



# Community Change Initiatives from 1990-2010:

## *Accomplishments and Implications for Future Work*

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In the 1990s, comprehensive community initiatives (CCIs) arose as an ambitious strategy to address the needs of residents of poor communities. They intended to go beyond the achievements of existing community-based organizations, notably social service agencies and community development corporations (CDCs), by concentrating resources and combining the “best” of what had been learned from social, economic, physical and civic development in order to catalyze transformation of distressed neighborhoods. In contrast to other community initiatives that focused on one intervention at a time—e.g. the production of affordable housing units—CCIs adopted a comprehensive approach to neighborhood change and worked according to community building principles that value resident engagement and community capacity building.

With the goal of learning from these experiences, The Aspen Institute Roundtable on Community Change is currently completing a review of 43 major CCIs and related community change efforts from the last two decades.<sup>1</sup> About \$1 billion in philanthropic dollars has been invested in these initiatives and when the broader universe of similar place-based community change efforts, especially federal government investments, is included, the total investment exceeds \$10 billion. Understanding the factors that contribute to high quality design, effective implementation, and improved outcomes can help us to identify key lessons and implications for the next generation of community-based work. This article summarizes these lessons and provides a framework for thinking about place-based investing going forward.

## Investments to Improve Human, Physical, and Economic Development in Poor Neighborhoods

CCI accomplishments in the programmatic arena—that is, activities focusing on human, physical and economic development—have been mixed. On the positive side, the quantity and quality of programs to support low-income families increased in most of the target neighborhoods. CCIs successfully assembled and implemented “best practices” and “programs that work” in areas such as workforce development, family services, and education. As a result, many of the initiatives showed improvements in the wellbeing of individual residents who participated in programs in their target neighborhoods. Some CCIs produced physical change in their neighborhoods as a result of housing production and rehabilitation carried out by place-based CDCs, non-profits, and for-profit housing developers. Those CCIs were able to show related positive outcomes such as increased property values and reduced crime. Community-based actors also succeeded in sparking commercial development, often working in partnership with local government and developers to plan retail spaces and commercial corridors with stores, restaurants, services, entertainment and other businesses that serve the residents’ needs and help stabilize the community.

By and large however, place-based efforts have had difficulty stimulating economic development, as too many of the forces that drive economic activity are outside of the control of neighborhood actors. Some CCIs found ways to connect neighborhood residents to economic opportunities in the larger region through, for example, sectoral employment programs, transportation strategies that link workers to jobs, and efforts to organize residents to ensure that they obtain jobs in major industrial or civic development projects in their locale. A more ambitious approach to economic revitalization would aim to ensure that low- and moderate-income neighborhoods get their share of the economic spoils of the larger region, which would also work to reduce structural and racial inequities. Experience on this front is only just emerging, and this will be a focus for next-generation work.

## Investments to Strengthen Community Capacity

Programmatic outcomes are not the only goal of community change efforts. CCIs also aim to mobilize citizens and their connections to one another, foster their ownership of the work, identify and build on their assets, and strengthen their civic capacity. This dimension of the work generally goes by the term “community building,” and its goal is to create stronger and more resilient communities.

The CCIs of the last two decades have generally undertaken four types of community building investments:

developing individual leadership; increasing organizational capacity; increasing social capital and a sense of community among residents; and increasing civic capacity and voice. Virtually all of the efforts reviewed by the Aspen Roundtable can point to accomplishments on the community building front. While much harder to measure quantitatively, qualitative data and the conviction expressed by those who are engaged in the work provide powerful evidence of these increases in capacity at the local level. CCIs demonstrated increased neighborhood capacity in the form of stronger leadership, networks or organizations, and/or improved connections between the neighborhood and external entities in the public, private and non-profit sectors.

For some in this field, community building outcomes are valid indicators of success in their own right. This constituency places a high value on strengthening the participatory democratic process among the most disempowered and alienated members of society. For others, community building is a means to an end. They argue that if improvements in programmatic outcomes do not follow, then community building is only about “process” and “feel-good” strategies, which could divert resources and time away from direct poverty reduction efforts. While many are tempted to gloss over this distinction and accept that the work is about both community building and tangible outcomes, this issue is an unresolved source of contention in the field. Exacerbating this long-standing schism is an absence of empirical evidence demonstrating that increases in community capacity lead to improved outcomes at the individual, family or community level. Such evidence would require sophisticated demonstration research and evaluation which, to date, funders have been unwilling to invest in.

