



Working Smarter in Community Development
Knowledge-in-Action Brief 07-3

Networks, Power, and a Dual Agenda: New Lessons and Strategies for Old Community Building Dilemmas

by Xavier de Souza Briggs

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Ideas in brief

A long-standing aim of community development is to “build community” in the form of trusting bonds, shared commitment, and collective capability. This aim came back to the fore in the 1990s, following a period in which some neighborhood-focused organizations (and most government agencies) were channeled into narrower business development, housing development, or social service delivery roles. But for many, building community is a fuzzy and elastic idea, sometimes emphasizing *making political claims* (through empowerment) and sometimes *changing social conditions directly* (through implementation-savvy partnerships). “Organizing” can contribute powerfully to both, but the fuzziness complicates efforts to mobilize and sustain support. And this has led to a mix of success and failure, of frustration and learning, in the latest wave of community building initiatives. What’s more, political competition, scarce resources, residential turnover, cultural diversity, and other factors may act as serious challenges to community building at the neighborhood level. And not all cohesion serves the public interest: tightly knit communities can be exclusionary and parochial, walling off their “turf.” So locally-based institutions and their partners face important choices about which specific community building aims to pursue, which strategies to apply in their local context, how to track progress, and how to guard against the pitfalls. Based on a workshop that gathered leading practitioners, researchers, and others, and drawing on innovative studies and other resources, this brief brings together cutting-edge practice and theory to examine key choices, trade-offs, and practical strategies for doing better.

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Networks, Power, and a Dual Agenda:
New Lessons and Strategies for Old Community Building Dilemmas

Page 1 | 39

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Ideas in practice

Here are four rules of thumb for building community as part of an agenda of change:

1. ***Foster “neighborly” ties, as well as bridges to external players and institutions and their resources.*** Though the 1990s brought a renewed interest in the relational aspect of local initiatives, for example in building “social capital” among neighbors, the relationships that matter most for keeping a neighborhood safe and healthy over time are much more varied—and need to be more durable—than many one-on-one interpersonal ties can be. Yes, some important relationships are “horizontal,” connecting neighbors to one another, but some are “vertical,” connecting residents to service providers and associations (including faith institutions), and some specifically act as *bridges*—from those who are isolated, through key people or institutions, to resources in the wider world. There’s more and more evidence that building inclusive institutions with clear benefits for those engaged, not interpersonal relationship building in isolation from institutions (“trust as magic dust”), is the key. The brief looks at examples from rural as well as urban communities.
2. ***The dual agenda—making political “claims” through empowerment and producing tangible outcomes through partnerships—should be clearly spelled out and addressed in realistic strategies.*** The first part of the agenda is about building influence or power to move plans forward and win resources, and it typically includes a blend of cooperation and conflict strategies. For example, groups must develop a coherent agenda among diverse neighborhood interests and advocate and negotiate outside the neighborhood, too. But the second part of the dual agenda looks for workable action plans to get better tangible outcomes—healthier children, safer streets, better employment, etc.—through collective action, close to “the ground.” This work often demands the clout to win outside resources and get outside institutions to be responsive partners. But it is much more than an influence game—a question of who has the power or who’s in control. Some of the most savvy and innovative efforts to change tangible social and economic outcomes engage those who would merely be *clients*, in a service delivery approach, as agents or *co-producers* of change. The roles, rhetoric, and forms of accountability are somewhat different for these two agendas, and a failure to recognize and address these differences can lead to unproductive conflict and disappointing results: Nuts-and-bolts implementation problems get distorted and misinterpreted as power-and-control issues, or conversely, a failure to appropriately empower others in the decisionmaking process is dismissed as merely a problem of mismanagement or missing “capacity.”

Networks, Power, and a Dual Agenda:
New Lessons and Strategies for Old Community Building Dilemmas

Page 2 | 39

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3. **Community building strategies should respond to important features of the local context, not just generic principles about being inclusive or building productive relationships.** For instance, it matters how neighborhood institutions relate to local government in a particular place (which varies enormously across the country), how financial resources are allocated by local public and private funders, how dispersed or concentrated political influence is in a city or region, how particular organizations have evolved to incorporate political action (or not) in their approach to “development,” what big ideas will resonate—given an area’s history and social make-up—if community-based institutions lead campaigns for change, and how the local region is changing in economic and demographic dimensions: Is it declining, restructuring, rapidly expanding, or a mix of these trends? Because meaningful change requires leverage that “multiplies” the force of your strategy, a savvy scan of the local context is vital as an input. Relationships are time consuming to build and sustain, some are more important than others for accomplishing particular objectives, and strategies grounded in a realistic assessment of organized interests and patterns of influence are more likely to pay off. Beyond generic trend spotting, a variety of tools for mapping the local civic structure are available—but not yet widely or systematically used to build better civic strategies in community development.
4. **Track progress at several levels, from the “bottom” up.** This follows from the point that a variety of bonds matter for a variety of purposes. For example, indicators of interpersonal trust and a willingness to act in common cause show powerful results at the micro-level of blocks and streetcorners, where cohesion among neighbors—a sign of what researchers call “collective efficacy”—can be key, for example, to improving community safety. But higher up, other measures are more telling, such as indicators of: active resident engagement in neighborhood institutions (how diverse, how extensive, how sustained?), specific uses of those institutions to promote survival or mobility (e.g., getting a ride to the hospital at a critical moment or getting job referrals through a local basketball league), and ties between those near-at-hand institutions and the sources of influence and resources that lie beyond the neighborhood (e.g., open lines of communication with a well-positioned local banker or real estate developer).



