



Working Smarter in Community Development
Knowledge-in-Action Brief 07-1

Rethinking Community Development: Managing Dilemmas about Goals and Values

by Xavier de Souza Briggs

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Ideas in brief

With roots in the social reform and social movement traditions, and with newer influences from business models for innovation and performance, community development works to strengthen places and improve the lives of people in them. It aims to do so by engaging those people in driving the process of change. But as the work takes shape in a given place and time, and as resource constraints come to the fore, community development often becomes a tricky blend of “industry” *and* movement, and a host of tensions about core goals and guiding values arise, for example: tension between building the capabilities of local people and servicing their needs most efficiently and accountably; between democratic aims of inclusion and political participation on one hand and programmatic objectives to “deliver the goods” on the other; between conceptions of neighborhoods as “stocks” and “flows” of investment and a focus on community as an adaptive system or “web” of interconnected parts; between universal standards that emphasize equality and more targeted aims (for example to celebrate social diversity and empower the disadvantaged). These dilemmas in planning and practice reflect the larger tensions in cities and regions that have imperfect mechanisms for decisionmaking, major resource disparities across neighborhoods, and complex patterns of change over time. Based on two workshops that gathered practitioners, researchers, and others, this brief brings together cutting-edge practice and theory—from the U.S. and other parts of the world—to offer new lessons about long-standing dilemmas, including ways to: make core values more explicit (and thereby subject to deliberation that improves action), resolve conflicts between competing goals, and put “systems thinking” to practical use.

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Ideas in practice

Current research and practice, sometimes building consciously on earlier foundations and often rediscovering old lessons, point to several principles for more effectively *defining* core goals and values and working, in concrete ways, to *advance* them:

1. ***Make a dialogue about core values and dilemmas a central part of any effort that aims for broad stakeholder participation, and build in mechanisms for resolving disputes.*** Neighborhoods feature a multiplicity of interests, some clear and some not, and mostly ad hoc mechanisms for developing broad-based agendas for action. One reason inclusionary planning and decision-making are tricky (anywhere) is that building and sustaining investments of time and confidence in the process are such challenging tasks. But a second reason is that stakeholders bring a range of priorities, cultural expectations, and communication styles. As such, conflicts over underlying goals and values can all too easily remain unexplored, becoming a subtext that erodes trust and commitment. One way to address this is with facilitated dialogue, allowing for a well-informed exchange of views—and not just a volley of opinions—about core goals and values and how and why they sometimes conflict. But mechanisms for resolving disputes are crucial, too, *within* the focal community and *between* it and outside parties, such as funders, policymakers, major employers, and civic institutions.

Examples: A multi-neighborhood planning and development project in Chicago is tackling a range of neighborhood priorities in the context of a gentrifying city with growing ethnic diversity. But early efforts ran the risk of obscuring potentially conflicting goals—for example to *preserve* housing affordability while *accelerating* the flow of financial investment into formerly distressed places—and also of deepening distrust among neighbors. Planning also deferred to the agendas of “lead agencies” and left open big questions about whether “more democracy” and “protecting diversity” were, in fact, shared values in the neighborhoods. In Indonesia, a project targeting thousands of villages has made facilitators available to learn about diverse community values and build new mechanisms for dispute resolution. These steps lay the groundwork for community-driven decision-making about new investments in local projects that promote efficiency and financial accountability in addition to a sense of local ownership.



2. **Identify specific goals for building resident capabilities, look for ways to align those goals with the goal of “delivering the goods,” and decide on acceptable trade-offs as part of a larger management plan.** Overly broad goals, limited labor capacity, resident turnover, mixed demands for accountability—from outside funders, for example, as well as community stakeholders—and shifting priorities complicate efforts to “build community capacity,” and strengthen resident capabilities as part of that, rather than merely service needs. Most of what we have in mind turns out to include enhancing residents’ *political* or *managerial* skills—and the mindsets that go with them—or a blend of both. Setting specific priorities, for example for building residents’ “public life skills” through training and action-oriented projects, can help. So does making the development of resident capacity part of a clear management plan, not a fuzzy, “grafted-on” aspiration. Trade-offs may be unpopular, but they also present opportunities for collective learning about how to get things done. What’s more, clear aims and vehicles for advancing them guard against the extremes: a slide back to top-down bureaucracy on one hand or positional stand-offs about control and “process paralysis” on the other. The latter is often driven by inappropriately broad and unstructured goals for “resident leadership” of change.
3. **Think and plan in terms of adaptive systems: Map the community as a system of interactions, use planning to help stakeholders rethink their “mental models” of change in practical ways, and use new technologies to plan with feedback loops and side effects in mind.** Too many local efforts rely on a general sense of “we-feeling” or shared fortunes without examining the specific ways in which parts of the community are inter-connected, how “flows” of people and investment and other dynamics drive conditions over time, and how small-scale things people care about—trust between strangers, clean streets, and more—reflect big changes affecting the community system as a whole. Failing to act with the system in mind frequently leads to a “capability trap”: Rather than invest the time and other resources needed to understand the feedback loops and become more capable—the keys to working *smarter*—we simply work *harder*, getting a bit more of the same limited results. New tools for making systems thinking “actionable” suggest a better way.

Examples: An asset building initiative in Oakland is targeting *adaptive resident networks*, rather than neighborhoods or individuals, as the unit of intervention. And tools such as Community Viz are helping community leaders explore spillover effects—and so head off unintended consequences—of local planning and development decisions.



Rethinking Community Development: Managing Dilemmas about Goals and Values

by Xavier de Souza Briggs

With roots in the social reform and social movement traditions, and with newer influences from business models for innovation and performance, community development works to strengthen places and improve the lives of people in them. At least in principle, community development aims to engage those people in *driving* the process of change. But as the work of planned change takes shape in a given place and time, and as resource constraints come to the fore, community development often becomes a tricky blend of “industry” and movement. It faces conflicting priorities, multiple layers of decisionmaking and definitions of accountability, and other challenges.

Sue Kenny has argued, from an international perspective, that the tensions and dilemmas have become more acute over the past decade as competing rationales—from charity and social activism to the reinvented welfare state and shifting global economy—shape policies and everyday practices in a variety of countries (see “Tensions and dilemmas in community development,” *Community Development Journal*, 2002). Rachel Bratt and William Rohe, focusing on the challenges facing community development corporations (CDCs) in the U.S., note recent trends such as gentrification—in which “revitalization” threatens to displace low-income people from their neighborhoods—and increased concern that community developers, as well as other nonprofits dependent on external funding, have failed to mobilize political action and broader social change (see “Challenges and dilemmas facing community development corporations in the United States,” *Community Development Journal*, 2005).

The specific dilemmas facing a community development initiative or organization are all about context—place as well as time—because local efforts evolve under a wide range of circumstances. But some of the most recurrent and universal tensions include:

- The tension between building the capabilities of local people and servicing their needs efficiently and accountably (usually with professionalized staffing and programs);
- The related tension between democratic aims of inclusion and political participation on one hand and programmatic objectives to “deliver the goods” on the other;
- Tensions between individual fortunes—helping individuals and/or their families to get ahead—and collective ones;
- Tensions between conceptions of neighborhoods as “stocks” and “flows” of investment and of a community as an adaptive system or web of interconnected and interdependent parts;



- The tension between universal standards that emphasize equality and inclusion—in the sense of equal treatment and “bringing everyone along”—and more targeted aims, for example to celebrate social diversity: mixing income and ethnic groups, promoting learning and respect, and empowering the disadvantaged.