## Investments to Generate Policy and Systems Change

In addition to their direct interventions at the neighborhood level, CCIs also aim to spark policy and systems reform in ways that could yield positive returns for their neighborhood over the long term. One hope was that community change efforts could break down the silos of categorical funding streams and integrate services across different sectors such as housing and education. Experience to date shows that community-based efforts partially compensated for, but did not solve, the problems of siloed public and private funding. At present, there are examples of successful co-location of activities, a small number of which have the potential to be implemented with enough intensity to test whether synergy among programs can be sparked. Yet in many cases, organizations engaged in place-based work must still contend with the complicated matrix of funding sources and agencies that work in the anti-poverty arena.





There are two ways in which community change efforts succeeded in changing policies or systems. One indicator was funding levels. The presence of an organized, legitimate and effective community intervention in a neighborhood increased its visibility and influence, helping to leverage new public, private and philanthropic resources. The other example of policy and systems change came from powerful partnerships between communities and institutions that had access, leverage and influence in the public sector. As a result, some initiatives built in a two-pronged strategy where the community work occurred locally and a separate line of work focused on policy and systems change. In this view, systems change is better done by actors who have better access to the policy reform process including advocates, special commissions, and other entities with civic capacity.

### **Where Is the Field at This Moment?**

Despite these accomplishments at the programmatic, community and system levels, most of the CCIs have not produced the degree of community transformation envisioned by their designers. For example, few, if any, were able to demonstrate widespread changes in child and family well-being or reductions in the neighborhood poverty rate. The reasons for this can be attributed both to “theory failure” and “implementation failure.” On the theory side, it appears that it was overly optimistic to expect that a relatively modest amount of philanthropic or government dollars (usually about \$1-3 million per year) was enough to catalyze a series of events that could build on each other and lead to major improvements in well-being for the poorest people in the most distressed communities within a limited time frame (usually about 7-10 years). On the implementation side, issues such as weak capacity resulting from long-term underinvestment, the difficulty of balancing “process” and “product” objectives, the challenge of managing multiple relationships and activities, and inconsistent or abbreviated funding often stood in the way of sustainable community change. As a result, the actual programmatic effort did not achieve the necessary dose or scale.

Nevertheless, policymakers, philanthropists, practitioners, and community residents continue to put a high value on “place” as an organizing principle for social and economic change for a number of reasons, which include: administrative and jurisdictional expediency; the fact that poverty is spatially concentrated, especially for people of color; and growing evidence about how community factors affect outcomes for individuals. Indeed, over the course of the last 10-15 years, the landscape of community change work has grown and diversified in many important and welcome ways. Most significant is that new kinds of public and philanthropic funding have become

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available and more institutional actors are taking on this work including CDFIs, banks, anchor institutions (such as hospitals or universities), and new local family and health conversion foundations. These institutions have expanded the range of connections, leverage, and capacity available to poor communities, and have created opportunities for powerful and innovative work going forward.

It is critical at this point in the field's development for practitioners, analysts, policymakers and funders to be as clear as possible about what community change efforts can and cannot accomplish, what structures and actions are most effective, and what needs to be changed for future place-based work to be more successful.

### **Progress Requires Better Alignment of Mission, Action, Capacity, Collaboration and Learning**

Recent community change efforts have applied best practices from social services and human development programs; they have taken advantage of government incentives and private sector development expertise to undertake housing and other kinds of physical development; they have been both pragmatic and creative as they seek strategies to increase assets, income, employment and economic activity; and they have benefited from decades of experience in effective community building, organizing, and engagement. Their challenge has been to weave these pieces together in a way that maximizes each contribution so that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

The efforts that stand out as exemplary have been the ones that aligned all pieces of their work and ensured that they reinforced each other. Our review suggests five dimensions of alignment associated with success.

### **Clarity about Mission, Desired Outcomes, and Operating Principles**

Ensuring all actors are in agreement about the core purpose of the work is critical. This might seem an obvious, or perhaps even trivial, conclusion to draw, but in the context of a comprehensive initiative that covers many programmatic domains, requires multiple partners, and has many accountability pathways, this has been a significant challenge. Answering even the most fundamental question about community change efforts—what

would “success” look like?—has turned out to be problematic. Too often, the goals sought by community change interventions are poorly defined at the outset, often defined too broadly or abstractly. Sometimes the lack of clarity is purposeful so that the initiative will resonate with a wide variety of stakeholders and they will invest in it. Moreover, because the work is tailored to community circumstances and is purposely developmental and emergent, clarity presents both a conceptual and practical challenge. That said, having agreement among all stakeholders about the work that will be approached is key to creating and maintaining focus. This could include identifying core values or philosophy or developing an overarching goal that guides practice and decision-making. A common framework and vision provides participants with shared language and a focused set of goals around which to engage people and interests, both inside and outside the community.

