decisions about the allocation of resources also requires that they have equal access to the knowledge and information needed to make an intelligent decision. Developing a sustainable resolution to the issues confronting these communities requires that all perspectives, especially organized residents, be present and that all involved be equally prepared to address the issues that confront them. Given the enormous and increasing role of technology in our work and our communications and the broad digital divide that has many of the people living below the clay line on the wrong side of that divide, it takes intentional action to insure those weakly or unconnected to the digital world are still able to access the knowledge and information necessary to be an equal at the policy table.

None of these barriers are insurmountable. Removing them requires first recognizing that the lack of engagement by those living below the clay line is not a reflection of their interest or the value of their contribution and then investing in the development of resident-run organizations that have the capacity to bring that constituency to the policy table.

William T. Oswald, Ph.D.
wtoswald@gmail.com

www.theglobalarc.org