These dilemmas in planning and practice reflect the larger tensions in cities or regions that have very imperfect mechanisms for democratic decisionmaking (at the neighborhood, city, and higher levels), show significant and persistent resource disparities across neighborhoods (creating an unequal “geography of opportunity”), and experience complex patterns of change over time (making it difficult to understand change, let alone shape it).

Preview and background

Part of a series on working *smarter*, not just harder, in community development, the aim of this brief is to bridge theory and practice in ways that diffuse innovative ideas along with the caveats and so what’s that are essential to effective practice.

This document is based in part on two day-long gatherings. The first, held in October 2004 at the MacArthur Foundation in Chicago, convened veteran community developers and organizers, evaluators and other researchers, educators and trainers, and funders and technical assistance experts (see list at the rear of this brief), some with extensive international experience, to discuss the core goals, values, and seemingly endless dilemmas of community development. The second gathering, held in March 2005 at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, convened a similarly mixed group to explore the concept of communities as adaptive systems or “webs.” At both workshops, we discussed a range of local cases, including the ambitious, multi-year New Communities Program (NCP) coordinated by LISC-Chicago and backed by the MacArthur Foundation, which also sponsored this project (NCP is now being adapted in other cities through LISC’s Sustainable Communities program). In between those dates, two other workshops focused on (a) tracking neighborhood change and community development impacts and (b) building community social bonds in the context of local organizing strategies and political structures (briefs 07-02 and 07-03 in our series focus, respectively, on those two).

At the workshops, the participants had a wide range of insights and priorities, which was the main reason to gather such a diverse group of thinkers, doers, and “straddlers.” Organized around the action-oriented “Ideas in Practice” outlined above, this brief highlights points of consensus as well as divergent views and unanswered questions.



1. Make a dialogue about community development’s core values and dilemmas a central part of any effort that aims for broad stakeholder participation, and build in mechanisms for resolving disputes.

One reason that inclusionary planning and decision-making are tricky (anywhere) is that building and sustaining investments of time and confidence are such challenging tasks. As workshop participants re-affirmed, some community members lack trust in the mechanisms of participation—and, in particular, in the authority figures doing the convening. Other stakeholders are motivated only when they perceive a threat or crisis. Sustaining broad-based participation in the everyday life of a community is probably unrealistic, at least if “participation” means engagement in civic debate, advocacy, or other public work; community service, socializing, and personal caregiving are certainly other valuable forms of participation.

A second reason that inclusionary approaches to planning and development are tricky is that stakeholders bring a range of priorities, cultural expectations, and communication styles. As such, conflicts over underlying goals and values can all too easily remain unexplored, becoming a subtext that erodes trust and commitment.

Ironically, because values of solidarity and inclusion are so prized in the “movement” tradition that still infuses much community development, there’s a tendency to look past differences rather than explore them creatively.

And a third reason, says sociologist Mary Pattillo based on her ethnographic research in changing Chicago neighborhoods, is that stakeholders bring different memories: They bring baggage related to memories and interpretations of past experience, such as earlier planning or development efforts, and this baggage sometimes includes suspicion (see Charles Kadushin et al, “Why is it so hard to form effective community coalitions?” and Mario Luis Small, *Villa Victoria*). Narratives of place may differ radically even among those who have been neighbors a long time, and the past casts a long shadow.

The civic challenge that community development faces is significant: Neighborhoods feature a multiplicity of interests, styles, and narratives, some clear and some not, but mostly ad hoc mechanisms for reconciling differences and developing broad-based agendas for action. This is especially the case where (a) a *mix* of income groups, ethnic groups, and groups defined by other social differences share a place, and where (b) recent *changes* have sharpened conflict.



Yet ironically, because values of solidarity and inclusion are so prized in the “movement” tradition that still infuses much community development, there’s a tendency to look past differences rather than explore them creatively.

At our first workshop, for example, Mary Pattillo shared her research on inter-group relations and the dynamics of decisionmaking in a changing Chicago neighborhood. Now published in the book *Black on the Block* (2007), Pattillo’s research found that public housing residents in the neighborhood—who are a mix of longtime neighborhood residents relocated within the neighborhood after their buildings were emptied and newcomers relocated from “transforming” public housing sites in other neighborhoods—feel marginalized and unwelcome. Most of them are black and very poor, while the organized residents of the neighborhood, most of whom are also black, are better off and reject what they see as “lower-class habits.”

These changes are leading to an all-too-familiar dynamic in urban life:
The push to *defend territory* (from one perspective)
or *gain a foothold of one’s own* (from another).

For the latter group of established residents, including many homeowners, “community improvement” means upgrading the area’s image and protecting the neighborhood against the perception that it is becoming a ghetto or a haven for anti-social behavior. Public housing residents are far more focused on economical survival and the need to obtain information and influence—the keys to solving basic everyday problems, getting needed social services, and repairing social support networks following the involuntary relocation that has disrupted their lives.

In the neighborhood Pattillo has studied in depth, mutual suspicion, owner versus renter perspectives on what is at stake, and some class differences in the use of public space complicate the effort to build community in a changing place. And for now, the organized mechanisms of collective life, including the group of residents charged with overseeing new community development, mainly reflects a homeowner-centric “protect-and-upgrade” perspective.

There may or may not be a clash of core values in this case, but there certainly is a clash of interests and cultural styles, a mutual sense of threat and stand-off, and a community organization functioning to advance the interests of a particular faction of neighbors rather than to be a bridge across groups within the neighborhood (creating a shared “community of interests”). Meanwhile, important changes in the neighborhood, which are tied to citywide and even regionwide political and economic change, are leading to an all-too-familiar dynamic in



urban life: The push to *defend territory* (from one perspective) or *gain a foothold of one's own* (from another). All of this poses the questions “Whose community?” and “Whose development?”

At our workshop, Andy Mooney and Susana Vazquez of LISC-Chicago acknowledged that community development intermediaries have substantial “leverage” (influence) and also face substantial constraints when faced with such diversity and this sort of institutional landscape at the neighborhood level.

On one hand, an intermediary organization such as LISC can fund and support neighborhood planning that enables a range of factions or interest groups to explore differences and confront new questions about accountability (who is accountable to whom for what?). Planning enabled by organizations external to a neighborhood, then, may compel *so-called* community-based organizations within the neighborhood to rethink their choices. One way of thinking about this is that such organizations are pushed to reflect on what the “base” in “community-based” really means and requires. LISC-Chicago’s ambitious New Communities Program (NCP) is driven by such planning, neighborhood by neighborhood.

On the other hand, like the Comprehensive Community Revitalization Program in the South Bronx after which NCP was modeled, LISC’s initiative relies on community-based organizations in each neighborhood to act as “lead agencies.” That is, they “lead” for the purposes of the NCP initiative, though these organizations are often not member organizations or otherwise elected formally by area residents. The lead agencies are LISC’s primary partners at the neighborhood level. As such, those agencies decide on the agenda for neighborhood planning, and they do so in ways that may or may not make core values or group conflicts over future development explicit or discussable, let alone produce a “bridging” outcome of the kind highlighted above.

