

Embracing a Collective Action Approach to Community Development

By Gabriella Chiarenza, Editor, *Community Investments*, Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco



Though there have been notable exceptions, initiatives within the community development field historically have focused largely on sector-specific approaches such as housing or asset building, with less dedicated attention paid to how one specific project might interact with other distinct efforts tackling a given community's challenges. Community development practitioners have thus worked in parallel within the confines of their individual areas of expertise, bound by organizational and financial structures that have limited cross-sector work. In many cases, traditional funding sources have been tied to success on narrowly-defined numeric objectives – building a certain number of housing units, for example, or financing a certain number of small businesses – and different sectors within the community development field often have had to compete with one another for limited capital, seeing one another as competitors rather than collaborators.

Yet the social, economic, and physical infrastructure issues disadvantaged communities face are complex, and addressing one element of a community's struggle in a vacuum does not get to the heart of the many interconnected challenges residents may grapple with around education, health, transportation, wealth-building, and workforce development, among others. For instance, an approach that narrowly focuses on job placement can have a profound impact, but it does not necessarily tackle the deeper community issues that made it difficult for an individual to find work to begin with. A poor educational system may have precluded someone from developing marketable skills, or perhaps an inability to affordably live close to job-rich areas, reliable transportation, or accessible child care impacted that person's ability to find and maintain employment. For many lower-income and underserved communities across the country we have seen that a combination of these factors routinely plays a role, collectively contributing to cycles of poverty and inhibiting improvement for residents and their neighborhoods.

Realizing that disconnected silo-based efforts cannot effectively address these interrelated conditions on their own, innovators within the community development field have increasingly experimented with a different approach that speaks to these linked community challenges. In this emerging approach, professionals from different but related community development sectors work together in a multi-sector coalition toward a common goal with an aim to holistically improve conditions for a group of people, neighborhood, or region. To do this effectively requires an intentional, highly organized, and connected network of flexible cross-sector activities on the ground that are able to respond to changes within both the community and the initiative over time, and the leadership of a core group responsible for moving this network forward toward its comprehensive goal. This approach is referred to as cross-sector community development, collective action, systems-level change, or collective impact, among other names.

What does this model look like in practice? One example of a successful cross-sector partnership is the Purpose Built Communities initiative in East Lake, a neighborhood in Atlanta, GA. East Lake struggled with high unemployment and crime levels, severely dilapidated housing, and poor health and educational conditions. The East Lake initiative took on these issues collectively with a cross-sector approach, working toward its goal to connect and strengthen the neighborhood through multiple avenues including building quality mixed-income housing, introducing a “cradle-to-college” independent educational system, and offering a range of community wellness programs. A new organization, the East Lake Foundation,



was established to manage and facilitate the initiative and coordinate all of the diverse practitioners and participants involved in the cross-sector work. Since its inception in 1995, the East Lake initiative has seen strong successes across its goals: violent crime has been reduced by 90 percent, high school graduation rates have increased from less than 30 percent to 78 percent of students, and fully 100 percent of the adults living in assisted housing in the neighborhood are now employed or in training, a vast improvement over the previous 13 percent.¹

The East Lake Foundation is an example of a key component of cross-sector community development known as the community “quarterback.” In the recent book *Investing in What Works for America’s Communities*, the Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco’s David Erickson, Ian Galloway, and Naomi Cytron define such a community quarterback as an entity that serves “in a coordinating role, managing a diverse coalition of players in order to achieve community betterment.”² A community quarterback may function as an organizer and navigator toward the shared goal of a cross-sector initiative in many ways, which could include articulating the goal itself, establishing shared metrics, bringing together knowledgeable allies and financial resources, and facilitating the work of an initiative’s many community partners. In this model, the quarterback knits together the diverse abilities of formerly siloed community development sectors, creating a powerful integrated initiative.

Another view of this kind of community development springs from an oft-cited *Stanford Social Innovation Review* article by FSG’s John Kania and Mark Kramer that defines the principles of the “collective impact” approach. This model illustrates how practitioners from a wide spectrum of community development sectors can come together behind a shared vision to work toward a common goal. Kania and Kramer introduced five key elements that are important for successful collective impact initiatives: a common agenda, a shared measurement system, the mutually reinforcing activities of initiative participants, continuous communication among participants, and backbone support from a separate, designated organization that coordinates the larger initiative.³ These “Conditions of Collective Impact” are in play in a wide range of collective impact efforts across the country.

Indeed, there are many ways to think about collective action work in the community development field. In the following articles, the authors describe several other approaches to this kind of cross-sector work around a common goal, emphasizing key elements that are central to effective initiatives and presenting examples of what these initiatives look like in practice. Alison Gold discusses the importance of placing strong leadership at the heart of collective impact initiatives, how to choose

the right individuals to compose such a core leadership group, and in what ways this leadership can help guide and manage the initiative. David Phillips and Jennifer Splansky Juster elaborate on the critical role of well-designed working groups within collective impact initiative networks and the importance of their efforts on the ground in communities. Moira Inkelas and Patricia Bowie expand on the ways in which data and measurement inform and focus cross-sector work. Dwayne Marsh discusses the Sustainable Communities Initiative, a federal cross-sector program that is helping communities build strong collective action partnerships that can work collaboratively toward local goals. Finally, Heather McLeod Grant presents the story of a new California initiative that brings together housing, transportation, and energy practitioners into a strong cross-sector network, working toward a shared goal to reduce overall costs on these three fronts for low-income Californians.

As all of these stories will illustrate, collective action is pioneering work, and we are still building a body of knowledge about what it takes to make these efforts thrive. What we know already is that this kind of community development model requires special consideration of structures and roles. The very scope and scale of these multi-pronged initiatives can inhibit their effectiveness, and without a shared common agenda along with strong and adaptive leadership to guide the initiative through trials and successes, these large efforts quickly may become chaotic. Clearly defined participant roles and a form of governance for strategy development and decision-making can help participant engagement and minimize unproductive internal competition. It is also important to ensure that funders understand and embrace the unique design of the initiative, and the necessity to make a significant mindset shift from funding programs to supporting a “process” that is designed to create this working table of stakeholders. Most of all, demonstrating on-the-ground progress and results around shared goals is a critical factor in keeping commitment and belief alive in the collective action initiative.

The following articles in this issue of *Community Investments* demonstrate that there is no one “right way” to design and launch a cross-sector initiative and, accordingly, there is no one-size-fits-all template to ensure success. Different communities will have varied priorities and resource capacities, which an initiative must take into account in establishing its goals and activities. However, when initiatives are well-tailored to the community or population they serve and their internal infrastructure is both strong and adaptable to change, collective community development efforts have the power to bring about holistic change with a breadth and connectivity that few single-sector efforts have been able to realize on their own. **CI**