

## **FOOD NOT BOMBS: COMMUNITY BREAKDOWN AND RECONSTRUCTION**

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In his essay “Bowling Alone,” Robert Putnam defines social capital as “features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit” (61). Noting that such social investment has decreased steadily, he refers specifically to civic engagement as an indicator of social capital and argues that there is currently an extremely low degree of civic engagement. Every year, fewer people have any connection to politics, associational groups, or even to what is going on in their own neighborhoods. Many grassroots and community activist groups, two types of associational groups, have felt the blow of decreased participation. Putnam attributes this to a number of reasons, including “the movement of women into the work force,” “mobility” (easy and frequent changes in people’s geographical location), and “the technological transformation of leisure” (64-5). It may also be a product of decreased awareness due to a broad range of reasons including the lack of free time and even self-absorption. These are only a few suggestions as to the causes of civic disengagement, but it is an increasingly complex problem having much to do with community, or lack of it.

Community involvement is the building block of civic engagement, yet most areas now have little or no sense of community, contributing to decreased levels of social capital. On the other hand, social capital is an important aspect of community building. Putnam asserts that the networks of civic engagement “probably broaden the participants’ sense of self, developing the ‘I’ into the ‘we’” (61). Even his definition of social capital contains evidence of the reciprocal nature of social capital and community, especially when he speaks of “coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit” (61). Though many grassroots and community activist groups are currently experiencing decreased membership, involvement, and awareness, an increase in community involvement can lead to an increase in social capital and civic engagement. The dual relationship of community to build social capital, and social capital to strengthen community, can be used by

these and other associational groups to strengthen their own organizations and communities in which they function. One community activist group, Food Not Bombs Hoboken, has faced the extreme complexity of civic disengagement and is currently struggling to increase social capital and civic engagement in the Hoboken, New Jersey community. The origins of the Food Not Bombs organization and recent history of its Hoboken chapter can be examined to illustrate causes of a lack in civic engagement and demonstrate the reciprocal nature of social capital and community.

Food Not Bombs was born out of an act of street theater in Boston in 1980. An antinuclear weapons activist organization held a demonstration outside of a stockholder meeting at the First National Bank of Boston. The purpose of the demonstration was to inform the stockholders that their investments were being used by the bank's board of directors to invest in the nuclear weapons industry. Saying that those types of policies had contributed to the cause of the Great Depression, the group lined up over a hundred homeless people from a local shelter outside the bank to make the statement that another Great Depression could happen. While doing this, they fed the homeless people leftovers from a catering company and a produce market, food that would have otherwise been wasted. This strengthened the point that some of the money that was being used on nuclear weapons and testing could be more effectively used to solve other problems within society. According to Keith McHenry, one of the cofounders of Food Not Bombs, the people involved in the action decided "we should really do this, to organize on the streets against nuclear war and nuclear power all the time" (*Food Not Bombs News*).

Twenty-two years later, Boston Food Not Bombs, the first chapter, is still one of the strongest chapters. The eight founding members never thought that they were creating a model for an organization that would eventually have over two hundred autonomous chapters worldwide. They were doing what they enjoyed doing, creating art and using it to spread a message through the community. Today, many Food Not Bombs chapters focus more on the issues of hunger and homelessness. While this shift in focus was probably inevitable as nuclear weapons became much less of an issue by the end of the 1980s, in some chapters it was accompanied by more of an ideological shift. Instead of using

art and community to get a message across, and having fun while doing so, some Food Not Bombs chapters focused solely on hunger and homelessness and functioned almost as soup kitchens. The shift away from being an artistic- and community-based group towards being a charity-based group actually drove away many people who had originally been attracted to it, often alienating or boring them so much that they decided to leave the group. This destroyed the ideal of creative community that Food Not Bombs was originally based on, and turned out to be a major problem for some chapters, even causing the end of a few.

