

Approaches and Models of Community Organisation

According to Murray G. Ross (1955) | Rothman (1968) | H.Y. Siddiqui (1997)
A Complete Exam Answer with Examples, Simple Language & Memory Tips

Introduction

Community organization approaches are structured methods used to empower communities, solve local problems, and facilitate social change. These approaches act as a map or guide that tells the community worker how to look at problems and what strategy to use. Key approaches include community development (self-help), social planning (expert-driven), social action (power-based advocacy), and neighborhood organization (geographic focus). These approaches aim to build capacity, encourage participation, and address local needs. In organisation, different scholars have proposed different ways — called approaches or models — through which a community worker can bring about change in a community. These approaches act as a map or guide that tells the community worker how to look at problems and what strategy to use. Scholars and practitioners use the terms 'approaches' and 'models' interchangeably in community work texts.

Three of the most important and widely studied scholars who gave approaches or models of community organisation are Murray G. Ross (1955), Rothman (1968), and H.Y. Siddiqui (1997). This answer discusses the approaches and models given by each of these scholars in detail with examples.

Quick Memory Tip — Remember All 3 Scholars

Remember: R R S

"Ross Rothman Siddiqui — 3 Great thinkers of Community work"

Ross (1955) → 3 Approaches: General Content | Specific Content | Process

Rothman (1968) → 3 Models: Locality Development | Social Planning | Social Action

Siddiqui (1997) → 3 Models: Neighbourhood Development | System Change | Structural Change

Scholar 1: Murray G. Ross (1955) — 3 Approaches

About Murray G. Ross

Murray G. Ross was a Canadian social work scholar who, in 1955, wrote the landmark book 'Community Organisation: Theory and Principles'. He was one of the first scholars to systematically study community work as a professional method of social work. He preferred

the term 'approach' over 'model' and identified three main approaches to community organisation.

Approach I: The General Content Approach

Simple Idea	Improve the overall welfare services of the community in a broad, general area.
Meaning	This approach focuses on the coordinated and orderly development of services in a particular area of community life — especially the welfare field. The goal is to coordinate existing services so they do not overlap, extend present services to more people, and start new services wherever there are gaps. It has two sub-approaches: (a) Strengthening existing services, and (b) Starting new services.
Primary Goal	To create pressure for reform and development in the welfare field and to build an informed group of citizens who understand the need for community welfare.
Example	A welfare council in a district notices that there are many NGOs working on child health, but they are all doing the same things and not covering remote villages. The council coordinates all these NGOs, stops the overlap, extends services to underserved areas, and starts a new vaccination outreach programme for tribal hamlets — all under one umbrella.
Remember	Think of it as a General Hospital that provides all types of services under one roof — not focused on one disease, but improving general healthcare overall.

Approach II: The Specific Content Approach

Simple Idea	Focus on ONE specific problem and solve it as quickly and efficiently as possible.
Meaning	Here, an individual, an agency, or an organisation becomes concerned about one particular reform and launches a focused programme to achieve that specific goal. Time is very important — the group works quickly to secure the reform. Success is measured by whether the specific reform was achieved or not. This approach is issue-oriented and focused.
Goal	To secure one specific reform, objective, or change in the community as efficiently as possible.
Example	A group of parents in a slum area come together with one specific goal: to get a government school built in their neighbourhood. They launch a campaign, collect signatures, meet the local MLA, and approach the District Education Officer. Their entire effort is focused on this single, specific objective — and success means the school is sanctioned.
Remember	Think of it as a laser beam — a laser does not spread light everywhere, it focuses all energy on one exact point to cut through. This approach works the same way.

Approach III: The Process Approach

Simple Idea	The goal is not a specific outcome, but building the community's ability to work together and solve its own problems.
Meaning	In this approach, the objective is not any particular service or reform, but the process itself — getting all sections of the community to participate, cooperate, and develop the capacity to collectively identify and solve their problems. The emphasis is on collaboration among various community groups. Four factors are central: (1) Self-determination of the community, (2) Indigenous plans made by the community, (3) People's willingness to change, and (4) Working at the community's own pace.
4 Key Factors	(1) Self-determination (2) Indigenous plans (3) People's willingness to change (4) Community pace
Example	A community worker enters a drought-prone village and does not immediately come with a readymade plan. Instead, she brings all groups together — farmers, women's groups, youth, and elders — to discuss their problems. Over months, these groups begin to trust each other, form committees, and develop their own plan to build a community water tank using local labour. The worker never imposes a solution — the process of building community capacity is the real achievement.
Remember	Think of it like learning to ride a bicycle — the goal is not to reach a particular place, but to develop the skill and confidence to ride on your own. The process of learning is the main outcome.

Scholar 2: Jack Rothman (1968) — 3 Models

About Jack Rothman

Jack Rothman is an American social work scholar who introduced his seminal "Three Models of Community Organization Practice" in 1968 to conceptualize macro social work. In 2001, he officially revised and reworked this framework into the "Core Modes of Community Intervention" to reflect modern, complex social realities - each suited to a different type of community situation.