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“community-based” really means and requires.**

These dynamics—and what some view as opportunities lost—are nothing new. In a particularly well-documented case, the Whittier neighborhood in Minneapolis saw conflict explode—and its neighborhood CDC transformed and then closed down—over the same sort of tense, unmediated coexistence between different groups with different priorities.

On one side were low-income, mostly African-American single parents and their children renting CDC housing and often struggling to get by. On the other side were middle-class



homeowners, mostly white and without children, who had very different ideas about making the neighborhood more attractive. In the early 90s, an infusion of local government funding for community development sharpened conflicts in the Whittier neighborhood over what development should bring and whose priorities it should emphasize. The homeowners in the neighborhood organized and, under the by-laws of the CDC, which was a membership organization, homeowners took control of the organization's board. Key programs to serve poor families were downsized or shut down, and eventually the CDC itself closed its doors (see Edward Goetz and Mara Sidney, "Revenge of the property owners," *Journal of Urban Affairs*, 1994).

As I explored soon afterward in an essay on social capital, although the two factions in Whittier were internally cohesive ("bonded"), the area lacked a force and strategy to build social bridges across the two groups (see "Social Capital and the Cities: Advice to Change Agents," *National Civic Review*, 1997). It is ironic and also sad that a major citywide community development initiative sharpened the intra-neighborhood conflict and triggered the CDC's collapse.

What if a neighborhood functions as a supportive "ethnic enclave" for one group mainly, and what if local community-based organizations recognize and prefer it as such—and not as a multi-ethnic "melting pot"?

In a related vein, workshop participants questioned core values tied to social diversity in relation to neighborhood development and change—both the planned and the unplanned. Should greater ethnic *integration* be an explicit aim, and if so, how much should it be emphasized if it competes with other aims of local action? What if a neighborhood functions as a supportive "ethnic enclave" for one ethnic group mainly, and what if local community-based organizations recognize and prefer it that way—and not as a multi-ethnic "melting pot"?

Also, is *economic* integration, or maintaining an income mix, at least as important as ethnic integration? Researchers Douglas Massey and Mary Fischer have found that high-skill, higher-income households have become more and more segregated from lower-skill, lower-income ones over the past 50 years. That is economic *segregation*—the tendency for people of different means, education levels, and sometimes class interests to live in different communities—is up overall in our country and also up among blacks and among whites specifically. That is, economic segregation has increased dramatically *within* those racial groups (long-run data on other groups are not yet available).



Enhancing social cohesion—turning a physical *neighborhood* into a *community*—is a frequent aim of community development. Yet mountains of careful research show that cohesive areas are typically stable (with limited residential turnover) and relatively homogeneous, whether in class, life stage, or ethnic dimensions. Many neighborhoods with active community development initiatives are not so stable or homogeneous. As I highlighted above, bridging differences can be extraordinarily valuable, for individuals, groups, and community life as a whole—opening up new perspectives, defusing conflict, and providing information and other supports to benefit the disadvantaged. But bridging is often very uphill work.

Dealing with differences more effectively

A world away from Minneapolis, in the villages of rural Indonesia, a huge, ongoing community development initiative is exploring a better way to deal with differences, as Michael Woolcock explained at our first workshop.

Indonesia is extraordinarily diverse in ethnic groups and languages, with over 350 indigenous languages alone—many of them as unrelated as Russian, English, and Chinese. With about a billion dollars in funding from The World Bank, the Kecamatan Development Project (KDP) is the largest community development initiative in Asia, as well as one of the largest experiments in “community-driven development” ever conducted anywhere. There are some 20,000 target villages.

KDP’s core premise is that villagers should be actively involved in deciding how “development funds”—externally provided funds for infrastructure and other needs—will be spent in their communities. But engagement extends to making the most of those investments (over time) as well.

In Indonesian villages, as in communities everywhere else, there are almost always more proposals that seem worthy than there are funds to award, and so villagers must negotiate with each other to determine which two proposals will be put forward to elected councils at each major review-and-decisionmaking session.

The process is carefully structured. A village delegation of at least two women and one man must accompany the proposal to present it. This feature was designed to address a history of gender inequality, but it also responds to research showing how women’s involvement makes project success much more likely. No one can modify the proposal once villagers have negotiated it.

Facilitators and other well-trained support staff play several key roles at various levels. First, villagers elect a man and woman to introduce project staff to the village and its formal and informal institutions. Next, among the KDP staff, a *social facilitator* works, at the district level



(across many villages) to manage processes, explain rules and promote reflection and learning over time. A *technical facilitator* helps villagers assess the quality of their infrastructure and trains them in maintenance. An *engineer* supervises implementation once funds have been approved, and a *management team* offers training, supervises projects in the field, and handles complaints from the villagers.

This carefully structured process stimulates social learning and new habits in a variety of ways. For example, when villagers buy construction materials, KDP rules require that they obtain bids from three different suppliers. As Scott Guggenheim, one of KDP’s designers, writes, “Initially, many villages do not want to do this. They have their own favorite suppliers where they have bought goods for decades. They are nearly always shocked to find that comparative shopping lowers costs.” Government officials, who were long accustomed to dictating projects and expected villagers to receive them gratefully—“no questions asked”—have had to adjust their habits and expectations, too.

Projects such as KDP provide new supports but also new rules and checks-and-balances, demanding responsibility and promoting learning in several ways, from all parties involved. Invariably, these projects change local norms, and the evidence so far is that many of the change are highly functional, at least from the standpoint of enhancing the quality of local life and local infrastructure.

The villagers ... do *not* have to develop a shared, let alone canonical, vision, of what the future of their community should be. But they do have to build constituencies for their proposals, negotiate in ways that acknowledge real trade-offs, and then live with the results.

The KDP structure is meant to ensure multiple kinds of accountability, and to deliver the goods (tangible improvements driven by public investments) in ways that are driven by efforts within villages to bargain and learn, explore conflicts and resolve them *enough* to come to useful agreements. All this unfolds in the context of ethnic, linguistic, religious, gender, and other social differences. The villagers that participate in KDP do *not* have to develop a shared, let alone canonical vision, of what the future of their community should be. But they do have to build constituencies for their proposals, negotiate in ways that acknowledge real trade-offs, and then live with the results. To do these things, the villagers are forced to acknowledge what they value and why—and listen to others do the same.



Let's highlight some implications for community development practice elsewhere: One way to address *possible* value differences and acknowledge the multiple, often unstated assumptions that stakeholders bring to the ideas “community” and “development,” is with *facilitated dialogue*. The aim is to allow for a structured and progressively more informed exchange of views—and not just a volley of opinions—about core goals and values and how and why they sometimes conflict. But *mechanisms for resolving disputes* are crucial, too, within the community and between it and outside parties, such as funders, policymakers, major employers, civic institutions or others.

Dialogue can be a powerful tool for learning, and it may shift people's preferences or usefully reveal new ones. But often, differences will remain, and yet *decisions must still be made*.