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by Xavier de Souza Briggs

The Community Building “Turn”

Many observers have noted the long community building traditions that undergird local revitalization or “development” efforts in America (as well as other parts of the globe). From the richness of Native American cultures to the utopian communities pursued by religious reformers or other European settlers, from social clubs and mutual aid societies organized by successive waves of immigrants to the self-help organizations created by descendants of African slaves, every major group and region of the country has roots that go deep.

Yet over the latter half of the twentieth century, many “community-based” organizations were channeled into narrower service delivery roles, often by obtaining public funding to do what government once did directly. *Building community*—shaping relationships and commitment to enable useful collective action—came back to the fore in the 1990s. One reason is the surge of interest in “social capital,” a concept popularized and promoted by the renowned scholar Robert Putnam in a body of work that culminated with the best-selling book *Bowling Alone* (2000). The term social capital has been independently discovered and rediscovered several times since at least the 1920s, Putnam finds. It refers to the usefulness in social connections, such as networks, norms, and trust. As such, social capital is the latest incarnation of America’s fascination with the power of community, and *Bowling Alone*, by carefully tracing a long-run *decline* in multiple measures of community engagement in America, stirred widespread interest in how to rebuild community.

Over the past decade, the discussions were everywhere—from board rooms to classrooms to legislatures—about social capital’s forms and consequences and, less often, about its pitfalls and limitations. At one extreme, some romanticized social capital as communitarian supportiveness for a cynical age. Others reminded us how social capital is linked to power and, sometimes, to exclusion. Putnam organized a workgroup—the Saguaro Seminar—to discuss changes sweeping the society and recommend practical ways to create more constructive social capital. The resulting *Better Together* (2001) report emphasized the workplace and faith institutions as critical domains and also highlighted the importance of building civic habits in the next generation. But whatever the emphasis, social capital is an idea whose time came, whose fame and potential swept the globe—The World Bank declared it a key to economic



growth and poverty reduction worldwide, for example—and whose implications confronted us, once again, with all that is crucial and difficult about building community.

But beyond that celebrated and much-debated concept, a critical mass of public and private funders, activists, and others had, by the early 1990s, become frustrated with the limits of traditional service delivery by insular bureaucracies: Clients are often relegated to passive roles and labeled as needy and broken (in need of fixing), and “community” becomes little more than a feel-good term for technocratic “experts” who lead top-down planning. That approach fails to tap local knowledge or ingenuity. It also fails often to respect local priorities.

In the early 1990s, Jody Kretzmann and John McKnight struck a chord with their call for a concerted return to “building community assets,” a century-old tradition in local organizing, rather than focusing perpetually on pathology, deficit, or need in disadvantaged places. Kretzmann and McKnight then outlined a method for “Mapping Community Capacity” (1996).

Around the same time, in *Streets of Hope* (1994), Peter Medoff and Holly Sklar chronicled the evolution of the widely discussed Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative in inner-city Boston, which had produced a vibrant community plan and won the right of eminent domain to ensure community control of the neighborhood’s many abandoned and vacant lots—the first community group in America to do so.

The 1992 Los Angeles riots, fueled by anger and mistrust of public institutions, triggered a renewed interest in building durable relationships and institutions to strengthen urban communities.

Focal events also played a part. Most importantly, the 1992 Los Angeles riots, fueled by anger and mistrust of public institutions, triggered a renewed interest in building durable relationships and institutions to strengthen urban communities. The federal Empowerment Zone program was one national outgrowth of that interest. Community planning came back into mainstream view, and so did community organizing, with renewed debates about the approaches and accomplishments of the leading U.S. networks for leadership training and organizing, including the Industrial Areas Foundation, ACORN, the Gamaliel Foundation, the PICO Network, and others.

Veteran organizers who were active in community development, such as Bill Traynor, sounded notes of “hope and caution” about the emerging paradigm of community building, emphasizing not only its potential but the challenges it posed to established institutions and



their habits and roles—a loss of control most of all (see “Community Building: Hope and Caution,” *Shelterforce*, 1996).

From former President Jimmy Carter’s Atlanta Project to the Comprehensive Community Revitalization Program in the South Bronx and beyond, a new wave of “comprehensive community initiatives” (CCIs), spearheaded by philanthropic foundations and community-based organizations but typically engaging government as well, took shape. Conference calls and ad hoc exchanges led to the creation of the National Community Building Network to share strategies through peer learning, equip the next generation of change agents, and advocate for the new wave.

Widely read reports offered healthy amounts of both hope and caution, as Traynor put it, as well as a shared vocabulary for the evolving movement. The Chapin Hall Center for Children launched a series of reports and evaluations focused on the CCIs. Veteran activists and social policy observers Jim Gibson, Tom Kingsley, and Joe McNeely chronicled a maturing, if still very broad approach, in their aptly titled, *Community Building: Coming of Age* (1997), as did journalist Joan Walsh in *Stories of Renewal: Community Building in America* (1997). Both included cases of nonprofit organizations and entrepreneurial local governments experimenting with new forms of engagement and capacity building in disadvantaged neighborhoods.

Elizabeth Mueller, Mercer Sullivan, and I wrote *From Neighborhood to Community* (1997), which examined in depth the efforts of three respected community development corporations—in three very different settings—to strengthen their neighborhoods “beyond bricks and mortar.” That “social effects” project was the brainchild of Mitchell Sviridoff, a pioneer in the community development field, since the late 1950s, who believed that building the community fabric and changing social conditions had to go hand in hand.

The Aspen Institute launched a national roundtable on CCIs to get front-line practitioners together with funders and researchers. The roundtable produced *Voices from the Field I and II* (1999, 2002), which highlighted challenges of practice in the new wave of efforts, and *New Approaches to Evaluating Community Initiatives, volumes 1 and 2* (1998, 2002), which outlined promising strategies for capturing their results.