One chapter in which this occurred was the Hoboken chapter. It started out strong and enthusiastic, but after a few months membership began to decline. The novelty seemed to be wearing off. People who had once been there every weekend found they had other things to attend to in their lives. Some people reasoned that in meetings there was too much emphasis on, and too many arguments over, trite details that did not seem to make much sense in the overall scheme of things and, despite the fact that Food Not Bombs had always been political in nature, stated that it was too political for them. This could have caused some of the membership decline and a reason for lack of interest in becoming involved, as is shown in Putnam's observation about decreased engagement in politics (61). Others felt it was too much like a soup kitchen and not active or political enough. They felt that instead of Food Not Bombs trying to make a problem more visible so the community could address it, they were just pushing it into the background. Some people may have felt the lack of community which had originally drawn them to the group in the first place; others may not have been able to find what they had been seeking. For the remaining few members, the work of the group became a chore. More than once, there was only one person collecting food, cooking it, and sharing it with the homeless. After six months, the three remaining members decided to end Food Not Bombs Hoboken. This is not uncommon among Food Not Bombs chapters; it is easy to find other chapters which have had similar if not almost identical experiences. These chapters do not recognize their problems while they are experiencing them, and if they do, it is difficult to trace their origins. All problems the groups face lead back to lack of community, either within the group itself, within the areas where

the group is meeting and sharing, between the group and the community, or any combination of these, resulting in a number of reasons why the group may have failed.

One problem occurs when the community in which the group is sharing food is not aware of the group. The public in Hoboken did not even know what Food Not Bombs was or that it existed. “It has a tremendous effect to be regularly out in the public eye, exercising your right to free speech” (Butler and McHenry). “Visibility is a human right” was proclaimed on one of San Francisco Food Not Bombs’ banners (Sabot 23). Visibility, sometimes accomplished by civil disobedience, has always been an important goal for Food Not Bombs chapters—in order to get their message out to as many people as possible—but this was one aspect where Food Not Bombs Hoboken failed. After a few months of sharing food in a highly trafficked area, the risk of getting in trouble led the group to stop setting up tables, putting up banners, or handing out flyers. Some members were willing to take those risks, but the consensus of the group restrained them. This could have led to those people’s frustrations with the group and their eventual departure. Food Not Bombs had always taken risks, more often than not risks with an artistic or creative edge, to spread their message and increase awareness:

From the very beginning, we saw all of our street activity as theater. This included not only our food tables, but also our literature tables, our presence at other peoples’ events, etc. We recognized that the personal is political and the political becomes personal. We wanted to dramatize the reality of the militarization of our society by highlighting the social costs and the human suffering. We created opportunities to expose these injustices through soup lines, by depicting military types holding a bake sale to buy a B-1 bomber, offering the “tofu challenge” instead of the “Pepsi Challenge”, and even a silent theater piece in which a person dressed as a paper mache missile chased a person in a paper mache world, threatening to destroy it. (Butler and McHenry)

The Hoboken chapter lost all of its creative aspects and became more of a soup kitchen, bringing food to the park to give to a handful of homeless people and then leaving. There was zero

visibility to the group. The effect of being in the public eye was not an option because the group was no longer vocal. “It is not enough to gather food and serve people . . . . The public should be exposed to the poverty in their community and join the fight (Khan 26). If the public is not aware that the group exists, it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to generate public support for it or to create any ties to the community.

The idea of art as a way of creating and maintaining community was inherent in the first chapter of Food Not Bombs, and was important to the Hoboken chapter at the time of its creation. But after a few months, there was a decline in artistic and creative approaches to getting the word out. Art has often been important within communities and in spreading social messages. “Communities and organizations are enhancing their efforts to address social issues by using the arts. Publicly and privately, the arts are being recognized as assets that promote healthy communities” (Lowe 358). The lack of artistic and creative approaches could have caused members who had joined because of its intended unique approach to the issues of hunger, homelessness, and militarization to leave the group, not just because of the issues. Lowe also points out that art creates solidarity and promotes interaction while communicating important messages; sticking with a more artistic approach could have been a strong building block for Food Not Bombs Hoboken.

