

## **Are grassroots organizers in Israel a special group of leaders?**

Dorit Barak & Elisheva Sadan

We will present finding from our research on how Israeli organizers for social change define themselves and their work.

The organizers we interviewed:

- Were well known for their organizing in Israel
- With at least seven years of experience in organizing
- 33 women & 16 men
- They represent the main organizing fields in Israel

For choosing the interviewees we used a 'snowball' methodology, asking each interviewee to recommend additional interviewees.

**Methodology:** We conducted in-depth, open-ended interviews.

The questions referred to:

- how they define organizational work
- how they define themselves and their work
- their career path
- their important struggles
- the communities they work with
- their actual projects
- how and who recruited them
- their ideology and motives to act
- their strengths and weaknesses
- their attitudes toward feminism
- and more

We defined grassroots organizers as:

Organizers who are members of the community they organize, and have experienced the same problems and conditions they aim to change through organizing.

This definition split our sample into three groups:

1. GR organizers (26)
2. Past GR organizers (7)
3. Other organizers (16)

**Do grassroots organizers (GRO) differ from other organizers and how?**

**Findings:**

**Background variables**

We examined Sex, age, origin, marital status, education, profession, seniority as organizers, field of organizing.

In most of these variables we haven't found significant differences between the different groups of organizers (GRO, Past-GRO and Others).

**Significant variable with no differences****Profession**

- 30 (61%) organizers work as organizations' managers or in coordinating positions in the organizations

**Variable with differences**

- **GROs - all** (or the vast majority) of the organizers for rights and the empowerment of Arabs, immigrants, women, Mizrahim, and gay-lesbians.
- **Not GROs – all** the “rights and empowerment of the poor”, and **80%** of the organizers for co-existence and bridging.

**Ethnicity**

- 33% of the GROs or past-GROs are Ashkenazim.
- 75% of the Not GROs, are Ashkenazim.

Note: the origin of all immigrants is defined “Olim”, although some of them are Ashkenazi and some not.

- All the Arab organizers and all the immigrant organizers are GR organizers.

Reservation: it should be noted that the findings of both variables are significantly affected by the sampling method. The selection of the interviewees was done intentionally in order to receive a wide range of organizing fields. In some of the organizing fields there is a close relation between the organizing field and the origin of the organizers (such as Arabs, immigrants, Mizrahim). In these fields the finding that the organizers are GROs is trivial.

**Findings from the interviews****Career path**

- Worked for the community or social change - before university: 17 (35%)
- Worked for social change - during university: 19 (39%)
- **Paid work for social change - after university: 32 (65%)**
- Paid work (not for social change) - after university: 19 (39%)
- **Unpaid work for political party - after university: 20 (41%)**
- **Unpaid work for social change - after university: 38 (78%)**

Note: the categories are not mutually exclusive.

**How do organizers define organizing?**

- Action to empower people	14	29%
- Consciousness raising	11	22%
- Recruiting activists around common goals	13	27%
- Developing capabilities for social change	5	10%
- <b>Political action</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>22% *</b>
- Recruiting partners	5	10%
- Building an organization	11	22% **
- Impresario	5	10%
- Others	13	27%

\* of them 8 are GROs

\*\* of them 8 are GROs

Note: the categories are not mutually exclusive

#### How do organizers define themselves?

- <b>Activists, political social activists</b>	19	39% *
- <b>Leaders, founders &amp; promoters of organization</b>	17	35% **
- Managers, coordinators	9	18%
- Enablers, initiator, assisting organizations to act	8	16%
- Organic intellectuals	2	4%
- Entrepreneurs	2	4%
- Network coordinators	2	4%
- Others	8	16%

\* of them 13 are GROs

\*\* of them 13 are GROs and past-GROs

Note: the categories are not mutually exclusive

**13 (50% of the GROs) define themselves as activists and political activists**

**13 GROs and Past GROs define themselves as leaders.**

#### A constant finding

There is a high prevalence of organizers who:

- see organizing as a political activity
- define themselves as activists and political activists
- is involved in political party activity (41%)  
(4 Arabs, 4 immigrants, 2 of the gay-lesbian community)

#### General conclusion:

**GROs in our study are not a distinct group. There are no significant differences between them and the other groups.**

**The background variables of all the organizers are very similar and their voices are similar.**

#### Possible explanations

1. The definition of GR organizing we have used is not unequivocal.
  - Part of the GROs deliver services for that community, and are not organizing the community to act for itself.
  - Many organizers are active in several organizations, some are GRO and some are not.
2. Maybe the connections all the organizers in our sample have with many different organizations have helped many of them to shape similar viewpoints regarding the essence of organizing and their role as organizers.
3. Since 2000 there are more than a 1000 NGOs which define themselves as social change organizations, but only a fifth (200) are GROs (Kaufman & Gidron, 2006). This is why we suspect that the high rate of GROs and Past-GROs in our study does not represent the reality in Israel.
4. All NGOs in Israel face limited funding, are active in the same circles, and have to follow similar guidelines and regulations in order to mobilize funds. Many of them attend the same conferences as well, and thus are exposed to many similar influences.

In view of these conditions the similarity among them is not surprising.