A few years later, Robert Chaskin and colleagues wrote *Building Community Capacity* (2001), synthesizing many of the program innovations and conceptual developments of the prior decade and advancing a framework for understanding neighborhood-level capacity and also for building it more wisely.

Next, the huge and ambitious *Encyclopedia of Community* (2003) included, among its thousands of entries, an entry on community building. At about the same time, on the global scene, the World Bank created sourcebooks on “community-driven development,” capturing the experiences of civil society organizations and governments in developing countries worldwide.



More recent Aspen reports have focused on the role of race and racism in community building. And long-time practitioner-observers, such as Bill Traynor, have returned to the debate to document new twists on old strategies—such as organizing networks of committed members—and their implications for local and national practice (see Traynor and Andors, “Network Organizing,” 2005).

By the early 2000s, any web search of “community capacity” or “community building” turned up scores of evaluations and program design frameworks tied to these concepts. Unfortunately, many of those publications failed to go beyond a set of now-familiar, fairly general mantras: engage stakeholders early, be prepared for conflict over priorities and approaches, partnerships take time, and so on.

Mixed record, mixed reaction

Many saw, in the community building movement, a chance to renew the case that capable communities with real influence over resources are much more likely to be healthy and productive than are communities that are mere targets for decisions made and capacity developed elsewhere. Many in this movement believed, moreover, that any meaningful definition of citizenship and democracy requires that capability and influence.

The new wave led to a mix of success and failure, learning and frustration, in part because the local projects were often conflict ridden, whether because of divisions internal to participating communities, a clash of expectations with funders and regulators, or both.

But the proverbial honeymoon for community building, if there was one, would prove short-lived, at least in the U.S. The new wave led to a mix of success and failure, learning and frustration, in part because the local projects were often conflict ridden, whether because of divisions internal to participating communities, a clash of expectations with funders and regulators, or both. Progress was always hard won, usually partial, and typically very gradual. And given all the investments of time, money, and reputation, the failures were often hard to acknowledge—and even harder to discuss openly. All of these factors inhibited learning that might strengthen the field of community development.

As America entered the new decade and century, public and private funders, in particular, acknowledged the difficulties of making community building a set of effective practices and not just a litany of inclusion principles. Activist organizations and service



providers, meanwhile, wondered if community building had been another “flavor of the month” to be discarded by funders once quick results proved hard to come by.

Building community is a very elastic idea, and this invariably complicates efforts to mobilize support and foster durable cooperation, if only because it can be difficult to arrive at shared priorities and then stick with them. What’s more, as report after report has acknowledged, political competition, scarce resources, residential turnover, cultural diversity, and other factors often act as serious challenges at the neighborhood level and beyond. Finally, not all cohesion serves the public interest: tightly knit communities can be exclusionary and parochial, walling off their “turf” rather than connecting members to opportunities in, or responsibility for, the wider society and the challenges it faces. So community building poses important questions about values, and this can lead to overt conflict or simply withdrawal—“voting with your feet” by disengaging.

For these reasons and more, locally-based institutions and their partners face important choices about which specific community building aims to pursue, which strategies to apply in their local context, how to track progress, and how to guard against the pitfalls.

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Preview and background

The success of community building efforts hinges on practices that can gain broad legitimacy and establish a track record. Toward that end, this brief tackles the what, how, and so what of community building, examining old dilemmas in the context of new and emerging lessons from practice and research. Because there is already a large literature “naming and framing” the hopes and puzzles of community building and describing case-specific experiences in depth, my focus here is on a few universal dilemmas about which we have important new evidence—evidence that might otherwise take years to diffuse widely and mature into savvy, responsible, reflective practice.

Part of a series on working *smarter*, not just harder, in community development, the aim of this brief, then, is to bridge theory and practice in ways that diffuse innovative ideas along with the caveats and so what’s that are essential to putting those ideas into practice. Working Smarter is the community development companion to an earlier series of tools with a more global focus on civic strategies—The Community Problem Solving Project @ MIT



(www.community-problem-solving.net)— including strategies for effective negotiation, organizing, partnering, participatory planning, and other tasks discussed in this brief.

This brief is based mainly on a day-long gathering held, in January 2005, at Harvard University, where veteran community developers and organizers, evaluators and other researchers, educators and trainers, and funders and technical assistance experts, some with extensive international experience, gathered to discuss the politics and social relationships that define community life, specifically as focal points for community development. We discussed a range of local experiences, including the ambitious, multi-year New Communities Program (NCP) coordinated by the Local Initiative Support Corporation’s Chicago office (LISC-Chicago) and backed by the MacArthur Foundation, which also sponsored this project.

Two earlier workshops focused on (a) values and success definitions that should guide community development and (b) strategies for tracking neighborhood change and determining the contributions of community development work to that change. So the January ‘05 workshop focused on three complementary topics: functions of community bonds and strategies for fostering positive bonds in the context of changes in American society; community-based organizations and their strategies for influence in larger networks that broker resources and political support; and changing patterns of local politics and influence in America.

At the workshop, different participants had different insights and priorities, which was the main reason to gather such a diverse group of thinkers, doers, and “straddlers.” Front-line practitioners, for example, emphasized immediate local interests and tough choices about how to deploy scarce resources, early lessons from experimentation in “real time” rather than formally documented evaluations, as well as the need to build confidence on the ground—a “fuel” for collective action, which hinges, in large part, on what people *believe* is possible. Researchers, policy analysts, and funders offered a blend of hope and skepticism, cautioning against naïve assumptions about creating stable, cohesive communities in the face of rapidly growing diversity, significant residential mobility, varied forms of conflict and competition, and other challenges. But we all shared the twin conviction that *building community is important for very specific reasons* and that *it can be done better if we get more strategic about learning as well as doing*—about making new mistakes, so to speak, rather than the same old ones, from place to place. This brief highlights points of consensus as well as divergent views and unanswered questions posed by a number of participants (see full list of workshop participants at the rear of this brief, along with key readings and other resources for learning). The brief is organized around the action-oriented “Ideas in Practice” outlined above—my conclusions, based on the discussion and the evidence so far.



