

A PLANNERS PERSPECTIVE ON ICA METHODS

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Several years ago, while working as a community planner for a consortium of Pueblo Indian tribes in New Mexico, I received a mailing from the ICA West on how to facilitate comprehensive planning. At the time, I was trying to figure out how to facilitate depth policy discussions on the question, "What kind of development gives us both economic self-sufficiency and continuity of our ways of life as Pueblo peoples?" After four years as a professionally trained town and regional planner assigned to economic development, I had faced community paralysis - a dead end of business venture feasibility studies often aborted after Councils couldn't agree on the realities of change in the community and on whether such a venture would be positive or negative for the unarticulated values and desired future.

I had a planner's file of methods for comprehensive planning, strategic management, and consensus decision-making; however, ICA seemed to offer an integration of all of these. More importantly, ICA included steps for building a consensus on community vision and incorporating cultural values into the identification of problems, thus avoiding two major pitfalls of standard planning practice. 1) The assumption that problems can be identified by comparing trends to national criteria for community quality of life "objectively" without systematic eliciting of local values, and 2) The assumption that commitment to implementation can be obtained separately from the plan making process.

Briefly, comprehensive local government planning results in policy goals and specific actions for each sector in a community - from social services to economic development and transportation. As commonly practiced, the process begins with data collection on problems and trends. After obtaining public input on these problems, planners design an implementation plan for presentation to public officials for support. The perpetual difficulty in maintaining consistent support for implementation of plans has led to a debate in the planning profession as to the role of professionals vs. politicians and the usefulness of strategic and incremental project planning vs. long-term comprehensive planning. The points of view are that comprehensive plans are static, vague and quickly outdated, whereas incremental plans can be implemented but lack the broader and long-term perspective on community change. Another perceived trade-off is between public involvement and professional quality.

ICA methods provide an opportunity to side-step these debates in three ways. 1) By involving all sectors who will have to implement the plan in using their knowledge and experience in understanding the problems and making the plans. 2) By starting with the fundamentals of vision and community perceived contradictions to achieving that vision in order to build commitment from the outset; and 3) Through a systematic process for engaging participants in articulating the connections between different problems or sectors and creating integrated solutions based on both their rational and intuitive knowledge. Professional planning has historically worshipped rationality and objectivity, whereas ICA methods provide a way to merge differing subjective judgements into a creative solution.

In terms of consensus building for implementation, ICA methods provide an entirely different set of possibilities to the assumption that only vague goals can be agreed on and specific implementation strategies require political tradeoffs. Although all groups within a session or community may not agree on every issue, they are led to create a statement which encompasses what they do agree on and then to design a specific action plan to address that item. The role of the planner is broadened from recommending solutions to facilitating solutions. In addition, the participants have an opportunity to decide how comprehensive and how incremental to make a plan based on their own analysis of how certain community issues are related. The result is not only a plan, but a more sophisticated and involved community.

The key gift of the ICA facilitation methods is that they encourage a living planning process within communities and organizations rather than merely a ten year document or a one year project. The quantitative and technical methods of forecasting and analysis that professional planners also practice can be an input into, rather than a substitute for, community responsibility for improving the quality of life and dealing with change.

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