

**Theoretical Understandings
of
Citizen Engagement**

**Prepared for
Hamilton Community Foundation**

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June 2003**

Theoretical Understandings of Citizen Engagement

INTRODUCTION

Environmental initiatives, whether volunteer-driven efforts from the grassroots or government-mandated programs, all share the common goal of encouraging appropriate changes in human behaviour so as to alleviate negative impacts on the environment. As a result, developing effective methods for engaging citizens in environmental initiatives becomes paramount to the success of these efforts. Unless you can effectively engage members of the public you will not succeed in encouraging the social changes necessary to benefit the environment.

But what do we mean when we talk about effective citizen engagement? The strategies employed to engage citizens and the ultimate goals of that engagement will differ depending on who is implementing the initiative. For instance, a government agency will utilize strategies and set goals different from the goals and strategies of a grassroots organization. But regardless of differing strategies and goals, effective citizen engagement necessarily consists of two fundamental components - a *learning component* coupled with an *action component*.

Effectively facilitating action as an integral component of citizen engagement hinges very much on the manner in which the message is delivered in the learning component of citizen engagement. Recent poll results confirm that Canadians are very concerned about environmental degradation and its potential impacts on their health and the health of their families. The problem, however, is that we are not witnessing behavioural changes at a rate comparable to the high levels of concern expressed in the polls. Nonetheless, the fact that the public is expressing concern suggests that, delivered in the appropriate manner, information on environmental issues of concern holds the potential to trigger appropriate public action responses. Further, an effective message must be accompanied by additional facilitation of citizen mobilization through recognizing and helping to address

any barriers and limitations faced by individuals who choose to take action to protect the environment.

There is mounting evidence confirming that Canadians are concerned about the state of our environment. Polling indicates that environment has been a priority concern amongst Canadians for a considerable period of time now.

Ontario Clean Air Alliance poll of 905 belt, Niagara & London Regions – through Oraclepoll (2003)

- 89% of respondents believe that air pollution will negatively affect their health and the health of their families in the future.

A. Frizzell & J. Pammett (1997) ‘Shades of Green’: Environmental Attitudes in Canada & Around the World

- 59% of Canadians disagree with the statement that we worry too much about the environment and not enough about prices and jobs.

This discussion paper begins with a brief exploration of theoretical understandings of the two-component process of citizen engagement. This includes exploring the nature of the learning that can lead to action and the triggers that can help to encourage this sort of learning in the first place. The process of change that occurs when learning is translated into action is also explored along with barriers and limitations that can prevent this action from emerging. Preliminary consideration is also given to methods for overcoming barriers and limitations. While theoretical understandings focus very much on the impact of engagement on the individual, they also provide insight into the potential for facilitation of engagement by ‘outside enablers’ – the organizations and initiatives with a mandate to facilitate action

The intent of this report is to spark discussion around some of the basic challenges involved in successfully facilitating citizen engagement in environmental initiatives. It is meant to encourage reflection on current efforts and consideration of whether we can make use of understandings of citizen engagement to enhance existing efforts and initiatives in order to engage a broader public in local environmental initiatives.

RECOGNIZING THE NEED FOR CHANGE: CRITICAL REFLECTION

Theories found in both adult education literature and organizational learning literature provide insight into how we, as humans, are capable of developing the ability to reflect on our circumstances and adjust our actions accordingly. These understandings highlight two basic methods of learning through reflection - single and double loop learning. As the theory reveals, double loop learning proves to be far more conducive to behavioural change

Single loop learning (Bateson 1972, Argyris & Schon 1978) or *straightforward problem solving* (Friedmann 1987 involves the common practice of checking ‘prior learning to confirm that we have correctly proceeded to solve problems’ (Mezirow 1990:12). It is a method of learning that relies on previous practices and norms in order to determine an appropriate course of action.

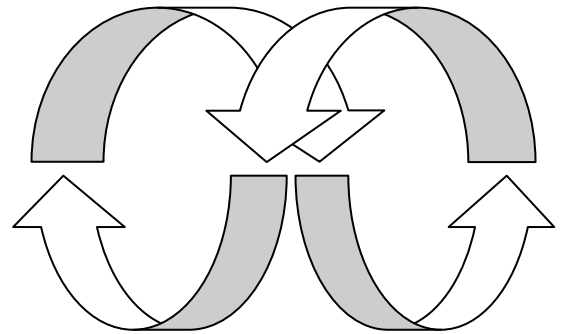
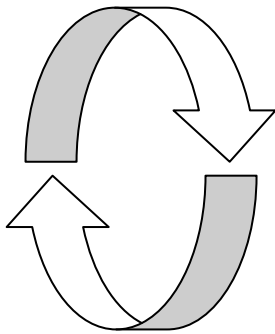
For instance, we all need a way to manage our household waste. Single loop learning tells us, through previous experience, that if we put the garbage at the curb on garbage day, it will be taken away and disposed of for us.