### **Intentionality in Action**

Where community interventions invested deliberate program effort, they counted program successes and improved outcomes. CCI that did not make deliberate investments or that made assumptions that investments in one domain would have spill-over effects in others, did not improve outcomes. Thus, better educational outcomes require work in the schools; improvements in neighborhood conditions require investment in physical revitalization; increased community capacity requires direct investment in leadership, organizations, and access to power. Even when an intervention aims to increase a less tangible outcome, such as social capital, investments must be intentional and not simply the hoped-for by-product of other strategies. Again, this lesson may seem readily apparent, but the problem becomes acute in an initiative that works across multiple dimensions and aims for comprehensiveness. The objective is to bring a comprehensive lens to the work while still implementing targeted and high quality programs in the various sectors.

### **Assessing and Building Capacity**

The theory underlying community change efforts is based in systems thinking, which views the strands of community life as interconnected and interdependent. The challenge has been that any resulting design, especially of CCIs, requires significant capacity to implement—capacity that under-resourced organizations in distressed neighborhoods often do not have. In retrospect, too many of the CCIs and other place-based change efforts stumbled on implementation. Therefore, goals must be assessed in light of actual capacity to implement, and if that capacity is weak, there are two options: goals must be scaled back, or investments must be made to build the capacity to do the work. When ambitious time frames for change



are overlaid on top of these highly complex interventions, they can set the initiative up for failure.

Capacity building is often one of the purposes of community change efforts, but oftentimes it is focused on helping an organization build the capacity to implement a particular initiative. Future work should move beyond this narrow definition of capacity and instead focus on a broader mission of building the capacity of a community more generally to set agendas, gain access to resources, and respond to community needs. Foundations are likely to be the source of the most flexible funding for capacity building activities whereas public funds are likely to be more circumscribed for programmatic activities. Practitioners must aim for a creative blending of the two.

### **Effective Management of Partnerships and Collaborations**

Managing a community change effort requires managing a complex web of relationships among residents, funders, intermediaries, neighborhood organizations, public sector agencies, private sector financial institutions, and consultants. Aligning all of these actors is largely about building relationships and understanding self-interest, and can be impeded by many things: the lack of real or perceived self-interest; cultural, historical, racial, or legal barriers; or the direct personnel and institutional costs associated with making the relationships effective. To overcome such obstacles, a range of actors must expend significant time as well as political, social, and economic capital. They must literally and metaphorically “subsidize” the relationships, sectors and interests until new habits of thinking, acting, and collaborating enable alignment to occur more naturally. Usually, intermediaries or brokers are required to build relationships, raise money, remove both political and practical obstacles, and move information back and forth. Such intensive, targeted, and prolonged brokering can lead to lasting change for poor communities by altering the way key individual and institutional actors see their interests, their relationship to one another, and the range of possible strategies they can engage in collaboratively. It is a fundamental way to get the most out of place-based work. Successful brokering can change perceptions as well as systems, and play a decisive role in how resources are allocated.

### **Learning and Adapting along the Way**

Learning is a continuous process; it requires a commitment to support people to reflect on their work in ways that can lead to ever-improving performance. Evaluation in community change work has been increasingly viewed as a means to enhance real-time learning and decision-making, refine strategy, and institute midcourse corrections. Soliciting the opinions and priorities of multiple and diverse stakeholders in developing key evaluation questions cultivates ownership of the learning process and increases the likelihood that results will be useful, relevant and credible for potential users. The iterative process of learning and doing helps to position evaluation as a tool for improving practices and nurturing change at every level. No longer an outsourced function, it becomes the collective responsibility of all stakeholders. In order to support this process, funders and evaluators must often work hard to provide sufficient resources and structures to support learning, and to create a culture that values candid dialogue and analysis and embraces the idea of learning while doing.

