

Works in Progress

Comprehensive Approaches to Community Development

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Experimentation with place-based, integrated approaches to community development has waxed and waned over the past 15 years. These programs, broadly referred to as Comprehensive Community Initiatives (CCIs), first gained a foothold in the early 1990s in the South Bronx, the Sandtown-Winchester neighborhood of Baltimore, and a number of neighborhoods in Atlanta, Detroit, and other cities facing the challenges of urban blight and widespread disinvestment. Driven primarily by foundations with a deep commitment to ‘place,’ CCIs reflected the belief that the community development field’s tendency to segregate issues into separate silos neglected the interconnectedness of factors contributing to neighborhood distress, and that the emphasis on the production of affordable housing by community development corporations (CDCs) was not enough to turn neighborhoods around. Instead, CCIs offered a more holistic response to community needs by incorporating measures to build community leadership and cohesion, improve educational opportunities, build wealth, increase civic participation, and repair the physical conditions and infrastructure of a neighborhood. CCIs also included the more wide-reaching goal of linking low-income communities to regional economies and political structures.

The successes of these early initiatives were mixed. Blending the “hard” and “soft” aspects of neighborhood revitalization proved to be a daunting challenge demanding high levels of technical expertise, cost effectiveness, and patience. Some neighborhoods are still struggling to realize the ambitious goals established through CCIs. Nevertheless, these early efforts yielded some positive impacts and provided a number of important insights on the general factors that contribute to successful community development efforts.

One of the primary insights was that some CCIs were ineffective because community members balked at what took shape as “top-down” planning that overpowered or ignored the voice of the community. As is the case with other planning measures affecting neighborhood structure, CCIs must engage community residents in the decision-making processes leading to the development of programs and projects meant to revitalize their neighborhoods. In addition, carrying out the scope of work planned through comprehensive programs often necessitates both building capacity within community organizations and creating coalitions and partnerships among agencies. Comprehensive models also require long-term commitments from funders and leadership

partners. Planning efforts alone can take years; program implementation and the emergence of multiplier effects can take many more. Time horizons, then, for program management, financial support, and impact measurement must be extended beyond those often used for more discrete activities such as affordable housing development.

Highlighted here are some examples from around the nation of a new generation of CCIs that are incorporating these lessons. Each program is unique, but all operate from the same underlying principle: when communities are supported in a holistic manner, lasting change can be achieved.

The New Communities Program

The New Communities Program (NCP) is an effort by the Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) in Chicago to orchestrate comprehensive community development in decaying and transitional neighborhoods in the Chicago metro area. The program, funded primarily by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, began as a pilot initiative in 2000 to develop resident-directed “quality-of-life” plans in four Chicago neighborhoods. The plans outlined community needs and interests, and mapped out programs and projects that would address identified gaps. A lead agency was selected in each community to forge partnerships and delegate responsibilities for carrying out work plans. Building on the successes in the pilot neighborhoods, 10 more quality-of-life plans, encompassing 12 additional neighborhoods in the city, were rolled out in May 2005.

Target neighborhoods are by and large marked by population loss, vacant properties, and high immigrant and African American populations. While many of the neighborhoods are adjacent to areas undergoing growth and development, they fall on different points along the spectrum of needing to attract investment or combat gentrification.

A number of cross-community themes emerged from the planning process, including interests in building family wealth, reducing crime and increasing personal safety, preserving affordable housing and fostering mixed-income communities, developing retail and commercial spaces and enhancing educational programs for youth. Reflecting, though, the varied circumstances of each target site, each community developed diverse programs and goals adapted to its particular basket of needs and interests. Many of the programs incorporate “early-action” projects as a means for communities to “learn-while-doing” and create visible

results in the near-term that help leverage other resources and investments.

For instance, the Auburn Gresham neighborhood on the South Side has witnessed commercial abandonment over the past 40 years. Neighborhood demographics have changed dramatically from an almost entirely white neighborhood to an almost entirely African-American neighborhood with a majority of residents over the age of 55. In an effort to revitalize commercial corridors and attract young families,

block clubs and art and film festivals have been established, and there are plans to create a new chamber of commerce for the neighborhood, pursue transit-oriented development, and upgrade the existing housing stock.

In the Humboldt Park area, many residents struggle with the effects of poor health, chronic unemployment and pervasive gang activity and drug-related crime. The neighborhood is also undergoing some development pressure from wealthier newcomers to the area. In response,

Murphy Park

Box 3.1

McCormack Baron Salazar (MBS) is not your average housing development outfit. The firm, nationally active but based in St. Louis, Missouri, aims to achieve the “positive, long-term, and comprehensive revitalization of neighborhoods: economically diverse, architecturally pleasing, functional places that reflect strength, pride, and sense of community.” Richard Baron, chairman and CEO of the firm, believes that successful revitalization strategies must incorporate a host of ingredients including economic, racial and social diversity, a variety of housing, a safe environment, cultural and recreational venues, job creation, and, especially, good schools. Quality neighborhood schools are particular drivers of market demand for housing, attracting families across the socioeconomic spectrum. They also offer avenues for civic engagement and community building through parent-teacher associations and other school-based activities.