Food Not Bombs Hoboken also had the problem of dealing with an area that saw a very small amount of civic engagement to begin with. One reason for this may be a general lack of solidarity and interest within the community. It is discouraging to members of the group to try to keep a disinterested public aware of its presence, much less attempt to build up community where none exists. One possible reason for this lack of community is that many people’s lives are isolated or fragmented. Most of the people who now live in Hoboken commute to New York City where they have jobs that keep them very busy. When so many of the people who live there have little or no stake in the area, aside from its being a cheaper place to live in than Manhattan, it is difficult to reach them about local issues, and this can be related to Putnam’s theory of “demographic transformations” (65) as a cause of diminishing social capital. It seems that most people in Hoboken do not even

know their next-door neighbor's name (this was pointed out by a current Food Not Bombs member and Hoboken resident). Putnam relates informal social capital to good neighborliness, but shows that this is also decreasing, "The proportion of Americans who socialize with their neighbors more than once a year has slowly but steadily declined over the last two decades, from 72 percent in 1974 to 61 percent in 1993" (63). These are the people it is most difficult to reach and it seems almost impossible to be able to get them involved in community activities or even to support them.

Besides trying to get the community involved, it was also difficult for Food Not Bombs Hoboken to keep up its own members' interest in the organization. There was a shift in the intended ideology, from a protest against nuclear weapons and unequal distribution of wealth and resources to a soup kitchenesque charity that handed out food to the homeless without making it visible to the community and forcing the community to address the problem. This ideological shift resulted in several members leaving the group, and made members lose sight of the goal of being community based and oriented. The group became isolated from the community, which was also a consequence of the decreased visibility of its activities. It is important to not only keep a feeling of community within the group, but between the group and the community it is active in. "Community relations is a dynamic process of communication between the community and the organization to discover how you can better serve and to convey how your organization is responding to that information" (Yarrington 10). Without any communication, it is impossible to gain community support which could make the group stronger. It is the community surrounding the organization that can make it strong and provide support and help, but that was exactly what Food Not Bombs Hoboken was lacking. No communication meant no civic engagement of the community.

Several months after the disbanding of the Hoboken Food Not Bombs chapter, two of its original members attempted to restart the group. This time there was more of a focus on the community in Hoboken instead of on bringing in activists from outside the community. Flyers were hung up several times all over Hoboken, and e-mails were sent to every person who had previously displayed interest in helping. Now, meetings are held at a

community-oriented health food market, and the group is attempting to reach out to the community while at the same time contributing to it. In this task, they face several problems. Finding people within the community who are willing to volunteer their time is difficult; as stated above, many people who now live in Hoboken are New York City commuters without much free time. Trying to build community where there is currently none to speak of can be frustrating if there is very little response, but Hoboken Food Not Bombs is already attempting to tackle this by first reaching out to the groups of people who are most likely to respond positively, such as other associational groups working out of the Hoboken Multicultural Center, and people who are more likely to have lived in Hoboken for their whole lives rather than the commuter population. They must also avoid the same traps that led to the disbanding of the previous Food Not Bombs group in Hoboken. In order to do this, they must keep in mind the importance of community to the group and not lose sight of their current goal of building community.

The first steps towards building community while maintaining a relationship between the organization and the community seem very small, but can make a lot of progress. “You can begin to forge community bonds in your neighborhood by simply striking up a conversation with your neighbor” (Shaffer and Anundsen 106). This is also a step towards visibility for the group. By getting to know the people in the neighborhood, Food Not Bombs could, at the same time, make the people of the area aware of the organization’s presence and allow room for community bonds to form within the neighborhood. Shaffer and Anundsen also suggest organizing “small events that will bring different age groups together” (107). By organizing such events, possibly pancake breakfasts or video showings, Food Not Bombs could bring people of the community together while again making their presence known and engaging in discussion with the community. By bringing people of different age groups together, Food Not Bombs could also become less exclusionary and gain more support and engagement. It is important to keep a communication network alive between the group and the community. “Communication practices are central in building the social bonds that allow collective action” and thus community (Novek 62).