### **Conclusion**

When the first CCIs were created more than two decades ago, their designers understood that alignment of their many parts would be the critical step in generating meaningful change in poor communities. The assumption was that a “comprehensive” approach to neighborhood change would generate the necessary alignment in programs and strategies, and that “community building” would generate the necessary alignment among stakeholders. As it has turned out, alignment has been harder to achieve than was anticipated. It does not automatically result from a one-time community planning process or from a foundation-sponsored initiative. The alignment that is needed is about fundamental ways of working and addresses goals, activities, capacities, relationships and learning priorities. It also needs regular recalibration as the work proceeds. As with most ambitious change endeavors, we start with a hope for an efficient and direct route to our goals, only to find that there is no easy path or short-cut. As a result, it is critical to identify lessons as we go along and incorporate them into the next round of work. **CI**

# Endnotes

## Community Change Initiatives from 1990-2010

- 1 The full publication will be available in summer 2010. For more information, see [www.aspenroundtable.org](http://www.aspenroundtable.org) or contact [akubisch@aspenroundtable.org](mailto:akubisch@aspenroundtable.org)

## Understanding the Different Types of Low-Income Neighborhoods

- 1 Elwood M. Hopkins is Managing Director of Emerging Markets, Inc. and President of the Center for Place-Based Initiatives. Juan Aquino, Rudolph Espinoza, and Daniel Tellalian also contributed to this article.
- 2 *Managing Neighborhood Change, A Framework for Sustainable and Equitable Revitalization* (2006), Alan Mallach proposes a six-type classification system based on the condition of the local housing stock, homebuyer characteristics, and housing prices. For each type, he specifies strategies for improving housing as well as the implications of these strategies on local residents. In a 2005 study entitled, "Housing in the Nation's Capital," Margery Austin Turner, G. Thomas Kingsley, Kathryn L.S. Pettit, Jessica Cigna, and Michael Eiseman propose a new neighborhood typology for Washington, DC neighborhoods based on housing characteristics.
- 3 The Center for Housing Policy uses a composite of data on subprime lending, foreclosures, and mortgage delinquencies to categorize neighborhoods according to foreclosure risk. Similarly, in *Using Data to Characterize Foreclosure Markets*, Phyllis Betts at the University of Memphis segmented five different types of home loan borrowers (in terms of their level of financial precariousness and ability to absorb a mortgage) and characterized neighborhoods according to which type of borrower predominates. She then factors in the type of housing stock and general housing market trends, discovering four distinct neighborhood types: Classic Distressed; Transitional-Declining; Stable Neighborhoods of Choice; and Transitional-Upgrading.
- 4 In *Contributions of Accessibility and Visibility Characteristics to Neighborhood Typologies and their Predictions of Physical Activity and Health*, a team from the University of Michigan and Detroit Health Department proposed nine neighborhood types in terms of health impact. For each, the team correlated physical characteristics (housing density, sidewalk coverage, street configurations, pedestrian pathways) to physical activity of residents and the prevalence of heart disease, diabetes, dietary cancers, and obesity.
- 5 In 2005, the USC School of Policy, Planning, and Development compared twenty residential neighborhood types in terms of the mobility patterns of residents. They separated neighborhoods by their location in the inner city, inner suburbs, outer suburbs, or exurban areas. The types are grouped according to clusters of traits that influence transportation decisions: street configurations, access to freeways or public transit, local land uses, topographies versus level ground and so on.
- 6 In *How Does Family Well-Being Vary across Different Types of Neighborhoods?*, Margery Austin Turner and Deborah Kaye use data from the National Survey of America's Families to classify neighborhoods as family environments. The authors of *Neighborhood Poverty: Policy Implications in Studying Neighborhoods*, tackle a similar task. In "Explorations in Neighborhood Differentiation" in *The Sociological Quarterly*, Donald Warren compares service utilization across neighborhoods.
- 7 In *Sharing America's neighborhoods: The Process for Stable Racial Integration*, Ingrid Gould Ellen examines six types of neighborhoods in various stages of racial and ethnic transition. For each, she identifies a typical bundle of quantifiable factors (ethnic breakdown, tenure, and demographic shifts under way) and qualitative factors like overall social stability. In *Paths of Neighborhood Change*, Richard Taub, D. Garth Taylor, and John Dunham identify eight neighborhood types at different stages of evolution from decline to gentrification to stability.

## Five Simple Rules for Evaluating Complex Community Initiatives

- 1 CCIs here are defined broadly and include community change initiatives, complex community initiatives, comprehensive community initiatives, and even comprehensive place-based initiatives.
- 2 Patton, M.Q. (2006). Evaluation for the way we work. *Nonprofit Quarterly*, Spring, 28-33.

- 3 Weiss, C. (1995). Nothing as practical as good theory: Exploring theory-based evaluation for comprehensive community initiatives for children and families, in J. Connell, A. Kubisch, and L. Schorr (Eds.), *New Approaches To Evaluating Community Initiatives: Concepts, Methods, and Contexts*, Washington, DC: Aspen Institute.