Double loop learning, on the other hand, ‘...connects the detection of error not only to strategies and assumptions for effective performance *but to the very norms which define effective performance*’ (Argyris & Schon 1978:22). This approach to learning involves *critically reflecting* on past experiences and therefore ‘requires an adjustment of the norms governing the action process and, specifically, a change in the actor’s theory of reality, values and beliefs’ (Friedmann 1987:185). The process is an iterative one in which the learning informs the action, informs the learning, and so on. To critically reflect – is to consider the reasons for and consequences of what we do (Mezirow 1990:12). It is a process of consciousness-raising whereby an individual awakens to problems around them as a direct result of the practice of critical reflection (Freire 1973).

Double loop learning, or *critical reflection*, therefore pushes beyond basic learning through an individual’s development of the ability to critique the very foundations of past

experience and, in so doing, to revisit the appropriateness of the norms that guided past learning and the behaviours informed by that learning. Critical reflection can initiate a progressive evolution towards permanent change in personal behaviour. Depending on the context, critical reflection can also motivate some individuals to move beyond the basic adjustment of personal behaviours to the active pursuit of changes in larger community or societal norms.

For instance, we all need a way to manage our household waste. But double loop learning or critical reflection facilitates the recognition that to simply put all of our waste in the garbage can at the curb will only speed up the process of our landfill reaching capacity and shoulder us with the environmental burden of having to create a new landfill. Instead, we should not view our garbage as garbage; we need to reduce the amount of waste we are generating in the first place and recycle and compost everything that we possibly can so that the amounts of true, residual waste are minimized to the greatest degree possible.



Single Loop Learning

Or

Straightforward Problem Solving

Double Loop Learning

Or

Critical Reflection

Triggers

Encouraging the emergence of *double loop learning* or *critical reflection* is a key first step in the promotion of effective citizen engagement. Educational theory suggests that this involves providing information to people in a manner that is ‘socially meaningful’. The work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire is well-known as a very successful example of how to make learning socially meaningful. In his literacy programs for Brazilian peasants, Freire made the content of the reading material he used for teaching relevant to the social struggles that the peasants were going through at the time. In doing this, his program came to serve as a vehicle not only for literacy but for the facilitation of what he called *conscientization* or critical consciousness-raising – a process which is essentially equivalent to double loop learning or critical reflection. The socially relevant content of the reading material effectively spurred on the efforts of peasants to develop literacy skills and engaged them in a process of critical reflection designed to facilitate action to rectify social injustices (Freire 1973).

The key lesson in the work of Freire is that people are far more responsive to a message that is directly relevant to their own personal experiences and concerns. Appeals to peoples’ enlightened self-interest can serve as very powerful triggers for critical reflection and potential action. But this is very often where many environmental initiatives fail. We assume that providing information about our issue or initiative is all that people require in order begin to reflect on the concern we are we are raising and act accordingly. As social marketing expert Doug Mackenzie-Mohr points out, it is rare that simply providing information on a particular issue will result in behavioural changes (Mackenzie-Mohr 2003). The information has to *trigger* an interest and, in so doing, encourage learning of the double loop variety.

The central rule of thumb in the effective use of triggers is to develop a variety of them, acknowledging that in order to have any far-reaching effects, an environmental initiative’s message must give consideration to more than just the fundamental goal of protecting the environment for the environment’s sake. People may not be moved - at

least not immediately - by an environmental message. Those who are moved immediately are probably already involved in the positive actions being promoted through a particular initiative. And so, awareness can be promoted, for instance, by connecting issues of concern to real or potential impacts on quality of life in a particular community, to potential economic impacts or human health impacts. The effectiveness of triggers is very directly related to context. For instance, in the case of Love Canal, the potential threat to human health served as an incredibly powerful trigger for raising awareness and mobilizing the Love Canal neighbourhood.

