

Lessons Learned from Comprehensive Community Initiatives

I. Comprehensive Community Initiatives as community-foundation partnerships¹

While the concepts that form the basis of these initiatives have their roots in methods practiced for decades, the aggregation of these ideas into CCIs can be traced to the late 1980s. These initiatives emphasize the merger of two traditionally separate fields of philanthropy and development.

Funded almost exclusively by foundation money, CCIs reflect the belief that single-issue planning and development neglects the interconnectedness of all the threads that create the neighborhood fabric. The philanthropic community – most notably a handful of national foundations, including the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Ford Foundation, and the Surdna Foundation – have seized upon CCIs as a way to address neighborhood development where traditional project-based initiatives have proven unsustainable. Foundations aim to show the effects of comprehensive planning can have when resources are focused on a small area. At the same time, foundations recognize communities can't address such a wide range of issues overnight, and so are funding these initiatives over longer periods – up to seven years – than most grants.

These projects show perhaps that most significant departure from their predecessors in the community-building field in their commitment to community transformation. Rather than focusing on bricks and mortar projects or social service development – though both are usually addressed – CCIs work to strengthen a neighborhood's capacity to affect change by building leadership among local residents and organizations. Neighborhood governing bodies established for these initiatives do more than function as decision-makers, but also act as a kind of neighborhood “think tank,” analyzing available resources and needs and determining how those needs could best be fulfilled using the resources at hand.

At the neighborhood level, CCIs force residents to think hard about what holds them together as a community. CCIs require collaboration between a wide spectrum of individuals and institutions, public and private that shapes the neighborhood. Community-based organizations, municipal governments, social service providers, residents, block clubs, and business owners are among those who join together to share resources and coordinate efforts in these initiatives.

II. Core values in Comprehensive Community Initiatives²

✓ *Resident empowerment must be at the core of community rebuilding efforts*

Resident empowerment is a complex concept and is used as shorthand for a great many linked activities: community organizing, resident engagement, capacity building, leadership development, and other involvement and empowerment strategies leading to increased opportunities for residents of low-income communities to determine their own and the community's future

Empowered residents:

- Play leadership roles in community rebuilding efforts
- Feel ownership for the community rebuilding effort and are perceived by others to be the owners
- Collaborate effectively with other investors to plan, implement, and measure community rebuilding
- Gain strength through collective self-advocacy

¹ Pitchoff, 1997

² Cornerstone Consulting, 2002

Resident engagement and empowerment is often seen as the key to achievement of all other facets of community building and includes both the creation of new structures through which the voices of residents could be heard and their power felt as well as changes in attitudes and day-to-day practices.

These factors are believed to be important to a successful engagement strategy:

- Focusing sincerely and systematically on empowering residents
- Engaging in continual community organizing
- Working on issues seen as having the potential to make a real difference for the community
- Seeing to it that people have important things to do, not just meetings to attend
- Matching community members' skills with volunteer roles
- Assuring that there is a sense of shared ownership
- Carefully selecting the issues to focus on when creating a community project or campaign
- Making sure the agenda is truly coming from the community, in part by building mechanisms to elicit feedback from a broad public.

✓ *The need for capacity building is critical and continual*

Structured learning processes, with communities fully engaged in the determination of technical assistance needs, management, and effectiveness, are critical in a comprehensive community-building initiative as is the recognition that the optimum learning sequence is not always a linear one.

The strengthened capacities were reflected in:

- New attitudes towards community development
- Greater ability to use data, technology, evaluation techniques, and outcomes planning in future community building work
- Stronger infrastructure with which to continue community-building work
- New ways of thinking about and treating residents within agencies
- Enhanced skills among staff in community-based organizations
- Stronger relationships between neighborhood institutions and external power groups such as government, foundations, and business
- Improved community image and greater ability to attract resources and political attention
- Stronger lead agencies with more staff, better management systems, and expanded resources

✓ *Acting as a [leading stakeholder] requires balancing competing roles and interests*

Among the most difficult challenges stakeholders faced was learning how to balance their organizational needs and priorities with their roles as an initiative convener and catalyst. Day-to-day, agencies felt competition for time and resources. The use of funds was a hot button issue as well

The experience of comprehensive community initiatives tells us that organizations in a position to lead comprehensive community initiatives should:

- Anticipate that peer organizations and community residents will benefit from repeated clarification of roles and goals.
- Minimize opportunities for miscommunication and discord by formalizing partnership agreements, especially ones that involved the exchange of money for services
- Keep all departments and staff members of the stakeholder agencies in the loop of the initiative, regardless of their level of direct involvement, by developing strategies for systemic communication.
- Be conscious of agency structure and remain open to modifying it based on the needs of the initiative.