## Understanding How Place Matters for Kids

- 1 Leventhal, T. and J. Brooks-Gunn. (2000). "The neighborhoods they live in: Effects of neighborhood residence upon child and adolescent outcomes." *Psychological Bulletin* 126; Leventhal, T., V. Dupere, & J. Brooks-Gunn. (2009). "Neighborhood Influences on Adolescent Development." In R. M. Lerner & L. Steinberg (Eds.), *Handbook of Adolescent Psychology* (3rd ed). New York: John Wiley and Sons; Sampson, R.J., J. Morenoff, and T. Gannon-Rowley. (2002). "Assessing 'Neighborhood Effects': Social Processes and New Directions in Research." *Annual Review of Sociology* 28:443-478; Sampson, R. J., S.W. Raudenbush, F. Earls. (1997). "Neighborhoods and Violent Crime: A Multilevel Study of Collective Efficacy." *Science Magazine*. August 1997 277(5328): 918-24.
- 2 Johnson, Heidi. (2009). "Vulnerable Youth and the Transition to Adulthood: Youth in Distressed Neighborhoods, ASPE Research Brief." Washington, D.C. The Urban Institute.
- 3 Tough, Paul. (2008). *Whatever It Takes: Geoffrey Canada's Quest to Change Harlem and America*. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- 4 Bronfenbrenner, Urie. (1979). *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design*. Harvard University Press, 1979; Bronfenbrenner, Urie. 1989. Ecological Systems Theory. *Annals of Child Development*, 6, 187-249.
- 5 Ellen, Ingrid Gould and Margery A. Turner. (1997). "Does neighborhood matter? Assessing recent evidence." *Housing Policy Debate* 8:833-866; Leventhal, T. and J. Brooks-Gunn. (2004). "Diversity in developmental Trajectories across Adolescence: Neighborhood Influences." Pp. 451-486 in *Handbook of Adolescent Psychology* (2nd ed), edited by R. M. Lerner and L. Steinberg. New York: John Wiley and Sons. Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn, supra note 1; Sampson, Morenoff, and Gannon-Rowley, supra note 1.
- 6 Edelman, Peter, Harry Holzer, and Paul Offner. (2006). *Reconnecting Disadvantaged Young Men*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute Press; Holzer, Harry. (2009). "The Employment Problems of Men in Segregated Urban Areas." In Margery A. Turner, Susan J. Popkin, and Lynette Rawlings. *Public Housing and the Legacy of Segregation*. Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute Press: 237-246.
- 7 Alan Guttmacher Institute. (1994). "Sex and America's teenagers." Author, New York; Albert, B., S. Brown, and C. Flanigan. (2003). "14 and Younger: The Sexual Behavior of Young Adolescents." National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, Washington, DC; Cooksey, Elizabeth, Ronald Rindfuss, and David Guilkey. (1996). "The Initiation of Adolescent Sexual and Contraceptive Behavior During Changing Times." *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 37:59-74; Tubman, J. G., M. Windle, and R. C. Windle. (1996). "Cumulative sexual intercourse patterns among middle adolescents: Problem behavior precursors and concurrent health risk behaviors." *Journal of Adolescent Health* 18:182-191; Johnson, supra note 2.
- 8 Furstenberg, Frank F., Jr., Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, and S. Phillip Morgan. (1987). *Adolescent mothers in later life*. New York: Cambridge University Press; Kendall-Tackett, Kathleen A., Linda Meyer Williams, and David Finkelhor. 1993. "Impact of Sexual Abuse on Children: A Review and Synthesis of Recent Empirical Studies." *Psychological Bulletin* 113.
- 9 Quane, James M. 2008. "Low-Income Female Caregivers' Expectations for Their Adolescent Sons or Daughters in Disadvantaged Urban Neighborhoods." Unpublished paper
- 10 Sampson, Robert J. 2008. "Moving to Inequality: Neighborhood Effects and Experiments Meet Social Structure." *American Journal of Sociology* 114(1): 189-231.
- 11 Browning, Christopher R., Tama Leventhal, and Jeanne Brooks-Gunn. 2005. "Sexual Initiation in Early: The Nexus of Parental and Community Control." *American Sociological Review* 70: 758-778; Sampson, Robert J., Jeffrey D. Morenoff and Stephen Raudenbush. 2005. "Social Anatomy of Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Violence." *American Journal of Public Health* 95 (2): 224-232.
- 12 Jencks, Christopher, and S. Mayer. "The Social Consequences of Growing Up in a Poor Neighborhood." In *Inner-City Poverty in the United States*, edited by Laurence Lynn, Jr. and Michael McGeary. Washington: Nat. Acad. Press, 1990; Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn, supra note 1.