The redevelopment of Jefferson Elementary School in St. Louis is a prime example of the result of Baron's stance that revitalization in central cities is contingent on enhancing neighborhood schools. When MBS began work on redeveloping the neighboring George L. Vaughn high rises into what has become the mixed-income Residences at Murphy Park (pictured below), Jefferson was dilapidated and underperforming with only 25 percent of students reading at grade level. Baron struck a deal with the St. Louis Board of Education to reinvest in Jefferson, and he raised funds from the private and philanthropic sectors to upgrade the school and provide professional development for teachers. Now, the school is serving as a new anchor in the neighborhood, and offers sophisticated computer access for students, before- and after-school programs for students to help meet the needs of working parents, and a job-training program for parents and community residents.

In addition, MBS worked with area residents and a non-profit partner, Urban Strategies, to form the COVAM Community Development Corporation to unify and coordinate community services in Murphy Park and surrounding neighborhoods. Contrasting with trends in greater St. Louis, the area has seen increased employment levels and rising home values since redevelopment began.



Murphy Park
before and after
redevelopment



the community has launched programs for youth to develop their leadership, education, and vocational skills. One example is the BickerBikes program, which teaches bike repair and maintenance to neighborhood youth. The community has also planned projects addressing health education and outreach on HIV/AIDS, dental services, asthma, obesity and substance abuse. In addition, the quality-of-life plan supports the establishment of a community land trust as a means to increase community control over land resources and address pressures of gentrification.

There are significant challenges for NCP in tapping and building on community capacity in the target neighborhoods. Some of the selected lead agencies are CDCs with long histories and strong ties both within and outside the neighborhood, while other communities are setting their starting point on building organizational infrastructure. For example, in Garfield Park, the Conservatory Alliance, a strong agency but one with little background in traditional community development activities, was selected as the lead agency to coordinate a new development council to “connect the dots” among existing resources and create new capacity in the community.

The MacArthur Foundation and LISC/Chicago have committed more than \$17.5 million to the five-year NCP project. This will provide the lead agencies with two dedicated staff members, planning assistance, and project seed



Photo Credit: Juan Francisco Hernandez

The BickerBikes program, established in Chicago's Humboldt Park neighborhood through the New Communities Program, teaches bike repair and maintenance skills to area youth.

money. The ultimate aim is to leverage additional private and public resources. Overall, NCP highlights the importance of both flexibility and partnerships in pursuing comprehensive place-based development efforts. “This is not a cookie cutter approach,” said Joel Bookman, Director of NCP. “The plans, priorities and participants are different, and one must be cognizant of the landscape and offer flexibility in what is supported.”

The Mount Cleveland Initiative

Box 3.2

A collaborative planning process between the residents of the Mount Cleveland neighborhood in Kansas City, Missouri and the adjacent Swope Parkway Health Center led to the development of what is now a 70-acre, \$100 million redevelopment project in a previously blighted, economically depressed area of the city. The partnership was launched in 1991, when the Swope Parkway Health Center proposed building a residential drug treatment facility in the Mount Cleveland neighborhood. Residents agreed to support the proposal only if Swope Parkway engaged additionally in broad neighborhood revitalization activities. Swope Parkway agreed, and created the Applied Urban Research Institute and Community Builders of Kansas City to help neighborhood residents through a neighborhood planning process and to oversee the development of new health facilities and other residential and commercial projects.

Known as the Mount Cleveland Initiative, the resulting development was financed through public-private partnerships, and now includes:

- Swope Health Services, a community health center that brought 150 new jobs to the area;
- Mt. Cleveland Heights, a 70-unit mixed-income duplex community;
- The H & R Block Service and Technology Center that brought 300 jobs to the area;
- The Blue Parkway Office Building, which houses, among others, FirstGuard Health Plan, Mazuma Credit Union, and the Housing and Economic Development Finance Corporation; and
- Blue Parkway Town Center, with a Baron's Foods store opening in late October 2005 as its anchor tenant.

Community Builders of Kansas City has also established job training programs, youth-targeted recreational and skill-building initiatives, and a range of health and safety programs in the neighborhood. As of 2002, homeownership in the neighborhood had increased 13 percent and new home values had increased by 28 percent from their 1992 levels. The vision of the Mount Cleveland Initiative—to realize a community-based approach to building a stronger, revitalized community providing homes, services, and a local economy for residents—is thus translating into true change for the area.

Making Connections

Started in 1999, Making Connections is a 10-city national demonstration by the Annie E. Casey Foundation that seeks to improve the outcomes for families and children in disinvested or isolated neighborhoods. Building on their research that shows that “children do better when their families are strong, and families do better when they live in communities that help them to succeed,” the program works to overcome family and neighborhood isolation through multi-pronged investments in programs supporting economic and educational opportunities, informal social support networks, and improved access to appropriate social services.