The difference is this: Dialogue need not lead to decision. But mechanisms for negotiating or mediating conflict specifically aim to produce decisions jointly, in the form of agreements among parties. The aim, more specifically, is that these agreements be recognized as valuable in the short run and also that they be sustainable over the long run. That is, dialogue can be a powerful tool for learning, and it may shift people's preferences or usefully reveal new ones. But often, differences will remain, and yet *decisions must still be made* (see Lawrence Susskind and Jeffrey Cruikshank, *Breaking the Impasse*, 1987). Structured approaches to bargaining and conflict management help produce joint decisions that are more valuable, legitimate, forward-looking, and—for all those reasons—more sustainable. A major bonus is that such agreements tend to strengthen rather than erode working relationships that the players can turn to in the future (see Xavier de Souza Briggs, “We Are All Negotiators Now: An Introduction to Negotiation in Community Problem-Solving,” 2003).

KDP and the other examples I have explored so far hint at ways to address another classic, and apparently inescapable, dilemma in community development: How to build resident capabilities (a core value) alongside the goal of producing tangible, measurable improvements in social and economic conditions (the bread-and-butter side of “development” or social progress).



2. Identify specific goals for building resident capabilities, look for ways to align those goals with the goal of “delivering the goods,” and decide on acceptable trade-offs.

Many things complicate efforts to *build community capabilities* rather than merely *service resident needs*, including: overly broad goals, limited labor power and other forms of capacity, resident turnover, mixed demands for accountability—from outside funders, for example, as well as community stakeholders—and shifting priorities.

The scenarios are many and varied. The funder needs a grant proposal right away, and this relegates a plan to develop resident skills in a new anti-violence program to the proverbial back-burner—a good intention that does not quite “make the cut” in terms of management priorities.

Two collaborating organizations in a neighborhood find it challenging enough to reconcile differences in their different operational systems. Coming up with an integrated plan for resident skill building, in the context of a new health program initiative, seems above and beyond the call.

One of the most fundamental dilemmas: Is it *community*-driven at all? Or has community development become little more than a decentralized, nonprofit-based system for delivering services to the public? And there’s another basic question: What does it mean to “develop”?

With tight overhead and complex layers of finance, a new homeownership program shortchanges the development of “community ambassadors” meant to refer residents to staff counselors and mortgage brokers. Multiple funders require multiple measures of progress of the local grantee or contractor, and none of those measures emphasizes gains in the capacity of local residents to *lead* change (or at least “co-produce” it). So the grantee manages toward what *does* count—officially, that is.

This tension, often seen as a conflict among expectations exacerbated by the scarcity of time and other resources, leads to one of the most fundamental dilemmas in community development. Expressed as a question: Is it *community*-driven at all? Or has community development become little more than a decentralized, nonprofit-based system for delivering services to the public?

And there’s another basic question: What does it mean to “develop”?



In *Development as Freedom*, Nobel prize-winning economist Amartya Sen offers an alternative to the income and wealth-based conception of what counts as progress. Sen argues for a focus on freedoms—both freedom *from* (hunger and want, for example) and freedom *to* do important things (capabilities), such as work that has meaning.

The scope of Sen’s argument is much broader than my immediate interest here, but one of his primary aims is to make us think carefully about what constitutes the *means* of development, including income-producing projects and economic growth, versus its fundamental *end*—improving the human condition, in large part by expanding both types of freedom: “freedom from” and “freedom to.”

But *how* can local efforts expand freedom-to capabilities, rather than simply service needs, removing “want”? The 1990s saw a rise of “capacity building” efforts in American neighborhoods. This paralleled a similar rise around the world. The new push for community capacity building was partly about the long-run shift from technocratic service delivery by government agencies to an alternative, and still more loosely defined, set of approaches.

But serious challenges remain, in part because the broader label “capacity building” is so broad an idea. In one instance, it may mean helping a nonprofit service provider to develop a realistic organizational strategy (as distinct from a list of goals), hire or train professional staff, and strengthen contracting and financial management functions. In other words, capacity building, useful as it is for managerial reasons, can, in some instances, reinforce pressure to de-emphasize the development of *resident* capabilities to play an active role in community change.

On the other hand, *community* capacity, as workshop participant Robert Chaskin and his collaborators explain, is also an elastic, big-tent idea (Chaskin et al., *Building Community Capacity*, 2001). In one context, it may refer to grassroots “leadership development,” in another to creating new organizations (with or without clear mechanisms of accountability to community residents), in another to fostering informal social networks in a neighborhood, or something else.

Candid, “backroom” conversations among funders and policymakers acknowledge that residents have—in some cases—been given authority and control of resources for which they were ill prepared, usually in the interest of making an initiative more community driven or at least appear to be so.



Here, I focus on efforts that specifically aim to enhance the capabilities of residents to act as agents of change on their collective behalf. Such efforts are often “slow and expensive,” acknowledged one workshop participant. Funders may value them but not be prepared for the time, money, and other investments required—or for the difficulty of assessing the return on those investments.

Furthermore, an unquestioned and inflexible emphasis on resident participation, for example in running complex programs, can lead to disappointment, failure, and withdrawal. Candid, “backroom” conversations among funders and policymakers acknowledge that residents have—in some cases—been given authority and control of resources for which they were ill prepared, usually in the interest of making an initiative more community driven or at least appear to be so. Influential players in this picture may or may not want to publicly criticize past choices, but the mistakes are costly all the same.

What should resident capability include, and how might community development get better at promoting it? Here’s a simple proposal: Much of what we have in mind turns out to include *political* or *managerial* skills—and the mindsets that go with them—or a blend of the two.

A number of organizations, such as the Industrial Areas Foundation network, have long-established methods, including training and structured practice, for developing resident leadership skills (see Mark Warren, *Dry Bones Rattling*, 2001; and Paul Osterman, *Gathering Power*, 2004).

What should resident capability include, and how might community development get better at promoting it? Here’s a simple proposal: Much of what we have in mind turns out to include *political* or *managerial* skills—and the mindsets that go with them—or a blend of the two.

But other groups have tackled these types of skills as well. Describing the efforts of the University of Illinois to build community capacity and improve outcomes for residents as part of a university-community partnership in East St. Louis, a very poor city, researcher and educator Ken Reardon highlights the need for “public life skills,” in particular. These are skills for recognizing that many private grievances or worries are tied to public issues, for organizing one’s neighbors around common concerns, and for understanding enough about the institutional structure of local power and decisionmaking to advance organized interests (see



“Enhancing the Capacity of Community-Based Organizations in East St. Louis,” *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 1998).

In another case, the Boston Community Building Network commissioned the Interaction Institute for Social Change to work with neighborhood residents and others on design and delivery of a “community building” curriculum, which emphasized those types of skills. DC Agenda, a civic intermediary organization, emphasized them, too, in its “Neighborhood College” initiative.

But some “community leadership development” efforts are focused on political or civic action alone. They may or may not include basic management or other skills important to *delivering a service, or otherwise directly changing a social condition, more effectively*, as opposed to influencing a decision or understanding someone’s interests.

There’s a tendency to associate “managing” with control or authority and direct service with “community self-help.” But at its most basic, management is about *producing results with and through other people*. It involves dividing labor well and coordinating it effectively. It creates and puts to work *operational capacity*, not just a set of political values or mechanisms of influence. And communities everywhere need some of *that* kind of capacity to contribute directly to solutions, including the capacity to coordinate labor (partner) with outside groups in order to get something important done.