1. Foster “neighborly” ties, as well as bridges to external players and institutions and their resources.

Though the 1990s brought a renewed interest in the “relational” aspect of local initiatives, for example in building social capital among neighbors in urban neighborhood or rural village, the relationships that matter most for keeping a neighborhood safe and healthy over time are much more varied—and need to be more durable—than many one-on-one interpersonal ties *can* be. Yes, some important relationships are “horizontal,” connecting neighbors to one another, but some are “vertical,” connecting residents to service providers and associations (including faith institutions), and some specifically act as *bridges*—from those who are otherwise isolated, *through* key people or institutions, *to* resources in the wider world. Ross Gitell and Avis Vidal explored this idea in their study of an ambitious demonstration program to “seed” community development corporations (CDCs) and support networks in cities that had never had them (see *Community Organizing: Social Capital as a Development Strategy*, 1998; and Xavier de Souza Briggs, “Social Capital and the Cities,” 1997).

Yes, some important relationships are “horizontal,” connecting neighbors to one another, but some are “vertical,” connecting residents to service providers and associations (including faith institutions), and some specifically act as bridges—from those who are isolated, through key people or institutions, to resources in the wider world.

In general, there’s more and more evidence that building inclusive institutions with clear benefits for those who engage—such that people will invest scarce time, energy, and confidence *over time*—rather than interpersonal relationship building in isolation from institutions—“looking for trust as magic dust” or simply “breaking the ice” among strangers—is the key.

In some ways, the context for these lessons is simple: Over the past century and a half, America, and much of the industrialized world, moved from an agrarian way of life founded on relatively stable and insular local communities (small towns) to an inter-connected global web of cities founded on industrial jobs and later services. The best evidence is that the “communities lost” were not the heavens on earth that conventional wisdom would have them be: we romanticize the past and so gloss over its many problems and limitations. But be that as it may, we now pursue hopes and dreams—and livelihoods, of course—in the context of a social world where more of our relationships are “single-stranded” rather than multi-stranded—meaning that your neighbor *was* also your child’s teacher and your fellow parishioner in a local church in



small towns, but no longer—where physical and social mobility make relationships more fluid than before, and where new technologies allow people to maintain key relationships across significant physical distances, meaning the most local ties are not the main ones available (and not necessarily the most desired). Across the country and the globe, many forms of “community” became “liberated” from a place base, as Barry Wellman puts it, in that the important ties were now defined by a “personal community” or social network rather than strong primary ties to one’s immediate neighbors. This tends to be less true for the poor and working class than for the middle class and wealthy, but it has affected a very broad swath of society.

In “What Community Supplies” (1999), Robert Sampson looks at myths and realities about the past and, more importantly for my aims here, he considers what community functions to *provide* in today’s world, especially in urban neighborhoods, given these sweeping structural changes in our lives and the character of our relationships. Though cohesive community is often an aim in community development, for example, strong bonds of trust and active exchanges among neighbors are relatively rare or scattered, and apparently hard to build, except where communities are *homogeneous*—in terms of race/ethnicity, life stage, and social class—and also *stable* (meaning turnover is limited).

We can all think of exceptions, even in urban areas. Some are places that are exceptionally stable over time, often with deep native roots, such as the roots in black New Orleans that Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath brought to national attention. Some are immigrant ethnic enclaves, where shared culture, language, and the challenges of being a newcomer act as “social glue,” connecting people’s daily lives and even their economic fortunes. Some are neighborhoods where stable, well-run organizations seem able to build bonds that benefit everyone involved and become a point of local pride. And again, low-income people tend to have more “localized” ties, in part because they are more likely than higher income people to live near to, and depend on, their relatives and close friends.

But in an in-depth study of Chicago neighborhoods, Sampson and collaborators found socially cohesive places to be comparatively rare, in that major American city, especially in the many neighborhoods that were ethnically diverse, composed of large numbers of renters, and mixed in income. Where the team did find strong indicators of “community”—where survey respondents reported trusting their neighbors and the expectation that neighbors would act with them to solve a problem—Sampson and colleagues outlined a specific form of social capital to describe the pattern: “collective efficacy.” By this, they meant that bonds of familiarity, trust, and the confidence that others will join forces with you (if the situation requires) create a *resource* for acting collectively and effectively to get something done. This is more than “we feeling” or psychological “sense of community,” which has also been measured carefully for many years. The researchers argued that collective efficacy is important for managing shared life in a shared place: It can help keep children on track to succeed, keep the streets safer, and more.



In a follow-on study, Sampson and colleagues show that the number of community-based public events in Chicago, from protests to festivals, fundraisers, and other events as well, have recovered quite a bit, in number, over the past few decades. Moreover, the volume of these events correlates highly with the presence of nonprofit associations and service providers in particular places—providing direct evidence that a “durable civic life” may rest, at least in some measures, on active institutions rooted in a city’s neighborhoods.

But if collective efficacy is *one* important thing that community can “supply,” even—and perhaps especially—in a world of far-flung networks and much moving about, can community development create collective efficacy consistently and sustainably by strengthening institutions and the bonds they enable? Can community development actually “supply” this and other forms of community or at least enable them to emerge and endure? And if so, how?

Sometimes, we think about the aim of local practice in terms of *creating* new relationships, sometimes we specifically emphasize steps to help those relationships *endure*, and at other times, the issue is *changing* pre-existing relationships so that their function and value changes.