No one better understands the power of appealing to people's enlightened self-interest than Love Canal activist Lois Gibbs. Gibbs was a young housewife when she began her crusade to see government authorities acknowledge and address the toxic contamination problems in her Niagara Falls, New York neighbourhood. Her door-to-door campaign made neighbours aware that their health and the health of their families was at risk because of potential exposure to hazardous chemicals. Gibbs' message served as a trigger for Love Canal residents, mobilizing many of them to take action, demanding that the government address the contamination problems in their neighbourhood. She has since become a full-time activist at a US national organization called the Center for Health & Environmental Justice. Her organization works to help communities across North America to develop effective campaigns to mobilize residents to take action to ensure their communities are safe from environmental contamination.

In her book, **'Dying from Dioxin – A Citizen's Guide to Reclaiming our Health and Rebuilding Democracy'**, Gibbs provides plenty of insight into how to develop and artfully apply triggers in order to build broader community awareness of an issue and potentially greater community involvement.

Embracing the diversified approach to triggers described above is also an effective method for embracing the principles of sustainability as part of an awareness-raising strategy, given that effective trigger strategies address more than the environmental concerns associated with a particular issue. There are also longer term benefits to this approach as someone who is moved, for example, by economic arguments against an environmentally harmful activity or initiative may well, in critically reflecting, come to embrace and work on concerns related to environment and social/cultural impacts. This development of skills of critical reflection may evolve even further, enabling an

individual to view the issues of concern in an even broader context by thinking globally and acting locally (Brown & Masterson-Allen 1994)

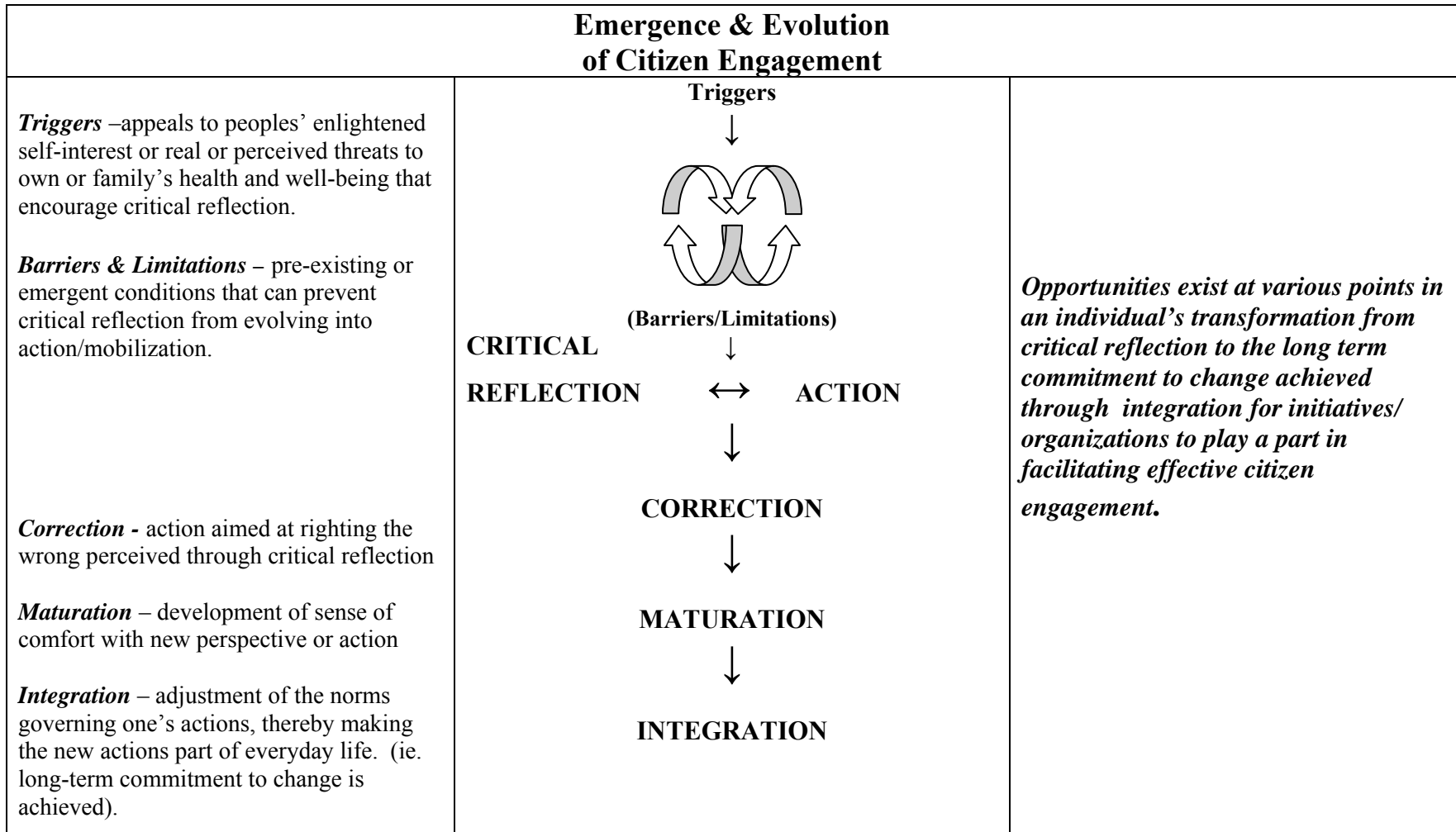
GETTING FROM CRITICAL REFLECTION TO ACTION