What’s the evidence that residents can make a difference as “co-producers” who play managerial roles? Promising social programs—for example, to improve children’s health and safety, monitor environmental conditions, and promote employment in disadvantaged communities—are yielding new lessons about engaging residents as paraprofessionals, community mentors and monitors, “natural helpers,” community ambassadors, and more. These lessons emphasize picking specific priorities and other key steps I explore below (and see the pullout box below for further reading).

See the third brief in this Working Smarter series, “*Networks, Power, and a Dual Agenda: New Lessons about Old Community Building Dilemmas*,” and also “*Perfect Fit or Shotgun Marriage: The Power and Pitfalls in Partnerships*” in our companion series, The Community Problem-Solving Project @ MIT, at www.community-problem-solving.net.



Doing better

Those results underscore that resident engagement and resident-focused capacity building shouldn't be tackled in isolation from the other objectives and constraints that come to bear on community development efforts as they struggle to deliver something valuable. Furthermore, these realities, and the trade-offs outlined above, suggest some principles for more effective practice:

- *Identify goals for developing resident capabilities, look for ways to align those goals with goals for “delivering the goods,” and decide on acceptable trade-offs—i.e., make resident capacity building a realistic part of a larger management plan.* A resident might do one thing to help organize a community visit to city hall to influence a budgeting decision and something very different to enroll young mothers in a community-based infant health program. Broad rhetoric about engagement and empowerment obscure these important differences. In each of these two instances, one of civic action and the other of social program delivery and community education, there is a division of labor: What residents can do, or be prepared to do effectively, is in large part a function of what others in the division of labor can or should do—and, of course, of what the overall objectives, resources, and constraints are. Plans for developing resident capability should be part of this basic management planning for effectiveness. Note that even civic actions require management plans.

The genius of community leadership trainings and other “social technologies” is that broad principles and goals get translated into clear *learning objectives* and then *specific practices* that are honed over time. Another lesson of these efforts is that context and application matter: Skill development seems to work best in the context of ongoing projects in communities, which demand new skills and offer opportunities to practice them and get coached, rather than isolated training experiences.

- *Be specific, not general, and turn goals into practices that can improve over time.* Broad goals of political “empowerment” are much less useful, where managing the dilemmas of community development are concerned, than are specific goals. Empowerment—if it means expanding someone’s capacity to think and act for themselves and then influence decisions that affect them—often requires, very specifically, developing residents’ public life skills.



These skills include active listening, identifying interests, organizing and managing meetings, and understanding basic principles of decisionmaking and influence in groups. The genius of community leadership trainings, community building curricula for resident activists, innovative university/community partnerships that target such skills, and other “social technologies,” is that broad principles and goals get translated into clear learning objectives and then specific practices that are honed over time. Another lesson of these efforts is that context and application matter: Skill development seems to work best in the context of ongoing projects in communities, which demand new skills and offer opportunities to practice them and get coached, rather than isolated training experiences.

- *Trade-offs: Name them, address them, and use them to promote collective learning.* Examine potential and likely trade-offs between operational progress and resident capacity building (given time, money, and other constraints) explicitly. Do so especially when initiatives are planned or evaluated for re-funding, and make the issue of acceptable trade-offs a part of any contract, formal or informal, with funders and other external drivers of accountability. Make the trade-offs a part of what gets monitored and re-assessed over time, too. Most people want systems that are responsive and will accept that there are limits and trade-offs where resident roles are concerned. The key is a transparent process that owns up to what’s at stake, not a shrill insistence on vague goals or principles.

Where resident capacity building is concerned, clear aims and vehicles for advancing them guard against the extremes, for example of a slide back to top-down bureaucracy on one hand or positional stand-offs about control and “process paralysis” on the other. The latter is often driven by excessively broad *and* unstructured expectations about “resident leadership” of change.

Positional stand-offs about control and “process paralysis” ... are often driven by excessively broad *and* unstructured expectations about “resident leadership” of change.



3. Think and plan in terms of adaptive systems: Map the community as a system of interactions, use planning to help stakeholders rethink their “mental models” of change in practical ways, and use new technologies to plan with feedback loops and side effects in mind.

Some community development dilemmas have to do with what we conceive a community to be—just a place with special features, a set of relationships lived through a shared history *in* a shared place, a stepping stone to other places or a haven that ensures healthy development of individual residents and their families, something else?

As Anne Kubisch put it at our fourth workshop, “Creative community developers *do* see communities as systems, but the structures and institutions around them do not.”

And too many local efforts rely on a general sense of “we-feeling” or shared fortunes without examining the specific ways in which parts of the community are inter-connected or how resilient those connections are likely to be in the face of important changes affecting the system as a whole. Connections at the everyday small scale often reflect what’s shifting at a higher level, for example if city government has cut funding for parks and recreation, the regional job market or housing market has shifted, and so on.

New tools for systems thinking suggest a better way to think and plan. This final principle is all about good planning, but it conceives of planning in the context of what a group of scholars at the Santa Fe Institute have labeled a “complex adaptive system”—as distinct from planning for neighborhoods as *catchment areas for services* or as *sets of “stocks” and “flows” of people and investments*.

Holland’s twin insights—that cities and neighborhoods have important *properties* of adaptive systems but are *limited in their capacity to adapt to shocks*—are valuable as guides to community development.

The idea that communities, like ecosystems, can behave as “webs” of interconnected parts is hardly new. The late Jane Jacobs, one of the most influential urban observers of the 20th century, made a passionate case for saving urban neighborhoods, and protecting their diversity in multiple senses of the word, specifically by highlighting all the interdependent events, relationships, and actors in the modern city (see *The Death and Life of American Cities*, 1961).

And starting with renowned psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner, experts have charted a new course for the study of human development, and related efforts to strengthen children and



families, over the past two decades. They recommend thinking of neighborhoods as “ecologies” of effective relationships and other *resources* and *sources of resilience*—as well as ecologies of *risk*.

But the formal notion that neighborhoods can be thought of as *adaptive* systems was best developed in classics of systems thinking and “complexity theory,” such as John Holland’s *Hidden Order: How Adaptation Builds Complexity* (1996). As Andy Mooney of LISC-Chicago noted at our final workshop, Holland’s twin insights—that cities and neighborhoods have important *properties* of adaptive systems but are *limited in their capacity to adapt to shocks*—are valuable as guides to community development.

Holland argues neighborhood and the cities in which they are nested turn out to have feedback loops and sets of interactions among interrelated parts. Problems in the regional job market put pressure on families whose homes are concentrated in particular neighborhoods. Those pressures spill over in the form of neighborhood crime and dependency. And those problems affect patterns of regional investment that drive further changes in the job market. And so the cycle continues.

That’s the *web* aspect in very simplified form: The health of the parts cannot be addressed in isolation. The system as a whole is complex and also adaptive, as long as it is capable of learning and modifying the actions and interactions of the parts.

Mooney builds on these insights to argue that a key aim of community development, more than building traditional physical assets, is to build the “tensile strength” of neighborhoods to handle ongoing change.

Convened by LISC-Chicago and the MacArthur Foundation, the Chicago’s Futures Committee, in a major review of the purposes and accomplishments of community development in that city, articulated a view that neighborhoods be seen as “webs of relationships, both internal and external” *rather* than “sets of discrete assets” and that development address this by understanding and strengthening the web—both inside the neighborhoods and through links to the larger system of resources and influence that surround neighborhoods (see *Changing the Way We Do Things*, 1997).