It would be wonderful if the careful research that reveals important and promising social patterns also clarified how to produce more of the “good thing” in question. But much of the best-available research does not do that, and too much creative practice is either unexamined or not yet shared in a form that enables self-critical peer learning, i.e., beyond self-promoting boosterism and beyond the you-can-do-it-too advice that may inspire more than it instructs.

Neighborly ties and more

Let’s briefly consider what’s desirable and possible in two dimensions: so-called *horizontal* ties among neighbors and *vertical* ties that connect community residents or other community members to institutions and wider resources. Here, I’ll draw very directly on the ideas shared by our workshop participants, whose cases qualify and extend the findings by Sampson and other researchers.

Sometimes, we think about the aim of local practice as *creating* new relationships, sometimes we specifically emphasize steps to help those relationships *endure*, and at other times, the issue is *changing* pre-existing relationships so that their function and value changes. To some, this may sound like social engineering, but a more generous way to think about it is this: Creative social action is always goal oriented, and we spend much of our lives influencing



how other people think about their obligations and also being influenced by others. Every close look at social change, from an individual organization to a nation or community of nations, reveals some important role for leaders, organizers, or catalysts—agents who are purposeful about change even if they have limited control over the form it takes.

At our workshop, Prue Brown offered the examples of a rural CDC targeting small towns in South and North Carolina, as well as that of an urban settlement house in the Bronx, New York.

In the first case, the CDC aimed to generate a new regional economic development strategy where small towns had competed for, and mostly failed to bring in, new resources. Most of the bonds of community resided in local churches, but churchgoers—this was a small town, remember, and not a big city—also connected to each other through chambers of commerce, local government, and other institutions. So the CDC invested more than 18 months, within and across small towns and their churches, to understand and begin to change the way existing relationships, both horizontal and vertical, functioned. All this before a productive regionwide meeting could be convened and well before the CDC itself could act as a bridge (a new connection) between groups that were isolated from one another.

The North Carolina case illustrates the importance of pre-existing community structures and of building new relationships with the structures in mind rather than pursuing a fast-paced marketing approach as a form of “community outreach.”

That case illustrates the importance of pre-existing community structures (which reinforced isolation initially) and of building new relationships with the structures in mind rather than pursuing a fast-paced marketing approach to development that might simply sell the importance of economic strategy—as a form of “community outreach.”

In the Bronx, a century-old settlement house, founded to be the “extended living room” for immigrant families in the neighborhood, found that it had become little more than a social service provider. That is, the settlement house had moved away from an earlier history of community building that included strategies for political advocacy—of going from “case to cause,” that is from individual needs to policies that addressed child labor, healthy building codes, and much more.

Yet in re-focusing on horizontal bonds among neighborhood residents, with the idea that civic action could build on that foundation, the settlement house confronted a high level of



ethnic conflict between African American and Latino residents. Community building succeeded only by carefully constructing something both groups valued—safe recreation for children—in the form of a new sports league. Organizers based at the settlement house were careful to “cross-cut” the ethnic groups, that is, to ensure that no team was all Latino or all African American. The settlement house worked, in a focused way, to nurture bonds among parents, built up through the league and also through neighborhood festivals and other events.

Hold on. These results in the Bronx are consistent with mountains of research about how relationships form, perform, and erode over the course of our lives: Most are formed where *institutions* focus our attention on particular people and organize our interactions with them, enabling us to discover common interests or tastes, develop trust over time, and perhaps even deepen a sense that our fortunes are interdependent (i.e., that we *must* rely on each other). The active relationships in our lives are sometimes, but only rarely, developed through random encounters. Mostly, they are born through the organized arenas of our lives: schools, workplaces, faith and civic associations, clubs, and so on. When neighborhoods function to generate ties, it is often through these or other institutions, not through the simple fact of living in close quarters to one another.

The Bronx settlement house case illustrates the importance of responding to people’s identities and motivations and also of scaling from something small and immediate to something larger and more policy-oriented—two tried-and-true lessons of community organizing practice.

Back to the Bronx: When it came time to act collectively to address a threatened closure of the neighborhood school, settlement house organizers mobilized people *around* the relationships built up through the recreation program (league) that was valued by a broad constituency of parents in the area. Mobilization, in turn, tapped the horizontal ties (among parents) and vertical ties, between parents and the settlement house and between the house and the local school board.

The Bronx settlement house case illustrates the importance of responding to people’s identities and motivations and also of scaling from something small and immediate to something larger and more policy-oriented—two tried-and-true lessons of community organizing practice. But the case also illustrates the importance of forging a new institution so as to cut across an ethnic boundary and not reinforce it, however unintentionally, as a divide. And the case debunks the notion that small-scale efforts to “turn strangers into neighbors” will



automatically flower into something more. The issue is not just “scaling” but sequencing—namely of steps to build familiarity and trust by pursuing common goals (if small stakes) with later steps to mobilize people in common political cause (i.e., longer-run goals with larger stakes).

Likewise, noted Robert Chaskin at our workshop, foundation-initiated efforts to promote comprehensive community initiatives in the 1990s generated a range of relationship-building strategies, from creating new nonprofits to act as source of institutional capacity and longevity to interpersonal networking around organizing campaigns, such as for local school reform. In the most successful instances, as Chaskin and co-authors write in *Building Community Capacity* (2001), there were clear and legitimate roles for professionals, who had an easier time building relationships outside the neighborhoods than some residents did. And there were key roles for neighborhood residents, who felt their voices were being heard and who were gaining civic skills—or what some call “public life skills” to enable them to participate.