Jack Rothman

Model I: Locality Development Model (Bottom-Up)

Simple Idea	Change must come from within the community — people must do it themselves, not have it done for them.
Meaning	This is a bottom-up model, meaning change starts from the grassroots level — from the people themselves. It is based on self-help and maximum participation. The community must define its own problems and develop its own plan. Professionals can provide support, encouragement, and

	expertise, but they cannot change the community for the people. Great emphasis is placed on self-determination, democratic process, cooperation, and consensus. In some ways, it is an extension of the group work model.
Key Features	Self-help Participatory Bottom-up Democratic process Consensus Cooperation Self-determination
Example	In a backward village in Rajasthan, women are facing problems of water scarcity. A community worker does not bring a government engineer to solve it. Instead, she facilitates meetings where the women themselves discuss the problem, decide they want a hand pump near the village square, and form a committee to approach the panchayat. The women lead the process — the worker only supports. This is locality development.
Remember	Think of a self-help group (SHG) — women do not wait for the government to save them. They pool money, take decisions, and solve their own problems. That is the spirit of this model.

Model II: Social Planning Model (Top-Down)

Simple Idea	Complex social problems need expert professionals to plan and find solutions — not average citizens.
Meaning	This is the opposite of locality development. It is a top-down model where experts, professionals, and technical specialists lead the planning and decision-making process. It is based on the assumption that modern social problems — like housing, public health, or large-scale poverty — are too complex for ordinary citizens to understand fully. Therefore, trained experts must guide the change process using technical skills, data, and research. Citizen participation may be limited in this model and it has been criticised as 'elitist' by some.
Key Features	Expert-driven Top-down Technical skills Data-based Limited citizen participation Complex problem-solving
Example	The government wants to reduce infant mortality in a tribal district. A team of public health experts, demographers, and social planners collect data, study the causes, design a health programme, and implement it through government machinery. Citizens are informed and services are provided, but the planning is largely done by the experts — this is social planning in action.
Remember	Think of city road construction — the citizens know the roads are bad, but the actual planning of flyovers, drainage, and traffic management is done by engineers and planners — not by residents. That is the top-down approach.

Model III: Social Action Model (Inside-Out)

Simple Idea	Marginalised communities must stand up, demand their rights, and challenge unjust power structures.
--------------------	---

Meaning	This model assumes that one section of the community is being ignored, overlooked, or oppressed. The goal is to organise these marginalised people to demand that their rights and needs be addressed. It works to bring about fundamental changes in social institutions and redistribute power, resources, and decision-making. It is called 'inside-out' because it starts with a committed core of people who slowly build collective consciousness among all affected people. It uses confrontational, disruptive, and challenging tactics to question the status quo and highlight issues of social justice, equity, and discrimination.
Key Features	Inside-out Rights-based Confrontational Challenging status quo Social justice Redistribution of power
Example	Dalit families in a village are denied access to the common well. A community organiser helps them understand their legal rights under the Constitution, builds their collective consciousness, and organises them to protest, file an RTI, and approach the district collector. The group challenges the unjust practice through sustained pressure — this is social action.
Remember	Think of the civil rights movement or the independence struggle — people who were being oppressed came together, raised their voice, and fought for justice. Social Action model is exactly this — but at a community level.

Quick Comparison of Rothman's 3 Models

Feature	Locality Development	Social Planning	Social Action
Direction	Bottom-Up	Top-Down	Inside-Out
Who leads?	Community members	Experts & professionals	Marginalised people
Main method	Participation, self-help	Data, technical planning	Protest, advocacy
Goal	Build community capacity	Solve complex problems	Redistribute power
Citizen role	Central & active	Limited / consulted	Organised & militant

Scholar 3: H.Y. Siddiqui (1997) — 3 Models

About H.Y. Siddiqui

H.Y. Siddiqui is a well-known Indian social work scholar whose book 'Working with Communities' (1997, Hira Publications, New Delhi) is a foundational text for community organisation in India. He is the same scholar who also gave the 8 Principles of Community Organisation. He proposed three models of community work that are especially relevant to the Indian context, focusing on self-reliance, systemic reform, and structural transformation.

Model I: Neighbourhood Development Model

Simple Idea	People living in a neighbourhood have the inherent ability to solve their own problems using their own resources.
Meaning	This model is based on the belief that people in a community (neighbourhood) have the basic and inherent capacity to meet their own needs through their own initiative and resources. The emphasis is not on doing things for people, but on encouraging them to think for themselves, adopt progressive attitudes, and take action on their own. However, Siddiqui notes that based on Indian experience, complete withdrawal of the worker or agency is not possible — long-term involvement is usually required. The steps in this model are: (1) Identification of the area, (2) Entry into the community, (3) Identifying needs of different sections, (4) Programme planning, (5) Resource planning, (6) Developing an organisational network, and (7) Partial withdrawal within a time frame.
Key Steps	Identification → Entry → Need assessment → Programme planning → Resource planning → Organisational network → Partial withdrawal
Example	An NGO enters a poor urban slum neighbourhood. Instead of immediately distributing aid, the workers spend the first few months simply getting to know the community, identifying natural leaders, understanding the needs of women, youth, and elderly separately, and then encouraging them to form their own neighbourhood committee. The committee then plans a cleanliness drive, raises funds from local shopkeepers, and executes it themselves. The NGO gradually reduces its direct involvement.
Remember	Think of teaching someone to fish instead of giving them fish. This model builds the community's own fishing skills — the worker is a trainer who eventually steps back.

