

From Awareness to Taking Action: A Community's Struggle to Raise Awareness of the Health Impact of Occupational Hazards in the City of Sarnia

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Introduction

This study investigated what occurred in the 1990s in the City of Sarnia that led to a reduction in carcinogens in the petrochemical industry.

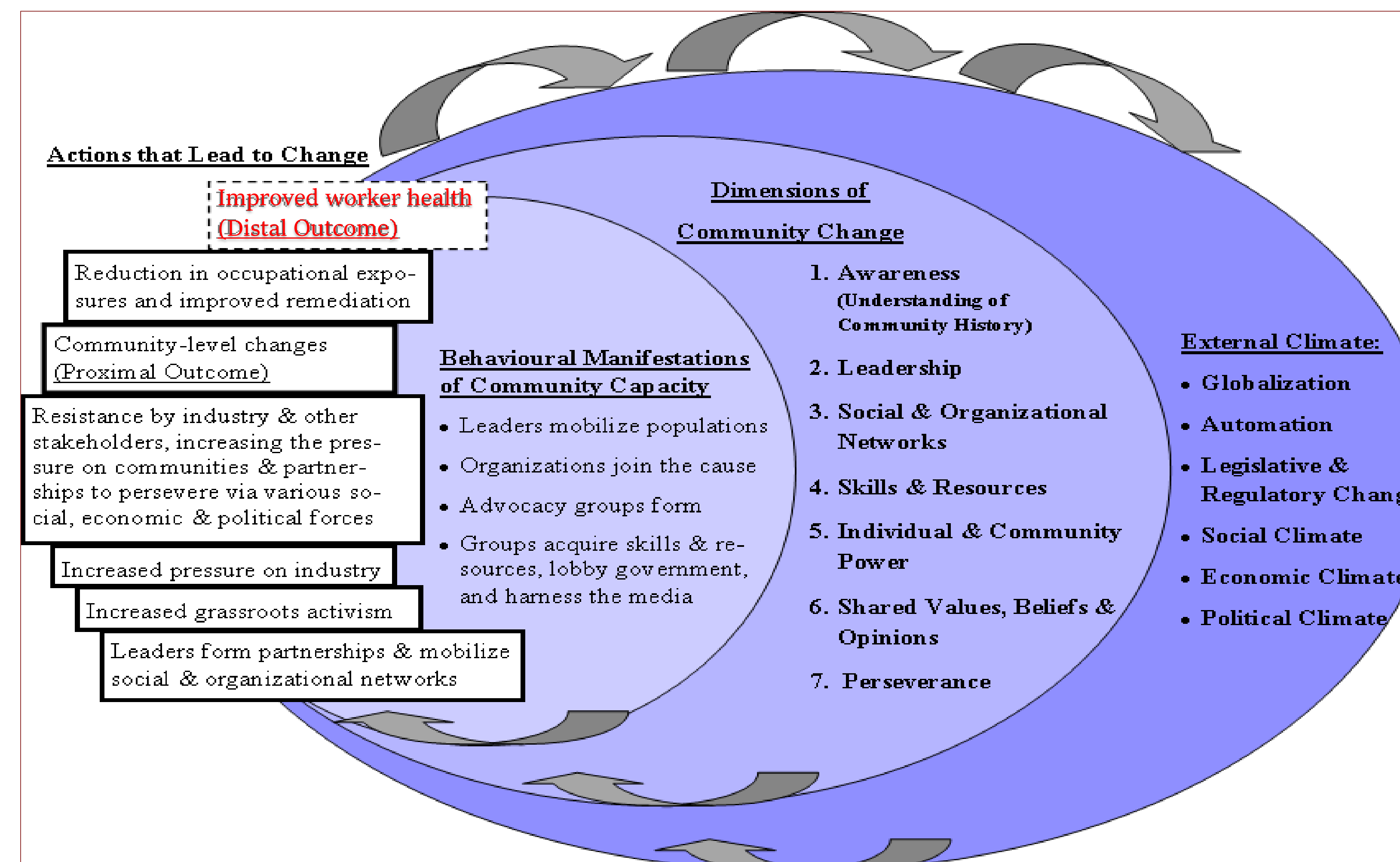
- Over 30% of cancers could be prevented by modifying or avoiding exposure to carcinogens [1].
- Workers are particularly vulnerable. The proportion of cancers attributable to occupational exposures can be as high as 18% [2].
- The gap between awareness of these hazards and taking action is a fundamental question in the field of knowledge transfer.
- City of Sarnia is dominated by the petrochemical industry. It was chosen since it has the highest rates of cancer compared to other Ontario cities [3].
- Sarnia has a reported history of high asbestos exposure dating back to the 1950's [4].
- Sarnia has had significant media coverage on environmental and occupational exposures.

Methods

- Qualitative case study.
- Hypothesis – high community awareness of occupational exposures leads to industrial facilities reducing their exposures.
- Semi-structured interviews and focus groups with 30 key informants from organized labour, workers, the community, local politicians, and industry.
- Investigation of factors that contribute to a community's awareness and subsequent action on behalf of workers who were exposed to asbestos.
- Supporting data was collected.
- Study and analysis was guided by a "Dimensions of Community Change" conceptual framework model adapted from Minkler et al., (2008); Goodman et al., (2009) and Freudenberg (2004).



Sample of Sarnia media clippings addressing environmental and other exposures



"Dimensions of Community Change" model [5-7]. Adapted from Minkler and colleagues (2008), Goodman and colleagues (1998) and Freudenberg (2004)

Results and Discussion

Dominant themes that emerged from the study include leadership, awareness, social and organizational networks, acquiring skills and resources, individual and community power, holding shared values and beliefs, and perseverance. Sarnia progressed because of 3 "fulcrums of change": (1) a very clear message that asbestos causes cancer; (2) having a central organization that brought together and linked multiple community groups and; (3) the creation of a victim's group that epitomized the cost and damage of occupational exposures.

Lessons Learned

- Timing is everything: the 1990s was a good time for occupational health in Ontario, which provided a good backdrop to the activism in Sarnia
- To achieve awareness of a health issue, or empower the community to make changes, one needs to:
 - have champions and leaders backed by strong / supportive stakeholders, such as organizations or unions;
 - use clear messages backed by credible research that emphasizes the link between cause and effect ("asbestos causes mesothelioma");
 - ensure that the person / workplace / community has the skills and resources to advocate for the change and make the change; and
 - ensure that all the relevant stakeholders are networked, linked and engaged.

References

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