✓ *It takes a long time and a lot of time every day to rebuild communities*

The first and most frequent observation about time is that the conditions of impoverished neighborhoods cannot be turned around in the relatively short lifespan of a foundation initiative... another aspect of the

time crunch is the amount of time it takes just to be a participant: to attend conferences and meetings, to engage in technical assistance events, to be evaluated, to meet and greet the streams of people coming to visit, to respond to inquiries from other communities interested in what you are doing, etc. Some suggestions for managing the time issue include:

- Explore the use of structured, time management tools that help agencies and communities prioritize their work and tie activities to outcomes
- Foundations should carefully consider when to introduce a new tool to an initiative
- Be aware of the ways in which historical contexts in communities can accelerate or retard the change process.

✓ *Partnership building is extremely difficult work*

Agencies and other proponents of comprehensive community initiatives confronted a lack of trust, a lack of clarity, and conflicting self-interests that impacted the ability to build partnerships. Difficulties in building partnerships may have their roots in:

- Competition among community agencies for very scarce resources
- Being the strongest, best funded, and/or most respected community-based organization in the area can get in the way of alliances with agencies inside the community
- Uneven commitment among community agencies and institutions to resident leadership

✓ *Power dynamics between funders and grantees can be greatly lessened, but never completely eliminated.*

III. Core processes in Comprehensive Community Initiatives³

✓ *Foundations and Communities: Changing the Relationship*

These initiatives are, first and foremost, about developing and nurturing relationships, and shifting relationships that have traditionally placed power to revitalize a neighborhood in the hands of anyone but residents.

The most dramatic relationship shift in a CCI is between the two main players: the foundation funding the initiative and the community organization, or collaborative of organizations, taking the lead in coordinating the effort locally. Foundations have used CCIs to cast themselves as active participants in the revitalization process, rather than merely a source of dollars. Neighborhoods, in turn, have had to adjust to this new force – the individuals, resources, and philosophies that come with the money they so desperately need.

For foundations to articulate such goals and structures run counter to the traditional grantor-grantee relationship, in which community organizations approach foundations for funding based on plans spelled out in their project proposals. The foundation sets about promoting its goals not just with infusions of cash in each of the neighborhoods... but also with technical assistance from a team of consultants. As a member of the initiative “team,” [the foundation] also contributed by leveraging resources and networks and providing a framework to guide each neighborhood’s process.

✓ *Clarity is the First Priority*

The reality is that, while they bring increased flexibility on the part of foundations, CCIs can exacerbate already complex situations. For the Annie E. Casey Foundation, some sites got tangled up in the process early on, due to a misunderstanding of just what was expected of them.

³ Pitchoff, 1997

AECF also needed to rethink how it was approaching the initiative. “This was still the foundation telling the communities what we wanted and the communities doing it . . . We should have asked the groups what it was they wanted to do up front, and had a better understanding of what they needed.”

The Ford Foundation’s Neighborhood and Family Initiative is similar in that the foundation says it tries to avoid presumptions about how each site should go about attaining its goals. “It’s not up to us to define what the outcomes should be . . . We worry about scale, impact, and the creation of a comprehensive, integrated community plan. But within the local context, the agenda has been defined by each site.” A foundation also brings an expectation that a certain amount of money will produce a certain type of change, and a set of values about what communities need, how much coordination is needed, and what types of people and organizations should participate. This expectation must be communicated to initiative participants.