The Process

Once an individual begins to critically reflect on an issue, the process of moving from reflection to the action component of citizen engagement begins to unfold. Again conceptual frameworks rooted in theoretical understandings are helpful here to shed light on the action component of the citizen engagement process.

Figure 1 provides a summary overview of theoretical insights into the emergence and evolution of the action component of citizen engagement. As already described, action is preceded by critical reflection which is often sparked by a trigger of some sort. But barriers and limitations can arise that prevent an individual from evolving out of critical reflection into action. These barriers and limitations need to be acknowledged and addressed to allow action to emerge.

But it must also be recognized that the nature of the barriers encountered will differ significantly depending on the nature of the citizen engagement effort. Some citizen engagement efforts are more mainstream than others. The focus of these efforts is usually on promoting *individual* behavioural changes. For instance, a government program aimed at promoting the use of public transit would fall into this category. Other engagement efforts can emerge through grassroots initiatives. These efforts are often in response to a specific issue of concern but usually evolve very quickly to embrace a more far-reaching outlook on how a community needs to change to become more environmentally sustainable. Grassroots initiatives also introduce a group dynamic to the process of citizen engagement that does not exist with mainstream initiatives. For both mainstream and grassroots forms of citizen engagement, barriers and limitations and



Information in this chart is a consolidation of the work of Freire (1973), Kieffer (1981) & Aronson (1995)

methods for overcoming them will differ. But it needs to be recognized that efforts at both of these levels have a significant role to play in promoting effective citizen engagement in environmental initiatives.

Barriers to Individual Behavioural Change

Efforts to encourage individual behavioural changes can face a variety of barriers, with the specific nature of barriers differing depending on the issue being tackled. Generally speaking, common barriers that prevent individual shifts towards more environmentally sustainable behaviours include complaints that new behaviours are too time-consuming and inconvenient. If it's not as easy as their current behaviour, people might indicate that they simply don't care or can't be bothered to change their ways.

In tackling the barriers and limitations preventing the adoption of sustainable behaviours, community-based social marketing becomes very helpful. Doug McKenzie-Mohr, a Canadian environmental psychologist and expert on the use of social marketing to promote sustainable behaviour defines community-based social marketing as follows:

Community-based social marketing is based upon research in the social sciences that demonstrates that behaviour change is most effectively achieved through initiatives delivered at the community level which focus on removing barriers to an activity while simultaneously enhancing the activity's benefits.
(McKenzie-Mohr 2003)

McKenzie-Mohr advocates a four-step process for community-based social marketing that begins with identifying both the barriers and the benefits of the particular sustainable behaviour an initiative is designed to promote. Following on this, a strategy utilizing tools confirmed to be effective in promoting behavioural change should be developed. Tools for change include: seeking some form of commitment from participants; using reminders or prompts to encourage the new behaviour; promoting the new behaviour as the norm and reinforcing this norm through personal contact; communicating information about the desired behaviour in an effective manner – taking heed of the importance of making the message relevant and meaningful to your audience; and using incentives to

encourage the behaviour (McKenzie-Mohr 1999). The strategy must then be piloted in order to work out all of the kinks. The final step is to implement the strategy at the community-level and to evaluate its effectiveness in achieving larger change across the community.

Much more detail regarding how to employ the principles of community-based social marketing can be found at McKenzie-Mohr's website - www.cbsm.com or in his book 'Fostering Sustainable Behaviour – An Introduction to Community-Based Social Marketing'. The website includes detailed information on how community-based social marketing works along with case study examples of how this method has been successfully applied in the real world. Additional information about social marketing can also be found at the 'Tools of Change' website – www.toolsofchange.com.