“Network organizing has to offer multiple opportunities and many levels of involvement.” – Traynor and Andors

Based on innovative community development work in Lawrence, Massachusetts, Bill Traynor and Jessica Andors have underscored the importance of stimulating and channeling resident *demand* for social participation via flexible networks as agents of change:

At present, the supply side of this marketplace – the community-based organizations, intermediaries, service agencies, etc. – is defining the problems and shaping the solutions. This, combined with anemic resident engagement, produces an environment where there is little relation between what people demand and what they are supplied ... We invest in the community’s capacity to produce demand, by providing abundant opportunities for people to come together, articulate and act on those things that are important to them ... Community development corporations, instead of being an end in themselves, must become part of a network – not just suppliers, but catalysts of the demand environment ... [Network organizing] has to offer multiple opportunities and many levels of involvement.

Reflecting a long-standing insight of network theory, the Lawrence approach engages board members, residents, staff, allies, and others as active agents of connection to the network (“weavers”) and offers multiple points of entry to the network.

The interplay of personal networks and formal institutions can serve multiple functions. In their book *Workforce Development Networks* (1998), Bennett Harrison and Marcus Weiss



examine other types of networks and the power of community-based organizations (CBOs) to act as economic bridges, not just political ones. Noting that most local labor markets in America lack strong mechanisms to “match” disadvantaged job seekers with employers, and that too many placement programs fail to understand employers’ needs carefully, Harrison and Weiss offer encouraging examples of CBOs acting in a variety of regionwide structures that link neighborhoods to community colleges, regional employer consortia, training organizations, and other key players.

What are the lessons of this case for community building? Horizontal ties through which people may draw in their friends, relatives, or neighbors matter—and CBOs are crucial to cultivating those ties *around the specific aim of getting people connected to work*. In fact, these support and referral networks, some of them neighborhood-based, turn up again and again in studies of how people find jobs. But the job impacts would not be possible without the vertical ties as well: Residents are tied to CBOs (the local anchors or nodes in the wider network), which are tied to employers and other key players in the regional labor market. The network does not depend centrally on neighbors—on any given street, say—knowing and trusting each other to intervene if there’s a problem. That is, the workforce networks do *not* hinge on the micro-level, neighborly collective efficacy outlined above. Those more dispersed networks have a different structure and represent a different form of useful “community” or social capital.

The workforce development network does not depend centrally on neighbors—on any given street, say—knowing and trusting each other to intervene if there’s a problem. That is, the workforce networks do *not* hinge on the micro-level, neighborly collective efficacy outlined above.

Doing better—some choices and guidance

These and other cases suggest some crucial lessons about how to build community more effectively (and preview ideas outlined later in this brief on how to track progress):

First, horizontal ties, for example among neighbors or among neighborhood-based institutions, have important but limited functions—and not just in the most disadvantaged communities. It’s important to keep the potential and the limits in perspective. Where the needed action and resources are near at hand, trust and the expectation that one’s immediate neighbors (or fellow institutions in the neighborhood) will cooperate can go a long way. Neighbors’ own resources, or self help, may well be able to clean up a lot or get particular young people back on track, for example. But keeping the lot free of dumping may call for better code



enforcement, and going from “case to cause” in the youth example may likewise call for mobilization aimed at local government or other formal institutions. Neighbors, especially if they are straining to keep themselves afloat, can only do so much. Likewise, neighborhood self help generally has a limited impact on how the local labor market functions or dysfunctions. Where outcomes depend on resources beyond those small, micro-level social circles—such as in the examples of bridging small towns in the rural Carolinas or building regional workforce networks with neighborhood “anchors”—horizontal ties are clearly not enough. What’s more, one way to bring people into those ties may be to work hard at the vertical ties that channel the resources people are seeking, as Ross Gittel and Avis Vidal detail in *Community Organizing* (1998).

It’s useful to distinguish strategies for *building new relationships*, which often hinge on revitalizing existing institutions (to make them attractive “magnets”) or creating new ones as a hub around which social ties can form, from *mobilizing or shifting pre-existing relationships*. The latter must not only frame a persuasive reason for people to invest time, energy, and confidence in each other or in a new institution but must offer an acceptable way of *integrating* new commitments into prior ones. The prior ones, which include a story about identity, history, and values, may get rethought in the process.

Here’s a second and more subtle lesson of the cases: Because some people in a network are more influential than others, find and support the “movers and shakers.” In his best-selling book *The Tipping Point*, which draws on decades of research on how innovation spreads through social networks and social influence, journalist Malcolm Gladwell calls such people “mavens” and “connectors.” These are the people who move ideas and initiatives forward by influencing what others think and do. In *Plain Talk*, which reports on a community-focused initiative to prevent teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted disease, Karen Walker and Laurie Kotloff give a number of examples of how such people contribute to better outcomes. They *validate* ideas so that people will pay attention and learn, *transmit* them to those less likely to receive the ideas through conventional channels, and more.

See the strategy tools “Organizing Stakeholders, Building Movement, Setting the Agenda” and “Planning Together: How (and How Not) to Engage Stakeholders in Charting a Course” in our companion series at www.community-problem-solving.net



In almost any neighborhood or organization, some people seem to know everyone and to know how to navigate (socially) to reach others. Our workshop participants talked about neighborhood “busybodies” who “connected the dots,” transferring information and getting things done where formal institutions may have failed to do so. Lawrence’s “weavers” are recruited and encouraged to play this catalytic role. Finding these people can be a challenge in some places—especially where there is a history of mistrust and where the person doing the searching lacks legitimacy—but asking around and finding trusted “ambassadors” is often the place to start.