✓ *Process and Politics*

In addition to confusion over lack of clarity about its expectations and definitions, “there’s a poor understanding or acknowledgement that there are different political dynamics on the ground at every site.” If the foundation can recognize this from the outset, the program could allow each site to deal with its unique situation more appropriately. “The foundation should have asked what political barriers there would be in the neighborhoods, and then set the format as far as the time frame, demands, skills needed, and technical assistance.” Had the initial stages of the initiative allowed more time to build alliances among political factions in the neighborhood, [collaborative] might have had better luck drawing in participants from all sectors of the community. “The foundation needs to ask neighborhoods questions about the movement of capital, political dynamics, etc. How can you have systems reform without this? How can you judge success without thinking about these questions?”

✓ *Technical Assistance*

Communities undertaking such projects often find themselves lacking some of the basic skills to make it work, such as running effective meetings or developing organizations, or finding financing for a project or developing a certain type of program. There’s a tendency to have technical assistance come in after the collaborative has defined what it needs... rather than providing technical assistance early enough to help [sites] define what they need. Figuring out what’s wrong and what’s needed isn’t easy. And often the organizations that need technical assistance the most are the weakest in defining their needs for that assistance. Technical assistance providers should have deeply rooted knowledge of the community’s unique situation, if their assistance is to be useful.

✓ *The Role of Reflection: Evaluating CCIs*

For CCIs, which concentrate on capacity building, leadership development, and resident participation, progress is even harder to measure. The scale of the projects also makes it difficult to measure change in broad indicators that foundations want to see, particularly in such a relatively short time.

The principle tension is that there’s a focus on program evaluation... This method doesn’t work in CCIs because there is no sample that can serve as a control... Evaluation teams have to play a more active role in the community. This should involve documenting as well as evaluating and evaluators must understand that outcomes won’t be measurable in the course of the initiative. Instead, evaluators should use mutually agreed upon markers, such as levels of participation and strength of partnerships, to gauge whether the project is on track or not. The evaluators should have ongoing interaction with the community, helping them understand what evaluation and documentation is all about, and giving constant input.

✓ *System Thinking*

Throughout the CCI process, the neighborhood groups have to keep in mind that these initiatives are ultimately supposed to be about changing power structures and alleviating poverty. Many of the initiatives have gotten away from that... Most of them try to focus on what programs will solve the problems, without taking institutional barriers like race and class into account. Changing systems and power structures requires something substantially more than a programmatic focus.

✓ *Governance and Lead Organizations*

For a community taking on the challenge of collaborating through a CCI, one of the first tasks is establishing a structure to govern the initiative. No single model will work for every neighborhood, so the sponsoring foundation often leave communities to figure out how to handle the delicate issues of sharing power, encouraging participation, determining representation, and executing projects. The relationship between the lead organizations and the governance of the initiative has to straddle the fine line between leadership and control.

Perception is as important as practice in these initiatives. The beginning of a new initiative doesn't wipe the slate clear of past neighborhood politics – in fact it can exacerbate them. Since the success of these initiatives depends on active participation by a wide range of individuals and groups from disparate backgrounds, the organizations leading the early stages of these projects need to be attentive to establishing agendas and processes that satisfy the needs of all those involved.

One of the toughest balancing acts for CCIs at the local level is between building a community and building a community organization.

✓ *Struggling with Participation*

As the organizations leading CCIs begin to move beyond establishing a structure, the issue of sustaining resident participation becomes even more complicated. As with any community-based initiative, CCIs depend heavily on the participation of many individuals with a wide range of connections to the neighborhood. Rooted in the belief that the more people involved, the more likely the initiative is to succeed in the long run, these initiatives – in principle, at least – aim to include residents from all parts of the community and tap into their skills, resources, and knowledge. This can be particularly challenging in an initiative that lasts many years and rarely produces tangible results right away. It's easy to 'lose focus about whether or not that will bring about the change that you really want to have happen at the end of the grant. We now realize that we need to refocus on community building'.

IV. Common tensions in the early phases of Comprehensive Community Initiatives⁴

The Product-Process Tension

A core lesson that emerges from the experience of current CCIs is that both process and product are critical, that one without the other will not achieve the desired goals at the individual/family, neighborhood, and systems level, and that practitioners must find a balance between the two.