Barriers to Participation in Grassroots Efforts to Promote Change

Barriers to action at the grassroots level can be more challenging than the barriers encountered in mainstream efforts. This tends to be the case because active involvement in grassroots efforts requires an individual to reflect on and often drastically redefine their role as a citizen in their community.

Generally speaking, common barriers can include a sense that it is futile to challenge or question the practices of those in power, even if critical reflection reveals that these practices are detrimental to local environmental and community health. This problem is captured in the old saying, 'You can't fight city hall'.

Another significant barrier is the perception of many concerned citizens that they lack the skills and experience to contribute, in any meaningful way, to efforts to promote change. Community development activist John McKnight points to this as a serious problem, arguing that the role of formerly 'competent communities' has been usurped by professional experts and, as a result, citizens have come to be convinced that they lack the skills to contribute to community (McKnight 1995). The deterioration of 'genuine'

community, then, should also be acknowledged as a barrier to citizen engagement in grassroots efforts. Another barrier that can emerge from a lack of community is a lack of inclusiveness and accommodation of minority groups and those who face socio-economic disadvantages.

The grassroots group setting offers an environment where many of these barriers can be overcome. While the efforts of these organizations may focus, much like mainstream efforts, on raising awareness and encouraging action, these groups also have the added benefit of an active organizational environment within which individual efforts to reflect and change can be nurtured and supported. The grassroots group setting is therefore more likely to facilitate the emergence of individuals who will evolve beyond basic behavioural changes to embrace efforts to see larger community norms challenged and replaced.

Research has confirmed that individuals within these organizations not only work to become competent promoters of action for change, but they also ensure that others around them develop these skills as well. Evolution from critical reflection to action involves a step-wise process of developing increasingly effective skills for citizen engagement. The first of these skills to emerge is *translation*, or the development of the ability to repackage information on an issue of concern so as to make it meaningful to other members of a community. Building on translation, individuals tend to develop greater abilities to educate those around them in a manner that encourages action – this involves a combination of skilful provision of translated information (triggers) with the provision of skills necessary to take appropriate action. Finally, some grassroots participants evolve into *visionaries*. These are individuals who have developed the ability to skilfully connect the issue that is the focus of a particular grassroots effort to the bigger picture. This usually involves developing the ability to encourage the community-at-large to begin to reflect on and question fundamental norms guiding a community's actions (Lukasik 2002).

At any given point in time, a grassroots organization is likely to contain active members who are all at various points in their evolution towards greater participatory competence. As a result, the environment here is very much one where experienced mentors work to facilitate the ability of newer participants to tackle barriers to participation and to begin to move towards action.

Progression to long term behavioural change

If barriers are successfully overcome, then the process of securing long term commitment to the changes being promoted through citizen engagement will begin to evolve. Much of this involves an individual adjusting lifestyle so as to accommodate new behaviours. As set out in Figure 1, first there is ***correction*** - the often intense effort of working to right the wrong perceived through critical reflection. This is followed by a period of ***maturation*** during which an individual acclimatizes themselves to the new perspective and associated actions. Following maturation comes ***integration***, the ideal endpoint of citizen engagement whereby an individual makes final adjustments to perceptions of the new norms that guide them and, in so doing, makes a permanent commitment to the changes in outlook and action pursued through their engagement (Freire 1973, Kieffer 1981, Aronson 1995).

Using the waste management example once again, imagine someone critically reflecting on the problems with waste management and deciding to change their behaviour to help to address the problem. The first step – correction – involves taking that leap and making the major changes in behaviour. This might involve setting up a backyard composter or starting to use a blue box. The maturation period that follows allows for adjustments to be made to accommodate the new behaviours into everyday life in a personally comfortable and workable manner. And so, for instance backyard composting might involve working out how best to transport the organic waste from the kitchen to the composter. It might involve putting a suitably large container under the sink so that organics can be accumulated in a manner that frequent trips to the composter are not necessary. It might involve determining whether to separate recyclables as they appear or leaving the sorting to once a week when the blue box goes to the curb. The integration

stage is reached when adjustments have been made and the new behaviour is now viewed as the norm; the change is now habit and, therefore, an acceptable part of everyday behaviour. You can imagine similar processes of change and adaptation in, for instance, a shift to sustainable forms of transportation, eco-friendly lawn and garden care, or water conservation/ watershed water quality protection.