A third and final lesson, highlighted in community organizing classics since at least the 1940s, is even more “in the background” in the cases: Effective local institutions, not just clever strategies or projects, are crucial. As Mark Warren shows in *Dry Bones Rattling* (2001), in-depth analysis of the Industrial Areas Foundation’s work in Texas, effective and accountable community institutions are the platforms on which savvy strategies are built and sustained. And as he argues, this is too often forgotten in communitarian hopes for building community simply through intentional “networking” or other strategies. Put differently, *Dry Bones*, the *Better Together* report, and other valuable resources highlight another reason why interpersonal bonds are not enough: Because some of the most important and durable social capital is stored in institutions where people gather, learn, debate, struggle, and strategize together—and, in some cases, where they play and pray, too.

But this leads to another thought, since such institutions don’t exist in every place: Change agents, whether inside or outside of government, are often faced with one or more of the following three challenges: *Creating* effective community institutions where they do not yet exist; making existing institutions that have a vital focus much more *effective*; or *shifting the focus* of existing community institutions, which may not be welcomed by those who lead the institutions even if popular pressure—within the community—is calling for change.

None of these three is easy, but (a) being conscious of what’s required is the first essential—is it establishing, strengthening, shifting, or some combination?—and so are (b) having the skills to analyze and communicate stakeholder interests and values clearly and pragmatically (the ABCs of constituency building), plus (c) having the skills and courage needed to mediate conflicts and lead deliberation, i.e., where differences, mixed priorities, and gaps in information must be sorted out on the road to change.

2. The dual agenda—making political “claims” through empowerment and producing tangible outcomes through partnerships—should be clearly spelled out and addressed in realistic strategies.

The first part of the agenda is about building influence or power to move an “agenda” of issues or concerns and win the resources needed to advance that agenda. This typically includes



a blend of cooperation and conflict strategies. Here, community building is unavoidably *political* in the widest sense of the word politics—not limited, say, to elections or lobbying but encompassing a wide spectrum of civic action to address shared concerns.

For example, groups must develop a coherent agenda among diverse neighborhood interests—this “inside game” is often at least as hard as what comes next—and advocate and negotiate outside the neighborhood, too. Often, what’s called for is “shuttle diplomacy” in which agents of the neighborhood agenda interact with outside players, shuttling back and forth to align interests, find a “zone of agreement,” and come up with better proposals for action (see “We are All Negotiators Now,” at our community problem-solving companion website).

The tension between “democracy” and “bureaucracy” gets re-discovered, apparently around the world, with each generation of efforts to “empower” at the local level.

All of this can be difficult, especially if community members are wary about outsider agendas, professionals who lack legitimacy locally or are perceived to lack respect for local knowledge, or what seem to be narrow bureaucratic demands for “performance.” As Robert Chaskin puts it in an in-depth study of community planning processes, local initiatives may seem to pit “democracy” against “bureaucracy” and its formalistic demands.

This tension gets re-discovered, apparently around the world, with each generation of efforts to “empower” at the local level. Peter Marris and Martin Rein discussed it at length in *Dilemmas of Social Reform* (1973), for example, which examined America’s government-funded “community action” initiatives in the 1960s. And a mountain of research and commentaries on “participatory development” or “community-driven development” chronicle this tension in initiatives throughout the developing countries.

As Nicole Marwell noted at our workshop, community development organizations frequently confront the political element of local change in the form of tough choices about how to mobilize resources. Should they merely be *service providers* and try to sustain a resource base without building extensive ties outside the neighborhood? Should they focus on community building *within* the neighborhood to create a community of interest and a loyalty to some wider notion of community beyond the organization? Or, in cities where access to grants is highly politicized, should they develop a *loyalty to the organization* (by community constituents) and a *political support networks*, beyond the neighborhood? The latter may imply obligations to particular, well-placed “patrons” that channel resources to the neighborhood and to particular institutions in it. Some groups, such as the Industrial Areas Foundation, refuse to seek money



for service delivery because they seek to be autonomous as social movement advocates. Others look for alternatives or compromises, such as establishing an “arms-length” service and development organization to complement the work of an organizing-focused organization. The Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative in Boston chose this route, and so did the Northwest Bronx Community & Clergy Coalition. Both spun off affiliate CDCs rather than *become* CDCs.

Marwell stressed that this structural view of how community development organizations struggle to win support and channel it raises questions beyond the micro-level approach that focuses on resident engagement or collective efficacy on the corner, such as: How do disadvantaged neighborhoods *fare* in the institutional systems of the wider society? What *kinds* of access to power are these places able, or not able, to develop? And what *trade-offs* are organizations that represent these neighborhoods compelled to make that organizations based in richer communities may not face?

All community developers face basic resource needs, but the particulars of the local landscape shape how, and with what risks, organizations can meet those needs in order to serve their neighborhoods.

As I explore below, in a discussion of how local context matters, the choices available to community development organizations seems driven, in large part, by the local *community development system*, which is very much an outgrowth of local circumstances and how the strategies of many institutions interact or “co-evolve” over time.

The term “community development system” came into use thanks to the National Community Development Initiative, a partnership of private, philanthropic funders and the federal government launched in 1991. NCDI recognized that its effort to significantly enhance the physical outputs of local development activity—affordable housing production, in particular—could not simply target nonprofit housing developers one by one. The effort had to target a local system of activities and working relationships.

The community development system, as Langley Keyes and colleagues defined it in “Networks and Nonprofits” (1996), is a web of institutions that depend on each other for support, but it is also defined by the rules and incentives to which these institutions respond. All community developers face basic resource needs, but the particulars of the local landscape shape how, and with what risks, organizations can meet those needs in order to serve their neighborhoods. In the case of CDCs, it means developing multiple forms of organizational capacity, as Norman Glickman and Lisa Servon explain in “More than Bricks and Sticks” (1999).



Also at the workshop, David Greenberg outlined the varied strategies that CDCs have used, in a special initiative in Massachusetts, to re-incorporate community organizing as a core strategy.