But the web is not infinitely *resilient*. A major shock to one part of the system, for example a physical redevelopment decision that displaces people and disrupts their networks, may deliver a crushing blow to the system as a whole. Mindy Fullilove, a psychiatrist and



community health expert, has concluded exactly this in the case of the federal urban renewal program, which “root shocked” an estimated 1,000 African American neighborhoods between the 1950s and 70s (see *Root Shock*, 2005).

Mooney builds on these insights to argue that a key aim of community development, more than building traditional physical assets, is to build the “tensile strength” of neighborhoods to handle ongoing change. Yet many neighborhoods in which community development efforts operate are, as we explored above, not models of cohesiveness in the simple sense of being “whole communities.” On the contrary, while they are undeniably undergoing important and challenging changes, these neighborhoods appear to reflect an uneasy coexistence of social and economic “parts” that neither acknowledge nor welcome interdependence. So bridging and mediating differences seems an important part of planning and acting on the adaptive system (or web) concept.

What is more, even if Holland’s insights constitute a valuable warning against myopic or piecemeal planning, the implications of those insights are not very specific. This makes it difficult to imagine what connections matter, which important kinds might be missing but constructible in a neighborhood, and what “tensile” strength requires exactly.

In contrast to systems thinking, the way we do most of our work—“open-loop problem-solving”—is linear and comforting, at least in the sense of the order and predictability it conveys.

How does an adaptive system work? And where do we go with this big idea?

Armed with some new ways of *thinking* differently, what should one pay attention to, and how should one *act* differently? The fourth and final workshop in our series was organized largely to answer those questions.

Let’s begin with the multiple traits that make neighborhoods behave like complex adaptive systems. As John Sterman, head of MIT’s Systems Dynamics Lab, outlined for us, such systems are: evolving and dynamic, sometimes chaotic in the way that patterns appear and change happens, governed by “feedback” that shifts the way parts behave and perhaps the way they interrelate, and “tightly coupled” (the trait that lets a shock wave, or other force, “travel” within the system, because what affects one part reverberates among neighboring parts).

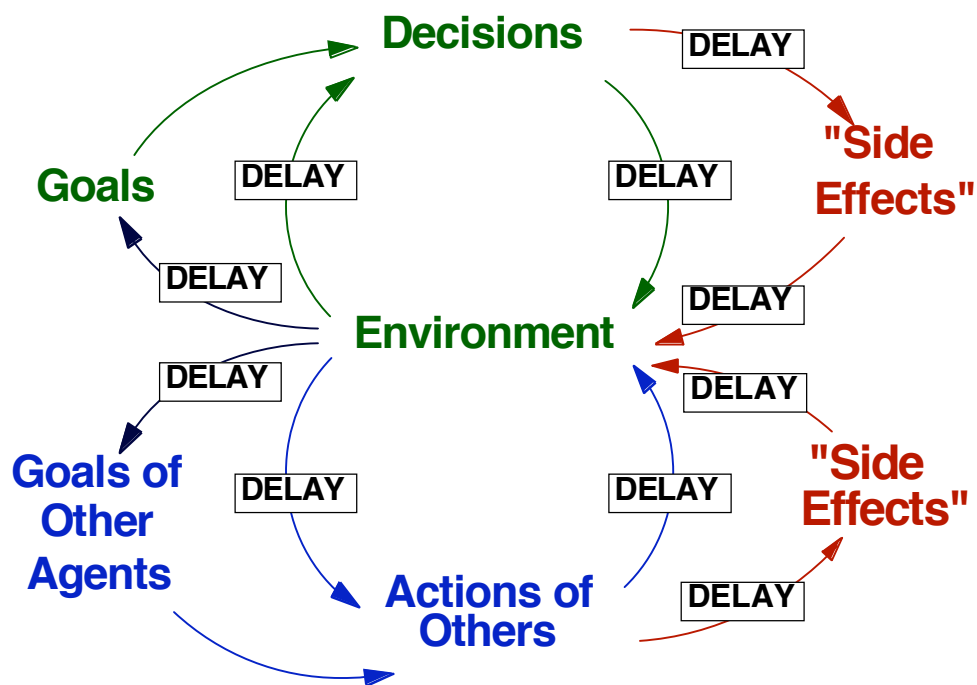
In this context, the aim of systems thinking is often to understand the few “simple rules” that govern much of the system’s function and evolution over time.



But our workaday mental models, says Sterman, are much simpler and more limited. They are: driven by short-time horizons and a focus on events we can plan and experience directly, narrowly bounded (to focus on our own unit or base rather than the system), “open loop” and so oblivious to important feedback and spillovers, and often unaware of delayed effects and other things that create a gap between what’s visible now and what’s driving change in the system. We may be oblivious to the underlying rules—for example about decisions of prospective owners or renters *not yet living in our neighborhood* to invest or not invest in the neighborhood—that shape the world around us and our limited interventions.

In contrast to systems thinking, the way we do most of our work—“open-loop problem-solving”—is linear and comforting, at least in the sense of the order and predictability it conveys. Professional analysts are typically trained to think and act in these linear terms: Identify problems, gather data, identify and evaluate alternative courses of action (responses to the problems), pick one or more, implement, re-assess the problems, and so on.

Figure 1: We Are Embedded in a Larger System



Source: Sterman, MIT Systems Dynamics Lab (2005)



In actuality, we are embedded in a large system of other agents, their decisionmaking goals and actions, multiple feedback loops, and “side effects” (see Figure 1). Except that “there’s no such thing as side effects,” adds Sterman, “They’re just effects ... outside of your mental model.” He means that we should think of them as an integral part of the system of feedback and change going on around us, not another “pesky symptom” to be dealt with in isolation.

Let’s apply these systems concepts to a specific case to plan and carry out community development more effectively. LISC-Chicago, in launching NCP in a variety of Chicago neighborhoods, outlined the basic “theory of change” as

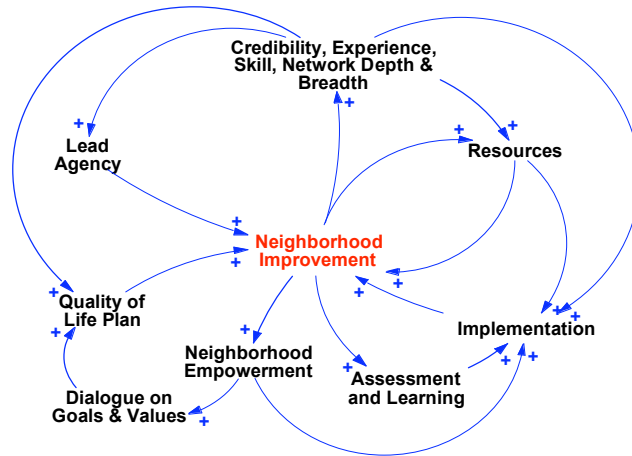
Lead agency + quality of life plan + resources + implementation = neighborhood improvement

But that is a list of ingredients rather than a model showing *how* change can be produced. Convert a linear conception of community development intervention to the systems view, as Sterman does in Figures 2 and 3, and the pitfalls of our dominant mental models become all too clear: We are slow to learn, oblivious to much feedback and adaptation happening around us, and prone to create new problems by putting out the proverbial brushfire or by scaling things up too eagerly—which often makes things more bureaucratic and cumbersome, not more adaptive and successful.