✓ *Comments from four individuals exemplify these four points along the continuum*

- On the process end:

For me housing without social capital is an empty shell, which will soon crumble. Whereas social capital without houses is much more desirable because I believe that out of the social capital, in the long run, there will be outcomes.

- Process is critical, where the creation of dense social networks and the building of capacity needs to be pursued explicitly and continuously:

⁴ Voices from the Field, 1997

By way of metaphor, if you imagine multiple strands of DNA coming together where there is engagement and then success, and then you have that happening with lots of different people around lots of different issues – all of those things together are social capital... In each of those things, there is a product or a purpose for the coming together, which then encourages people to come together again for other purposes.

- Process is important, especially as a vehicle for enhancing outcomes:

There is a lot of opportunity for capacity building within the actual process of doing... The rent-up process [an effort to get residents to move into new housing] is a terrific example of how we did the wrong thing. We hired a bunch of people, piece workers, you know, paid them per interview. Then our piece workers left and suddenly we had all these building and we did not know any of these people who were living in them and they did not know each other. The next round, what we did was we got our first group of ten people... We trained them to interview the other people. So essentially, they selected their neighbor... and in that case, we had build community, we had not just rented up a building.

- On the product end:

What is it that led to the creation of the Bedford-Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation? It was Bobby Kennedy hearing, when he walked the streets, ‘We want to see something’. They wanted to see something three-dimensional. They wanted to see housing and a movie theatre and so on... it has to start with an agenda that produced something in short order.

✓ *Examples of the process-product tension in CCI operations*

- Governance: efficiency vs. participation

The key lesson that the CCIs are learning with respect to governance is that community revitalization depends on a new way of doing business at the neighborhood level, as well as between the neighborhood and outside forces. Therefore, capacity building for neighborhood-level actors is not optional for CCIs: it is necessary... Governance is one of the most powerful tools at the disposal of the CCI for providing for continuous and positive interaction between process and product. The governance mechanism is, first and foremost, the vehicle through which programmatic activities are undertaken, that is the vehicle through which “product” is accomplished. But at the same time, it has the ability to develop new leadership, to make new connections among people and organizations, and to create new organizations if necessary.

- Staffing and technical assistance: expertise vs. facilitating others

A clear lesson from experienced CCIs is that the set of skills relating to convening, facilitating, and supporting others in their efforts to get things done is more important. There is a sense that an initiative can contract for specific technical advice... There appears to be an emerging consensus that the best kind of technical assistance—TA that both provides the necessary skills and builds local capacity—is in the form of “coaching”.

- Program activities: concrete projects vs. community building

There are those who feel that the CCI neighborhoods are generally so needy that priority should be placed on investments that are most likely to lead to concrete outcomes. Others have embarked on particular projects that have had community building as their sole objective. By and large, CCI participants recognize that neither use of program dollars will, in and of itself, accomplish a CCI’s goal.

✓ *Two emerging strategies for resolving this process-product tension*

- Weave a community building agenda organically into all aspects of a CCI’s programmatic work by building in multiple opportunities for participation and for leadership development

Often, a large number of task forces and committees are developed around issues of importance to the neighborhood. Community building activities can then be organized around problem-solving needs.

- Dedicate program dollars to outreach and community organizing activities

There is a need to refashion traditional community organizing strategies to more closely match the CCI way of operating... CCIs need “process” organizing that evolves over the course of the initiative, first engaging different players in a planning and “visioning” process, then designing and implementing programs, and then reaching out anew, marketing, and redefining program activities. Organizing along

those lines “keeps people moving and growing and empowers them along the way.” Moreover, CCI leaders must be deliberate about making resident engagement an ongoing priority. Often, the need is perceived only episodically, but in order for positive change to be sustained, it must be continuous. This means willing to dedicate funds to outreach and organizing activities. It also means engaging the next generation through an ongoing effort to enroll youth and young adults in organizing activities. CCI participants agree that it is almost impossible to over-inform the residents of the neighborhood about what the CCI is doing. “We live in the 21st century... and whoever controls the communication controls the community... Put [communication tools] in the hands of the people and let them get the message out and communicate.”