Model II: System Change Model

Simple Idea	When existing social systems (health, education, employment) are not working properly for people, they must be changed or reformed.
Meaning	Society has various systems — education, health, housing, employment — each with their own sub-systems. These systems exist to serve people (social production and social consumption). But sometimes these systems become dysfunctional — either they produce something people do not need, or many people cannot access what they produce. The community worker must understand these systems and their failure points, then mobilise the community to demand change. The tasks involved are: (1) Collecting facts about deficiencies in the system, (2) Sharing findings with the community, (3) Selecting strategies to influence decision-makers, (4) Mobilising community and outside support, and (5) Developing a community organisation linked to similar groups and agencies demanding change.
5 Key Tasks	(1) Collect facts about system failures (2) Share with community (3) Select strategy (4) Mobilise support (5) Build organisation & link with allies
Example	In a district, there is a government hospital but medicines are always out of stock and doctors do not show up. The health system exists but is dysfunctional. A community worker collects data on these failures,

	presents the findings in a community meeting, and helps residents form a 'Swasthya Adhikar Samiti' (Health Rights Committee). The committee files RTIs, meets the Chief Medical Officer, and links up with similar groups in other districts — collectively pressuring the government to fix the system.
Remember	Think of a broken ATM machine in a bank — the system exists, but it is not working. You do not build a new bank — you fix the existing machine by reporting the problem to the right people and pressuring the bank to repair it. That is the System Change Model.

Model III: Structural Change Model

Simple Idea	Problems like poverty and discrimination are not accidents — they are caused by unjust structures in society. These structures must be fundamentally changed.
Meaning	This is the most radical of Siddiqui's three models. It sees the community as a small cell within the larger body of society. Problems at the community level (unemployment, lack of education access, no credit for poor farmers) are linked to the larger macro structure of society — its unequal distribution of power, wealth, and resources. The community worker analyses this link between macro (big picture) structures and micro (local) reality, and then tries to mobilise the community to participate in the radical alteration of these structures. The tasks are: (1) Develop understanding of micro-macro link, (2) Make a conscious decision about an alternative ideology, (3) Share understanding with the community, (4) Help the community identify a plan of action for a long struggle, and (5) Help sustain interest, enthusiasm, and capacity during the inevitable conflict with existing power structures.
5 Key Tasks	(1) Understand micro-macro link (2) Choose alternative ideology (3) Educate the community (4) Plan long-term action (5) Sustain community in conflict
Example	Landless labourers in a village are trapped in poverty. A community worker helps them see that their poverty is not their fault — it is linked to the unequal land distribution system, caste-based denial of credit, and labour laws that are not enforced. The community is organised to demand land rights under existing laws, challenge the dominant caste's monopoly on resources, and link up with a national movement for agrarian reform — working toward a fundamental change in the power structure.
Remember	Think of uprooting a weed from your garden — you can keep cutting it at the surface (system change), but unless you pull out the root (structural change), it will keep growing back. This model attacks the root cause.

Quick Comparison of Siddiqui's 3 Models

Feature	Neighbourhood Development	System Change	Structural Change
Focus	Neighbourhood/local	Dysfunctional systems	Macro power structures
Level of change	Local/micro	Institutional/meso	Societal/macro

Method	Self-help, capacity building	RTI, advocacy, reform	Radical mobilisation
Goal	Community self-reliance	Fix broken systems	Transform society
Nature	Gradual, participatory	Reform-oriented	Radical, confrontational

Master Summary Table — All 3 Scholars at a Glance

Scholar (Year)	Model / Approach I	Model / Approach II	Model / Approach III
Murray G. Ross (1955)	General Content Approach	Specific Content Approach	Process Approach
Jack Rothman (1968)	Locality Development (Bottom-up)	Social Planning (Top-down)	Social Action (Inside-out)
H.Y. Siddiqui (1997)	Neighbourhood Development	System Change Model	Structural Change Model

Conclusion

Murray G. Ross, Jack Rothman, and H.Y. Siddiqui have each made valuable contributions to the theory and practice of community organisation. Ross gave us three flexible approaches ranging from broad welfare coordination to deep process-building. Rothman provided three influential models — from grassroots self-help to expert planning to radical social action. Siddiqui, writing specifically in the Indian context, offered three models that address community self-reliance, systemic reform, and structural transformation respectively.

Together, these nine models/approaches give the community worker a rich toolkit to choose from based on the nature of the problem, the readiness of the community, and the level of change required. A skilled community worker does not blindly follow one model — they mix and adapt approaches based on the ground reality, always keeping the welfare and empowerment of the community at the centre.