Indeed, working in this system of feedback loops without much awareness of them, we are liable to *misunderstand* the range of ways we could improve results (enablers) or find ourselves thwarted (barriers).

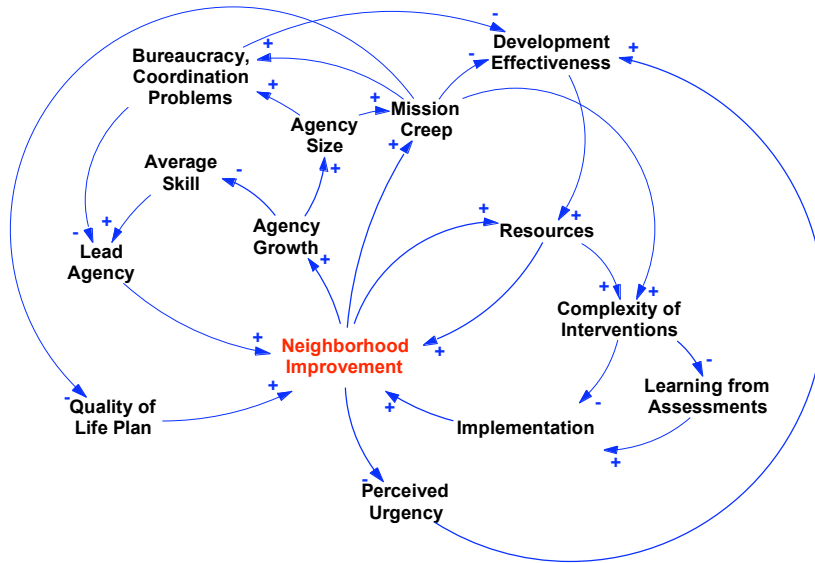
The mismatch between our limited mental models and the system in which our actions “play out” is huge, and it frequently leads to a “capability trap.” Rather than invest the time and other resources needed to understand the feedback loops and become more capable—the keys to working *smarter*—we simply work *harder*, getting a bit more of the same limited results (Figure 4). Sterman labels this the “capability trap.” It’s a major barrier to performance, because it helps explain why we do not *invest* more in becoming more capable: Investing in capability is the slower part of the process.

Figure 2: Some Feedbacks Driving Improvement



Source: Sterman, MIT Systems Dynamics Lab (2005)

Figure 3: Feedbacks That May Limit Success



Source: Sterman, MIT Systems Dynamics Lab (2005)



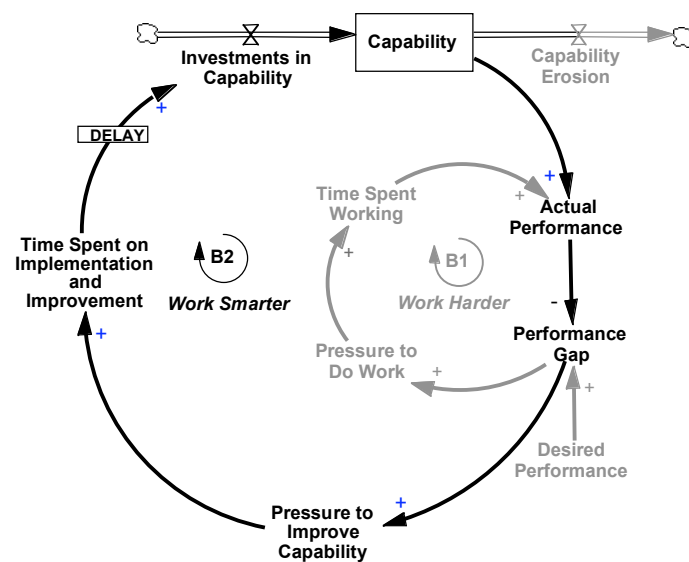
To break out of this trap, we could invest more, but since this would mean working less hard in the near term (on the familiar tasks right in front of us), the short-term results would be an apparent *loss* of productivity. This leads to a *worse-before-better* pattern, which encourages us to stay the course rather than “slack off,” so to speak.

Sterman calls this the “maintenance trap.” We continue to do what we’ve been doing, working hard rather than investing more and getting better at what we need to do. We might even be close to a tipping point, where the positive feedback loops would begin to work in our favor and change would become more self-sustaining. But we stop short, fail to invest, and go back to business as usual.

And then the group or leadership concludes “bad idea” or “bad plan” rather than “failed implementation process.” In this picture, external pressure to produce tangible results may actually work against the effect intended.

Sterman offered the distressing example of foster care: “With underfunding, with inadequate skill, with high turnover, with high caseloads, almost all the time that social workers have is in [the working harder] loop ... emergency removals, emergency interventions, desperate attempts to line up a family at 4Pm on a Friday night to take kids who have nowhere to sleep. As a result, none of their time is available for with working with the biological and foster parents to build their capacity to get their children back and learn how to parent the kids they have better.”

Figure 4: Investing in Capability





In some cases, we end up compounding the significant social problems we set out to solve—one reason why systems thinking specifically aims to help decisionmakers find “high-leverage” ways to intervene (see Sterman, “All Models are Wrong,” *Systems Dynamics Review*, 2002). John Holland offers the example of how a vaccine works: by stimulating the immune system to “learn” about the disease, i.e., by leveraging the strengths of the system itself rather than threatening or replacing those strengths.

Implications for planning and action

At our workshop, participants explored the implications of these principles, all of which have been verified again and again in business strategy implementation studies and analyses of complex healthcare delivery systems and more.

One implication is that a narrow framing of the system can leave one without the needed leverage on important problems. As some experts put it, “get the system in the room” to do the planning, even if the road to that room is slow and arduous, rather than focus on gathering only the like-minded souls to come up with *their* plan.

Also, some of the benefits of new investments are not captured by the stakeholders doing the work. Some investments we make in relationships or “social capital,” for instance, accrue to others.

In addition, although understanding delayed effects is important, it is often exceedingly difficult, when working in neighborhoods, to know *how long* it may take for efforts to hit a positive tipping point: that is, where significant results will encourage more smart investments in capability, which drives more results, and so on. And resident turnover means that people are moving into and out of neighborhoods constantly. Some neighborhoods see half the population change in five years or less. These dynamics can make it hard to sustain effects long enough to hit a tipping point.

As for leverage points in this challenging picture, we discussed the need to think about flows into and out of communities in ways that keep up with realities of the market.

Although understanding delayed effects is important, it is often exceedingly difficult, when working in neighborhoods, to know *how long* it may take for efforts to hit a positive tipping point.



A growing number of local programs aim, for example, to build the assets of low-income and low-wealth families. Individual development accounts, homeownership promotion, and other asset building strategies are important, and they should get more support. But it was years before many small local programs began to pay attention to *asset stripping*—the process through which large financial institutions practice “predatory lending,” offering mortgages that families cannot pay back and then foreclosing and re-selling the home.

A systems view looks at the flows of assets into *and* out of the neighborhood and, in the context of predatory lending, systems thinking leads one to think about policy advocacy strategies to affect the lenders and consumer education and intervention to affect the borrowers. This takes one well beyond the aims and tools of typical savings programs for individual savers or families, for example. But the end goal is one and the same: to build wealth, in part by better *protecting* the wealth people already have.

