

**German Institute for Community Organizing/Deutsches Institut für Community Organizing  
(DICO)  
Frequently Asked Questions**

**Q: What is the German Institute for Community Organizing or DICO?**

**A:** DICO is the initiator of Germany's young but growing and successful network of broad-based community organizations. It was founded in 2006 by Leo Penta who "translated" the US tradition of organizing to Germany by building the first broad-based community organizations in Berlin and Hamburg. DICO is currently building new community organizations in Berlin and in other German cities. Each organization has its own name, sets its own agenda and hires its own organizers. They affiliate with DICO for the mentoring of their organizers, the training of local leaders, assistance in fundraising and best-practice knowledge of organizing. For more information on DICO, visit [www.dico-berlin.org](http://www.dico-berlin.org).

**Q: What is broad based community organizing?**

**A:** "Broad-based" organizing is organizing that brings together a broad base of local groups and institutions for power to initiate change. Power is understood by DICO leaders as the ability to act collectively in public. The groups that community organizing brings together are neighborhood associations, churches and mosques, civic and non-profits organizations and other civil society groups, many of which have been strangers to public life and democratic participation in the past. DICO organizations teach the "Iron Rule" of organizing, which is: "Never do for somebody what they can do for themselves." DICO organizers do not "do" democracy for the groups in the network, but rather teach the skills and practices necessary for public life so that leaders within those groups act together and develop and mentor new leaders. DICO, therefore, does not bring an agenda of issues to new institutions, but rather invites those institutions to participate in a process of determining their own agenda of issues.

**Q. What is the mission of a DICO affiliated community organization?**

**A.** DICO helps build broad-based, non-partisan organizations of dues-paying member associations, congregations and non-profits committed to building power for sustainable social and economic change. This is done through the building of relationships within and between institutions; institution-based leadership development; the identification of and research on issues of mutual self-interest; and disciplined, organized action. Through this organizing strategy, DICO develops a constituency of leaders to become citizens in the fullest sense: participants on an equal footing in democratic decision-making and agents of the creation of a more just society through the exercise of relational power.

**Q. Why do groups get involved in community organizing? What must they bring to the organization?**

**A.** Groups that join DICO affiliated community organizations usually do so for three central reasons:

- To build their capacity to act for positive change on structural issues that go beyond the individual group's capability ;
- To develop leadership and strengthen community within and between their institutions; and
- To build bridges across the divides of difference that isolate many communities from each other.

The responsibilities of membership are:

- To build a core team of leaders responsible for organizing within the member institutions;
- To send leaders to DICO trainings to learn and how to apply the universals of organizing;
- To participate in organizational actions to address local, city-wide and regional issues; and
- To pay membership contributions (based on a standard set by the organization's own leadership).

**Q. How does DICO organize?**

**A.** Issues, action and leaders in DICO organizations emerge out of a cycle of organizing. This process begins at the local institutional level, as a "core team" of leaders conduct relational meetings with members and other local groups. Relational meetings, or one-on-one conversations, provide an opportunity for two people to share their stories and interests in order to build a public relationship. Group listening sessions provide a similar opportunity for small groups. Through these conversations, leaders begin to understand value and effectively tell their own stories and learn how to elicit stories from others.

As issues emerge from these conversations, leaders are trained in research actions, meetings where potential issues are researched and leaders learn about the people who can effectively address those issues. Eventually, leaders engage in public actions - meetings with officials where leaders raise major issues and hold officials accountable for action to address those issues.

Reflection and evaluation are primary tools throughout the organizing process. After every relational meeting, group meeting, research action and public action, leaders reflect on what they have learned and evaluate their work thus far.

**Q: Who sets the agenda for the organization?**

**A:** The organization's agenda is set by the groups that make up the organization. There are three kinds of issue actions in DICO affiliated organizations: institutional actions, local actions and organizational actions. Institutional actions are actions determined by one institution that decides to act on its own behalf, local actions occur when institutions in a certain area gather in order to address an issue relevant to that area and organizational action takes place when the organization as a whole addresses a certain issue. Organizational issues often emerge when addressing institutional or regional actions requires the support of the whole organization or are necessitated by a particular historical opportunity. These three kinds of issue actions (institutional, regional and organizational) often occur simultaneously in DICO work.

**Q: What kinds of issues do DICO-affiliated organizations work on?**

**A:** DICO affiliated organizations work on the issues that emerge out of conversations within member groups. Thus the organization's agenda arises directly from the concerns and interests of member groups. DICO affiliated organizations have worked on regional economic development, education, work, traffic issues, public-safety concerns, parks and public spaces, and other issues of fundamental importance to the quality of life of their neighborhoods and cities.

**Q: Where do DICO affiliated organizations get their money? Where does the money go?**

**A:** DICO affiliated organizations are funded by dues from member institutions, contributions from the business community and foundation grants. They generally do not accept government funds. The vast majority of a DICO-affiliated organization's budget goes to pay the salaries of an organizer and for training and development of leaders. A small portion of the budget is allocated for a minimal infrastructure (small office, telephone, internet).

**Q: What do organizers do?**

**A:** The primary responsibility of organizers is to identify institutional leaders who have an appetite for public action and teach them the skills and practices required for effective, results-oriented public work. Organizers spend their days in one-on-one meetings, sitting down over the course of each month with more than 50 members of various institutions in order to find people who are interested in acting together to improve the lives of the communities they care about. Organizers develop the talent within leaders, agitating them to see their potential and the possibilities that can be accomplished through organized action. Organizers attempt to abide by and teach the "Iron Rule" of our organizing: "Never do for others what they can do for themselves." In living out this tradition, organizers are primarily teachers of public life rather than staffers who do the work of organizing for member institutions.