

Project Renewal: a clear picture

DISTANT PARTNERS: Community Change Through Project Renewal by Ben W. Lappin and Morton I. Teicher. Lanham, MD., University Press of America. 277 pp. No price stated.

By Eliezer D. Jaffe

Two outstanding social work educator-practitioners have written a unique book on aspects of Project Renewal in Israel, and the role and involvement of the liaison-consultant community worker. This is not a public-relations travelogue or a display of instant expertise by visiting professors. It is a very meticulous presentation of how an Israeli township and an American Jewish community worked together to rehabilitate a disadvantaged neighborhood in Israel. It is also an excellent presentation of theoretical and applied community organization practices and principles, based on extensive diary/documentary material gathered systematically over several years by the authors. Its half-novel-half-

textbook style (152 documentary pages) should satisfy a variety of readers.

Project Renewal resulted in the creation of a new Israeli social-worker role because of the need for several sophisticated Diaspora federations to have direct, reliable input and feedback from liaisons in Israel concerning their investment in Project Renewal activities. These federations hired their own Israeli liaisons, thereby creating a significant departure from the standard procedure, where the Jewish Agency alone provided feedback and was the sole address for information. Eventually, the agency accepted the federations' demand for liaison-consultant, community organization workers (and paid their salaries), but as the authors point out, "there is no established job category for them nor any official description of what they do."

Thanks to Lappin and Teicher, we now have a much clearer picture of the liaison's roles, strategies, relationship networks, potential for creating change, and a model for meaningful Diaspora representation. Although the book deals with only one neighborhood and one federation, the insights and analyses provided are extremely

relevant for the other approximately 50 liaison workers and nearly 100 Project Renewal neighborhoods. The Community Organization Section of the Israel Association of Social Workers has held several conferences on the community organizer-liaison role in community development in Renewal neighborhoods, but this is the first book on the subject, and it is an important contribution to community organizers, teachers, lay people, and planners.

Sadly, there will probably not be any more such conferences since these jobs will evaporate as Project Renewal winds down and Russian absorption takes its place. However, the liaison model developed so carefully, by the federations and their Israeli community organizers in Israel, can serve the federations on other projects in Israel, and should not be discarded. Twinning can and should take place on many projects other than Renewal, and the liaison community organizer function so expertly described and analyzed by Lappin and Teicher could remain extremely relevant. Otherwise, the book will have described an isolated historical episode in community work. This message should be more explicit because the idea of twinning beyond

Renewal has never really been implemented, and it can only become institutionalized if the federations apply it systematically in their philanthropic work with Israel.

It is unfortunate that only eight pages are devoted to the Diaspora community's perspective and how the twinning affected them. Project Renewal was meant (by this writer, at least) to be a two-way street. It was supposed to democratize the Diaspora leadership and lay involvement in the federation structure, and to bring in new people who were not necessarily big givers. It was meant to educate lay leaders about Israel's social problems, bureaucracy, politics, social services, ethnic relationships, and economic realities.

It also was meant to be an educational opportunity for learning about the detailed workings of the Jewish Agency, the uses of Diaspora funds, and to provide new models for hands-on, direct donor involvement with Israelis in a variety of changing projects and joint enterprises. If nothing other than a new partnership relationship between Israel and Diaspora communities and individuals came out of Project Renewal, it would have been well worth the effort. ■

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