Systems thinking can also lead to better targeting. Maurice Lim Miller shared the experience of the Family Independence Initiative (FII), an asset building and employment initiative in Oakland which has built consciously on participants’ social networks (see *Pathways Out of Poverty*, 2003). The initiative provides direct investment of resources, some simple rules and incentives, and a small support staff and then lets families—rather than nonprofit staff or government regulators—figure out how to accomplish important financial goals. Families are buying homes, opening small businesses, and generating successful youth projects.

There’s a significant trade-off between large-scale investments in costly evaluation models and large interview samples on one hand and the self-conscious learning and adaptation—working smarter, not just harder—on the other. What if more resources went to the latter?

In this case, the *adaptive network*, not the individual, or the family or neighborhood in which a person happens to be nested, is the program’s main unit of intervention. The neighborhood is one platform of change and interaction, but the “personal community,” as sociologist Barry Wellman calls it, rather than the spatial community (neighborhood), is the main focus. By tracking change in simple indicators over time, the FII program is learning what networks need, at various stages of investment, to solve problems.

“I don’t have to understand the system to get something done,” Miller argues, meaning that while the range of causes and effects are something of a mystery, the program gets results—



and at very low cost compared to traditional, bureaucratic social service programs run by rules and standardized procedures. FII does so by investing in the adaptive capacity of a system of relationships that matter for people and that (mostly) work for them already.

Also at the workshop, Jim Riccio underscored an implied caveat, for evaluators, in adopting a systems view of change: Don't "drown" in all the complexity. Riccio argued that evaluations of community initiatives should stay focused on a few core questions and purposes, regardless of how complex the causes and effects may be. He also recommended including the interactions between "self-conscious" agents of change and the communities in which they work. Understanding that interaction, in multiple dimensions if need be, becomes important if we think that webs and feedback loops and ongoing adaptation matter.

But there are other implications for conceptualizing and evaluating community development process, outputs, and outcomes. First is the need for more insight into what interactions, feedback loops, and adaptation (the reaction for every action) actually include over time, including attention to finding better measures.

“Best” practices don't resolve the basic implementation dilemma: If the incentives favor working harder, not smarter, an invitation to adopt some new practice, get trained, and change habits will be resisted. Corners will be cut, old habits will re-appear, skill levels will remain stagnant, and the disabling loop will repeat itself.

A second implication is that there's a significant trade-off between large-scale investments in costly evaluation models and large interview samples on one hand and the self-conscious learning and adaptation—working smarter, not just harder—on the other. What if more resources went to the latter, at least as an experiment, and not, said Prue Brown, to the expectation, in a world without implementation dilemmas and resistance, of a one-for-one return on investment?

Third, the systems view reminds us of the need to understand multiple capacities and how they affect the system over time, such as the capacity to garner resources from the wider world versus the capacity to manage those resources (once secured) inside the neighborhood, the capacity to develop and sustain collective action, and the capacity to learn and change course (strategy-wise).



Finally, the realities of adaptive systems highlight the pitfalls in simplistic “best practice” thinking. Yes, there are effective practices for solving discrete problems—better and worse ways to tutor children, design mixed-income townhouse communities, recruit neighbors to a planning meeting, and so on. But the technical contents of the recipe don’t mean much if you can’t take a practice created and modified in one dynamic system (context) and implement it well in another. And as Sterman underlines, “best” practices don’t resolve the basic implementation dilemma: If the incentives favor working harder, not smarter, an invitation to adopt some new practice, get trained, and change habits will be resisted: corners will be cut, old habits will reappear, skill levels will remain stagnant, and the disabling loop will repeat itself.

Doing better: Systems thinking in practice

Our discussion suggests some principles for putting systems thinking, and specifically the view of neighborhoods as complex and adaptive systems, to work:

- *Map the community as a set of agents who interact through key processes.* Avoid the temptation to start with a laundry list of everyone who cares about the neighborhood or has a stake in it. The issue is not who counts in the ethical or legal or civic sense but who acts and interacts, around what, with whom. Start with a few big processes, such as finding and moving into a home in the neighborhood (which involves prospective residents outside the place, realtors, lenders, and perhaps current residents, journalists and other opinion makers). Holding a major community event is another kind of process, and keeping the neighborhood safe—the ongoing work of putting eyes on the street to detect crime as well as the processes that discourage crime in the first place—is a third kind of process, somewhat harder to map. Each process has agents who interact and relationships that structure the ways they interact and the effects of their interactions.
- *Don’t forget the system around the neighborhood system.* It’s the ecosystem. As Chicago’s Futures Committee recognized, neighborhoods cannot be healthy as “sandboxes” treated in isolation from the cities and regions around them. Neighborhoods compete with each other for attention, funding, and other investments within city-regions. Large-scale regional change drives neighborhood-level change in a much more fundamental way than most small-scale community development activity, determining where people invest, what workers earn, and more—in part because the region is tied to much bigger systems of, course: national policy and the global economy. The relationships between agents based in the neighborhood and agents elsewhere helps define what both can do and want to do. Getting a job is something most people in America do through their networks, so smart community development strategies tend to figure out what networks people are already in and how to complement the strengths of those networks. A person with strong social support



but lousy information about job openings or skill requirements (beyond the neighborhood) needs one kind of help. Someone with the information and skills but not childcare near at hand (the support) needs another kind. And networks, local and nonlocal, figure into both types of need. Beyond the individual, map out the key market and political forces and institutions that shape important resource flows to and from the neighborhood, and try to identify specific relationships, such as ties to public officials or trade links with regional businesses, that stand out as especially important.

- *Use planning to challenge people’s mental models and help them learn what change really requires.* Systems thinking won’t always make the smartest decision about tomorrow’s event crystal clear. But it’s a major tool for disabusing people—who need to be effective together and need clear understanding to achieve that—of the linear model of planned change. As part of that learning, get a handle on feedback loops, and then act with them in mind. Today, “decision support” technologies give us an array of options for understanding problems and solutions that go beyond the narrow, linear model. For example, *Community Viz* software helps professional planners but also “citizen planners” understand the range of spillover effects that patterns of urban development are likely to have—and does so in helpful pictures and accessible terms. But other feedback loops can be constructed more intentionally, as Michael Woolcock explained in the context of the KDP community-driven development project in Indonesia: Project decisions must be posted for all in the village to see, community networks transmit information based on a public process and not just hearsay, and trained journalists cover uses of the villages’ development money. So when one local official used money to line his pocket rather than fund community infrastructure, says Woolcock, feedback loops made that a scandal rather than “business as usual.”

Final thoughts

As part social movement and part industry, community development will continue to face dilemmas about core goals and values. But being more explicit about the range of values that motivate the work, and recognizing values and value conflicts for what they are, is a key place to start. Building in mechanisms for resolving conflicts is also important. Without these, deep and often unstated conflicts erode trust and commitment. Being able to move the community conversation from *values*, which are broad and wonderful, to *practices*, which are tangible, learnable, and imperfect—but often improve-able—is vital, too. Finally, whatever it may mean in a given place and time, community development strives for change. Systems thinking, though still rarely applied in any systematic way in the field, offers a framework to challenge and sharpen our mental models of change—how it really happens and where it leads. Sometimes, the biggest changes begin with looking at things in new ways.□



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Further reading and other resources

Note: * Indicates: Available free online.

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