

## SOME RESEARCH FINDINGS ON IMMIGRANT ORGANIZATIONS

Updated January 4, 2010

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Wherever immigrants have gone in the world, and certainly in the United States, they have attempted to create organizations. These range from informal social networks to hometown associations, immigrant religious congregations, cultural and leisure time associations, advocacy and political organizations, and specialized immigrant service providers. How important are these organizations to the successful integration of immigrants? To what extent should government and private philanthropy provide financial support for their activities, or seek their input into the policy-setting process? Positions on these questions are often based on ideology, rather than solid research. Although conclusions are often hard to draw, let's look at some key findings from recent studies and reports.

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- Researchers often have had a hard time defining an immigrant organization. Is such an organization defined by its purpose, e.g. to help immigrants, or by its membership and control, e.g. immigrant majority on board of directors or in larger membership? Sometimes immigrant-led organizations enjoy little grassroots support. Should a multi-purpose organization that devotes a significant share of its resources to immigrant service be classified as an immigrant organization? Sometimes this latter type of organization does not devote sufficient attention to community problem-solving and activism.
- Most of the scholarly discussion about immigrant associations revolves around organizations with some sort of political, empowerment, or social mobilization agenda. However, the vast majority of immigrant organizations are social, cultural, or recreational in purpose. These organizations attract impressive followings and strong participation, whereas the more political organizations often have a hard time involving people other than the leadership<sup>1</sup>
- More affluent and better educated immigrant communities tend to have a richer associational life than poorer and less educated communities. They have more leisure time to participate and the resources to dedicate to organizational development.<sup>2</sup>
- It appears to be easier to build immigrant organizations in cities or regions with large immigrant populations. For example, Mexican hometown associations in the United States are clustered in Chicago and Los Angeles, two cities with large Mexican immigrant populations.<sup>3</sup>
- Many immigrant organizations, in particular those receiving government or foundation support, are often developed and managed by immigrants who came at an early age (the so-called 1.5 generation) or those born in the United States (the

2<sup>nd</sup> generation).<sup>4</sup> These younger leaders are generally better able to access resources from mainstream institutions.

- Federal, state, and local government support appears to be crucial for the development of immigrant organizations as service providers. In New York City, for example, state and local government have routinely contracted with immigrant organizations to deliver services, both general social services and specific services such as naturalization assistance, and as a result, New York has a vibrant immigrant organizational life. Comparative research looking at the Portuguese and Vietnamese communities in the United States and Canada also shows how important state support is in the development of organizations in these communities.<sup>5</sup>
- A number of policy experts call for the active participation of immigrant organizations in immigrant integration work. Not only do these organizations possess knowledge of the needs and resources of the immigrant communities, their leaders often exert an influence over their communities that government employees could never hope to achieve. Through partnerships between government and immigrant organizations, new relationships are developed and “social capital” is increased.<sup>6</sup>
- One of the most important initiatives in the United States to develop newcomer organizations is the support provided by the federal Office of Refugee Resettlement to refugee mutual assistance associations. A recent report based on in-depth interviews with the leaders of nine of these organizations around the country concluded that they were “important agents of integration.”<sup>7</sup> However, four of them assumed a broader identity, e.g. religious (Jewish), pan-ethnic (African), or gender (women’s issues). Somewhat paradoxically one of the recommendations in the report is that these associations should diversify their boards and staff to become more “representative of the larger community” and to gain access to more people with organizational development skills.

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<sup>1</sup> Jose C. Moya, (2005) 'Immigrants and Associations: A Global and Historical Perspective', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 31:5, 857.

<sup>2</sup> Moya, 853-854.

<sup>3</sup> Xochitl Bada, Jonathan Fox, and Andrew Selee, “Invisible No More: Mexican Migrant Civic Participation in the United States,” Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars (Mexico Institute), 2006, 35.

<sup>4</sup> In the case of the Korean community in Los Angeles, the organizational experiences of the various generations are traced very skillfully by Angie Y. Chung. See her “The Dawn of a New Generation: The Historical Evolution of Inter-Generational Conflict and Cooperation in Korean American Organizational Politics,” Center for Comparative Immigration Studies, University of California, San Diego, Working Paper 55, June 2002.

<sup>5</sup> Irene Bloemraad, “The Limits of de Tocqueville: How Government Facilitates Organizational Capacity in Newcomer Communities,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 31:5, 865-887.

<sup>6</sup> A good exposition of this point of view in the Canadian context may be found in: Howard Duncan, “Non-governmental Organizations and Immigrant Integration,” *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, Vol. 9, No. 2, 2009, 305-309.

<sup>7</sup> Kathleen Newland, Hiroyuki Tanak, Laura Barker, “Bridging Divides: The role of Ethnic Community-Based Organizations in Refugee Integration,” Migration Policy Institute and International Rescue Committee, 2007, 72 pp.