There are larger steps that can be taken once there is a small support base from the community. According to Shaffer and Anundsen, Food Not Bombs could collaborate “with another association in the city on an issue the two have in common” (107). This can include anything from high school clubs to searching out a community center, and would widen the support base while tapping into a potential resource for more volunteers for the group. Another suggestion made by these authors is to start a community garden (107). This has proven successful in many Food Not Bombs chapters and allows the community to be involved while providing food for the group to share. The most important point they make that meetings should “introduce processes that encourage new people to become involved, help participants feel safe and listened to, and encourage sharing of decision-making and responsibility” (108). Food Not Bombs meetings have always had the goal of incorporating even first-time members in the meetings and the decision-making process. This is important in order to keep prospective members interested in continuing with the group and to make them feel as if their opinion counts, which keeps a feeling of community within the group while encouraging the active participation of actual Hoboken community members. In an article about Food Not Bombs for a Canadian Magazine, Food Not Bombs volunteer Sharmeen Khan sums up the ideals of the organization while addressing the problems of visibility and the importance of community and civic engagement to the organization:

Food Not Bombs is more outspoken and upfront about hunger and poverty. Many anti-poverty organizations accept poverty as a reality of the system and argue that nothing can be done about it. We reject this political position and loudly insist that hunger and poverty are unacceptable violations of basic human rights. It is not enough to gather food and serve people. We want to raise awareness of poverty issues in the community. This is why groups serve free meals in big parks in downtown areas instead of hiding the poor inside soup kitchens. The public should be exposed to the poverty in their community and join the fight. (26)

Food Not Bombs Hoboken has already taken the first steps in planning, but taking action has always proven to be the difficult

task. They have already begun to try to make their presence felt by moving out from the park where they were sharing food to a more highly trafficked area, and by posting flyers throughout Hoboken on a regular basis. Plans are being made for community events, such as a booth at the Hoboken Arts and Music Festival and a pancake breakfast for the community, in which they could explain what they do and ask for support and volunteers. The group has begun to grow artistically and creatively, once again hanging banners, discussing film and video projects, and playing music at their sharings. Also, city officials have already given permission for a community garden in an unused area of a park. It seems as if Food Not Bombs Hoboken is taking steps in the right direction, but the goal of community involvement and participation has to be kept as a top priority. This participation will help to increase civic engagement, and thus increase social capital within the city of Hoboken. If the members of Food Not Bombs Hoboken continue with their plans to interact with the community and to involve the community in their activities, they will not only strengthen the community and help to increase the amount of awareness, civic engagement, and social capital within it, but also strengthen themselves by planting roots in the community, allowing them to grow and flourish.

Putnam argues that “American social capital in the form of civic associations has significantly eroded over the last generation” (64). Food Not Bombs Hoboken is only one associational group that illustrates this erosion and the reciprocal relationship between social capital and community. Putnam affirms that this relationship exists. “A rounded assessment of changes in American social capital over the last quarter-century needs to count the costs as well as the benefits of community engagement” (65). Putnam also recognizes the importance of good neighborliness and social trust. As seen in the case of Food Not Bombs Hoboken, a lack of community can lead to a lack of civic engagement, and when there is a deficiency in civic engagement there is likely not much of a community. This reciprocity can be an advantage though, in trying to increase both community and social capital. As seen in the case of Food Not Bombs, a commitment to community development makes it possible for a localized increase in social capital, while at the same time, even a small rise in social capital (i. e., several new

members in the organization) makes it possible to build and maintain community. “Members of associations are much more likely than nonmembers to participate in politics, to spend time with neighbors, to express social trust, and so on” (Putnam 64). Greater involvement in associations, or even the community as a whole, leads to a higher degree of civic engagement and social capital. Associational groups can utilize this dual relationship between community and social capital to their own advantage, while at the same time help to reduce or even reverse the decline in social capital which has occurred and work towards civic renewal.

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