This same fundamental process takes place within grassroots organizations where participants must also adjust to behavioural changes. Researchers studying the impact of citizen participation in grassroots anti-toxics initiatives, like the efforts at Love Canal, have documented the nature of this process of evolution towards long term change. Triggers of critical reflection are often hard-hitting, such as a sudden realization that an individual's own health and the health of their family is at risk. The correction period involves coming to grips with what is happening, often by taking action to determine why it is that a harmful situation has been allowed to emerge unabated and trying to accept that the authorities are not always there to protect communities from harm. The maturation period requires an individual to begin to adapt to their new role as an active citizen. This may involve coming to grips with impacts on family and on the reactions of others around that individual to their new, potentially very public role in the community. The final stage focuses on the permanent redefining of acceptable norms and, for some individuals, a long-term commitment to their role as a community activist (career activism).

Levels of Change

The preceding sections focus largely on individual change and on efforts to push for larger community change from the grassroots. But change through citizen engagement can also happen at larger levels, whether provincial, national, within North America, or beyond. Understanding how change emerges at these levels is interesting and challenging; making significant change happen at these levels can be an elusive undertaking. Some interesting insights into larger level change are presented in a book

entitled ‘The Tipping Point – How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference’, by Malcolm Gladwell.

CONCLUSIONS

Effective citizen engagement, whether through government or grassroots initiatives, depends on both an effective learning and an effective action component. Encouraging critical reflection is key to the facilitation of action, and requires the development of a diversity of appeals to the enlightened self-interest of the public-at-large. The action component requires overcoming barriers and limitations, but effective efforts can lead to long term commitments to both sustainable behaviour and action for larger social change.

One thing that is clear from theoretical understandings of citizen engagement is that both mainstream and grassroots efforts are capable of promoting behavioural change in different ways. The potential therefore exists, through closer coordination of efforts in these two realms or even more communication between players in these realms, to create synergies that may well serve to further enhance efforts to engage citizens in local environmental initiatives.

Resources of Interest – Citizen Engagement

Social Marketing:

Book:

McKenzie-Mohr, D., & W. Smith. 1999. *Fostering Sustainable Behaviour – An Introduction to Community-Based social Marketing*. Gabriola Island: New Society Publishers.

Website: www.cbsm.com

This is the website of McKenzie-Mohr Associates. You must register on-line to use the site, but access is free. The site contains a plethora of information about how to use social marketing to promote citizen engagement, including research articles and case studies demonstrating successful real-world application of social marketing principles.

Website: www.toolsofchange.com

Tools of Change is another excellent on-line source of information on social marketing. It includes more case studies of best practices and guides for the design and implementation of effective social marketing strategies.

Website: www.aed.org

The Academy for Educational Development website includes more illustrative examples of successful citizen engagement. This site is not focused exclusively on environmental examples.

Lessons from the Grassroots:

Website: www.chej.org

The Center for Health, Environment, and Justice is the U.S. organization founded by Love Canal activist Lois Gibbs. The organization now works as a clearing house, helping communities across North America and beyond to tackle grassroots issues of concern. The organization's website contains plenty of helpful information on designing campaigns to raise community awareness and encourage involvement.

Books:

Bobo, K., J. Kendall, & S. Max. 1991. *Organize! Organizing for Social Change – A manual for activists in the 1990s*. Washington: Seven Locks Press.

Gibbs, L. 1997. Dying from Dioxin: A Citizen's Guide to Reclaiming our Health and Rebuilding Democracy, Montreal: Black Rose Books.

Gibbs, L. 1998. Love Canal – The Story Continues, Gabriola Island: New Society Publishers.

Shaw, Randy. 2001. The Activist's Handbook: A Primer. Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Shields, Katrina. 1991. In the Tiger's Mouth – An empowerment guide for social action. Gabriola Island: New Society Publishers.

Miscellaneous – Other Books & Websites of Potential Interest

Books:

Gladwell, Malcolm. 2000. The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference. Boston: Little, Brown & Company.

Website: www.cpn.org

This is the website of the Civic Practices Network, a US-based site focusing on how to rebuild civic society.

Website: www.pirg.ca

This is the website of the Canadian Public Interest Research Groups. PIRGs are based within most Canadian universities and initiate a wide variety of innovative projects often aimed at promoting citizen engagement.

Website: www.smartgrowth.bc.ca

This is the website of Smart Growth BC, a very innovative project aimed at promoting citizen awareness and involvement in Smart Growth initiatives in British Columbia.

Website: sustain.web.net

This is the website of Ontario's Sustainability network, an organization which facilitates capacity-building within Ontario not-for-profit organizations through workshops, provision of resources, and seminars with guest speakers.

Website: www.sustainabledevelopment.org

This is the website of the United Nations Best Practices & Local Leadership Program –

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