The Inside-Outside Tension

Much of the tension generated by these differing perspectives can be understood as the tension between “inside” and “outside,” a geographically based metaphor that reflects an “us” and “them” distinction. Connection to the neighborhood is usually the standard for insider status, with the phrase characterizing a perceived conjunction of initiative staff, participants, and other residents and stakeholders. The phrase opposes these insiders to those outside the neighborhood, particularly the funder, but sometimes also technical assistance providers, evaluators, and others.

The tension in the inside-outside relationship of CCIs and their funders revolves around basic issues of authority, control, responsibility, and accountability. CCIs are attempting to create a new and different kind of relationship between funders and initiatives: they aim not simply to move control from one side of the relationship to the other, but to draw on the strengths and richness of their diversity, to find ways to achieve collective action, and to work together to effect meaningful change. Yet both sides are acting within a complex set of constraints that emerge from their different constituencies and accountability structures, from their established ways of operating, and for their historical relationships with the actors in the initiative.

Funders must think through their own expectations, and then communicate them clearly to the initiative, governance board, community, and others involved. An evaluator comments, “A common problem is that the people holding the strings, whether it’s the funders or the leaders of a major institution, are not clear enough in their own minds what they strings are, what the limitations are... And so inevitably, they do not communicate the limitations clearly to the residents or other people. And when the residents bump up against the limitations, both parties are surprised. The residents feel betrayed and their trust tends to dissolve rather quickly. Overall, however, there is a sense that relinquishing power is more difficult for funders than they admit and that it requires an “enormous mind set change...to really transfer authority to residents and citizens.”

The central issue, according to many, is whether the most important source of power – control over funding decisions – is to be devolved.

The inside-outside framework provides a useful lens on how the initiative and the funder engage in ongoing interaction to meet planning and implementation challenges.

✓ *Examples of the insider-outsider tension in CCI operations*

- Governance: representation vs. effectiveness

There is consensus among all CCI stakeholders about the need to include neighborhood residents on governance boards. This view is strongly espoused by neighborhood residents participating in CCIs. They view their involvement in all aspects of the decision-making and management processes as critical to a CCI’s quest to become a legitimate actor in the neighborhood and to achieve sustainable change. Some argue the case in historical terms: given the fact that many initiatives in the past have disenfranchised neighborhood people, CCIs have to fight skepticism by working explicitly to engage

residents and other stakeholders. Yet, some raise issues around who actually constitutes and represents the community. Therefore, CCIs place emphasis on ensuring that a range of different organizational and individual interests are represented and that deliberate efforts are made to ensure that residents' perspectives are included – through governance structures.

Racial and ethnic diversity in a neighborhood adds yet another level of complexity to the challenge of creating working governance structures in neighborhoods. In neighborhoods where there is a second or third significant minority group, resident and governance members have generally made efforts to ensure that all racial/ethnic groups participate in the governance of the initiative with varying degrees of success. There is strong consensus about aiming for diversity among governance board members. This may begin with the simple extension of governance boards to include non-residents... While the value of resident participation is widely stressed, there is some concern about the possible costs associated with emphasizing resident involvement -- that outsiders will not fully attend to the views of residents until initiatives either prepare [residents] to sit at the governance table or structure the board in such a way that residents are deliberately over-represented. "What we haven't done is enhance the capacity of people in the neighborhood to be able to come to the table as equals to leverage their particular perspective." "It's not just preparing residents to be able to sit in there and fight, but you have to reform the boards and the agencies themselves in terms of whether they respect people and think that they have something to say".

- *Technical assistance: expert skills vs. local empowerment*

Who should decide who receives TA, at what times, in what ways, and with what content? Resistance to imposed technical assistance reflects the desire of the initiative for autonomy and vigilance against encroachments by their stronger partners. This resistance is intensified when an initiative interprets the introduction of a consultant, as a means for the funder to meet its own needs, and not necessarily those of the initiative in the community. One funder notes the conflict of aims when funders bring "highly skilled technical people from outside into a process that is at the same time empowering local residents." CCI actors agree that funders and communities must work together in technical assistance ventures. A responsible funder can, for example, help the community think through the logistics for technical assistance, including criteria for selecting a provider, ways to use a consultant, benchmarks for performance, and appropriate fee levels.

V. References

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