Making Connections has program sites in Denver, Des Moines, Hartford, Indianapolis, Louisville, Milwaukee, Oakland, Providence, San Antonio, and Seattle. Each site’s size and program structure is unique. Site teams, which include representatives of local and state governments, service providers and schools, as well as neighborhood residents and consultants, coordinate the activities of government, private sector, faith- and community-based partners. The program emphasizes effective use of data in identifying and implementing strategies. “Local Learning Partners” thus gather and track data for the purposes of developing a comprehensive database of neighborhood-level information, documenting neighborhood change, and building local capacity to use data to inform and advance change. Technical assistance is also provided to agencies through peer and professional networks.

The Milwaukee Making Connections program provides an apt example of how this initiative is working in communities. The selected site is a two-square mile area near downtown comprised of a number of low-income African-American neighborhoods struggling with disproportionately high unemployment rates, high rates of debt, and lower homeownership rates than city-wide averages. A number of strategies for rebuilding family and community strength are being implemented through the Milwaukee program. A “Jobs Club” project has been established to broaden neighborhood residents’ access to employment and training opportunities. Through financial education courses and new Volunteer Income Tax Assistance sites, neighborhood residents are working toward improving credit and are supplementing earnings with the Earned Income Tax Credit. Programs have been established to improve the quality of preschools and increase parent involvement in schools to boost student success rates. Several mixed-use developments have risen in the neighborhood and there are plans to further strengthen homeownership opportunities.

Implementation of this range of activity hinges on the partnerships that have been forged among diverse community stakeholders. Site coordinator Eloisa Gomez said there are at least 100 different partners engaged in the program, including Milwaukee Public Schools, Milwaukee Area Technical College, the State of Wisconsin Child Welfare Bureau, the Wisconsin Arts Board, LISC, the University of



Photo Credit: Making Connections Milwaukee

Student, teachers, and parents rally for community schools as part of Milwaukee's Making Connections program.


Wisconsin-Milwaukee, as well as local banks, community development and planning organizations, and area service providers. One of the aims of the program is to coordinate service provision across agencies so that families can more easily access the resources available to them in their community. Another major goal of the program is to build relationships between neighborhood residents so that they have ongoing support from one another.

The program is financed in part through the Casey Foundation, but partner agencies are required to raise matching funds. Gomez noted that the program's emphasis on impact measurement, including assessing the baseline situation in the program site, identifying gaps in achievement, setting targets, and tracking appropriate indicators of change, has been important for leveraging investments and in-kind donations from both the public and private sector. In 2005, these co-investments totaled close to \$30 million.

Coordinating the activities of a multiplicity of actors to empower residents has been a challenge, said Gomez, but the outcomes have been positive and partner agencies are committed to sharing the risks of a non-traditional business model. "Anything comprehensive is risky," said Gomez,

"but we feel that what is important is to be entrepreneurial and take on an ambitious agenda for change."

There are a number of other examples of neighborhood-scale projects that align bricks-and-mortar revitalization with the development of social capital, economic opportunity, and community health (see boxes 3.1, 3.2, 3.3). All of these examples, which reflect the varied entry points for engaging in broad-based community revitalization, hold promise for triggering significant and lasting impacts for the communities they target and the surrounding regions.

While there is still a great deal to learn about how to more effectively implement and measure community revitalization, the central tenet of this work is intuitive—community development takes much more than a single apartment building or a single organization working within a community. To foster a more comprehensive and strategic model of development, partnership-building among foundations, financial institutions, community groups and many other community stakeholders is critical. The challenge is in determining how to most effectively harness available skills, knowledge, and resources to generate the scope of change sought through these efforts. 

Market Creek Plaza

Box 3.3

In San Diego, Market Creek Plaza has sparked the transformation of the historically disinvested Diamond Neighborhood. The concept for Market Creek Plaza grew out of a partnership between the Jacobs Center for Neighborhood Innovation and neighborhood residents, who, through a community planning process that included surveys conducted in four languages and hundreds of meetings, indicated that they wanted a vibrant commercial and cultural hub for their community. The Plaza, which includes a Food 4 Less grocery store, a Wells Fargo bank branch, and an outdoor amphitheater, has created just that. Local women- and minority-owned businesses completed much of the construction work



Market Creek Plaza

on the Plaza, and the Plaza has created jobs and employment training opportunities for local residents. In addition, community residents have become owners of the Plaza through Market Creek Partners, a community development limited liability company that allows owners to build assets and guide the future course of development in the neighborhood. The project was also approved as part of the City of San Diego's City of Villages program, which aims to revitalize existing neighborhoods while retaining their distinctive character. The Village Center plan for the 45 acres surrounding Market Creek Plaza includes additional housing development, childcare and youth programs, outdoor recreational facilities, and entrepreneurial opportunities.

COMMUNITY INVESTMENTS

Endnotes

Works in Progress

BOX 3.1

<http://www.mccormackbaron.com/HTML/mission.html>

Richard Baron, Speech at Urban Land Institute 2004 Fall Meeting, http://nicholsprize.org/winners/2004_Speech.htm

BOX 3.2

Program Profiles. AECF. http://www.aecf.org/publications/data/meetingtools_profiles.pdf

<http://www.fanniemaefoundation.org/grants/johnson2002.shtml>