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Obama, the Community Organizer President

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Community organizing means different things to different people, but its basic intention is to bring people together at the local level to talk about the socioeconomic and environmental challenges they face, work through their differences, and then implement their own plan of action to meet their most critical development goals.

Facilitators of this process – such as the Democratic presidential nominee Illinois Senator Barack Obama, before he entered the political scene – are necessary to catalyze and help maintain a productive and inclusive experience for participating communities.

Obama often refers to this approach to social change as “bottom-up” because when implemented successfully it results in new public-private partnerships, the growth of civil society, government officials more responsive to people’s needs, and a reformation of state and national social policies to promote local empowerment.

As cases from around the world have illustrated abundantly, such an approach leads local communities to have a heightened stake in their own development and to create self-help projects that further economic development, promote public health, and encourage progress that enhances people’s lives in other key areas.

There are many benefits of community development based on broad local participation that make it applicable to a diverse range of domestic and international challenges facing the United States.

The coherent vision offered by this approach to social change provides Obama with a special and perhaps unique opportunity to enunciate detailed policies that he would pursue as president – policies that would also attract Independents and Republicans and add substance to his claim that he has the right kind of experience to lead the United States in the 21st century.

Consider the issue of international free trade. As devastating as it can be for manufacturing towns in different parts of the United States, its dislocation effect in developing countries, particularly in rural areas, can be even more acute.

Under NAFTA, Mexico has seen a considerable decline in rural employment, lower prices for land and farm products, greater urban migration, rising income inequality, and increasing agricultural trade deficits.

Morocco, which entered into free trade with the United States in 2004, took heed of Mexico’s experience and delayed free trade in the agricultural sector for 10 years to pave the way by modernizing its agricultural practices and diversifying its rural economy.

This is where community organizing steps in. The new development projects that emerge from local participation in community initiatives nurture economic diversity and expand the income base through training and implementing the ideas for the development of local peoples.

This approach better enables hard-hit communities to adapt to the economic restructuring caused by free trade while building a foundation for more rapid development.

Obama can therefore claim correctly, as he did at the Democratic primary debate at Howard University, that his

community organizing background gives him precisely the experience necessary to create policies and reform existing free-trade agreements in order to revitalize communities at home and abroad that have experienced the extremely harsh effects of free trade but not its benefits.

Regarding reconstruction and reconciliation efforts in Iraq, only in the past year did the United States decide to "go local" to achieve successful outcomes. An experienced community organizer such as Obama can readily see that the widespread use of foreign contractors undermined both the Iraqis themselves and the United States.

The evidence in Iraq clearly suggests that people do not attack projects that they design, manage, and control. The opportunity lost from not directing the tens of billions of dollars to community-based reconstruction and reconciliation created the opening, perhaps more so than anything else, for the deadly violence, the millions of people dislocated, and other disasters that followed.

Because of his experience, Obama can outflank Senator John McCain, the Republican nominee, on this issue.

Though McCain was a critic of how the war has been conducted militarily, he has not been nearly as vocal about the colossal reconstruction failure and the insecurity it has created in Iraq as well as its toll on the United States.

On the domestic front, his community organizing perspective can inform Obama's approach to the White House Office of Faith-based Initiatives. Obama stated that, as president, he would review this program to ensure that its funded initiatives are open to everybody and are not used to proselytize.

I suggest one way to do this is to require individual initiatives to include implementing partners from different religious institutions. Such a requirement could help address first-amendment concerns related to faith-based programs while helping to ensure the long-term success of the initiatives themselves since partnership is an essential component of any successful community development.

Indeed, the more collaborators, the more groups and individuals there are that seek to maintain the project's continuity.

Obama's community organizer perspective also can be quite appealing to Republicans and Independents who would appreciate the local empowerment approach as an especially effective way to address the poverty and dislocation caused by free trade.

The senator can use also this special perspective to explain to these key groups why the Iraq war has gone so bad, and how faith institutions can continue to play a significant, if somewhat different role in his administration.

His experience in community work is indeed the right and needed experience to formulate social policies that can revitalize the U.S. economy from the bottom-up, promoting development and helping the government to manage conflicts around the world.

Throughout the presidential election campaign, Obama should seize on every opportunity to carefully explain the community organizer experience and how it will inform his policies as president, always using examples of specific issues of vital interest to the electorate.

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