Though some observers of the field, such as Randy Stoecker, have argued that community developers cannot be organizers because service providers are too dependent on grantmakers and can't "rock the boat" (stir up conflict), Greenberg notes that organizing can take many forms that stop short of major structural challenges to local political structures and funding arrangements. In his research, entitled "Ways of Contending" to emphasize the varied possibilities, Greenberg contrasts CDCs that framed organizing in terms of continuity with the past (and recruited important institutional allies on that basis) from other CDCs that emphasized growth or change, such as the opportunity to incorporate new immigrants into community life and write a new "story" of the neighborhood. He stressed that these choices are not only about the local political landscape but also the specific organizational history of the CDC and how it chooses to make organizing a part of its own evolution and story, as the community fabric—economic challenges, demographic make-up, political pressures, and more—shift around the organization.

This work, which is much more than an influence game, engages those who would merely be clients in a service delivery approach, as agents or *co-producers* of change.

Changing conditions directly: The other community building agenda

The tensions and trade-offs demanded by community building's *political influence and resource mobilization* agenda become clearer in light of community's building's second agenda, which seeks productive action to generate tangible outcomes—healthier children, safer streets, better employment, beautified surroundings, and more—through collective action, close to "the ground." This work, which is much more than an influence game, engages those who would merely be *clients*, in a service delivery approach, as agents or *co-producers* of change.

The power of this co-production is perhaps best recognized and addressed in the community health field, where co-production, as I explain next, is often an imperative. Nationwide, the *Healthy Communities* initiative is one outgrowth of this logic. But there are also long traditions in education, employment, and other domains that recognize this logic as well.

Consider a classic example in which a public health program aims to significantly increase child immunization rates in order to prevent disease and lower mortality in a particular



geographic area or within a defined social group. A little bit of investigation turns up important barriers, but these turn out to be opportunities as well. The locals—those who live in the area or are members of the target group—may fear health professionals or be unaware of the full set of risks that the disease entails. In some places, local residents may also favor their own, traditional remedies over vaccines sanctioned by the medical field. More basic still, locals may be pre-occupied with a variety of other urgent concerns, e.g., for meeting shelter, income, and other day-to-day needs. Many social problem-solving efforts face these or similar barriers. To address the barriers, health professionals seeking to use informal parent networks in the area (or group) to promote the aims of the program, or to recruit community insiders as “natural helpers” to validate the program’s objectives, may be described as building community *in order* to improve health outcomes.

The community building elements of the program anticipate specific, helpful links between community networks and influence patterns—links based on how information spreads, who listens to whom and why—and the cause-and-effect patterns on which improving health outcomes depends.

In this case, the specified actions are motivated by social problem-solving (health improvement) objectives and not only by the strengthening of networks or mobilizing of key community members (i.e., connection making or community building as an end in itself). In addition, the effort described requires collective action, drawing on the knowledge and skills of professionals as well as community members who may not be professionals (including the clients of immunization) to produce key results.

Third, the community building elements of the program anticipate specific, helpful *links* between community networks and influence patterns—links based on how information spreads, who listens to whom and why—and the sequence of steps, or cause-and-effect chain, on which improving health outcomes depends. Specifically, health professionals and their community member partners hope that informal community networks will help diffuse reliable information about both disease and immunization, that the visible support of community insiders will help reduce fears or doubts about the immunization efforts, and perhaps that those community networks will relay information—in a feedback loop—to support adjustments over time. In effect, these are hoped-for links between particular forms of social capital, including informal networks and patterns of trust, and the larger public interest that a program aims to promote.



Fourth and finally, the key players in designing and delivering this program may believe that the new or stronger forms of social connection that the effort creates may have a value beyond the health outcomes that serve as a primary motivation. That is, the effort may represent a broader investment in the community's capacity to act on its own behalf in the future.

Note that the problem-solving action outlined above might have originated outside of the formal health system—among concerned and activist parents or among informal community leaders perhaps, in civil society, at the “grassroots.” What is most important, though, is not where the efforts originated but the logic that they relied on—a logic of *co-production*—to produce results.

In a second case, the Manpower Demonstration Research Organization (MDRC), a national nonprofit that sets up and evaluates promising demonstration programs, launched Jobs-Plus, a place-based program to promote employment in public housing, in several cities (see reports online). MDRC designed and ran the program, with support from local public housing agencies funded by the federal government and also from welfare agencies and tenants. Jobs-Plus included state-of-the-art employment and training services available on site in the public housing developments (the most traditional component), plus rent incentives to encourage tenants to get and keep their jobs, and “community supports for work.” The third element was the least defined initially: The planners simply did not know what would be most effective. Finding a way to shift norms and expectations in relation to work? Creating a system of informal job referral networks? Or perhaps arrangements for child caregiving, within the housing developments, to free up parents to find and hold jobs?

MDRC carried out a careful implementation study as well as an outcomes analysis that tracked program beneficiaries even if they moved out of the targeted public housing developments. This dual effort generated convincing evidence that the program had a positive impact on earnings, most of all where the program elements were best implemented, and that the most helpful community supports were simple: (a) *Recruitment*: Residents were hired to act as paraprofessional “ambassadors” for the program within their public housing developments (*endorsing* the program, as in the public health example above, and *providing information* in ways that potential clients could absorb, so as to enhance standard program marketing and other recruitment mechanisms); (b) *Job referral*: When asked how they found out about specific job opportunities, residents confirmed that organized community events and institutions, such as a men's basketball league, generated referrals; and (c) *Overcoming barriers to work*: Residents organized, through a “community coach,” to bring safe and trustworthy childcare services on site, which was a boon for single parents on the job market, as well as high school equivalency training and even a campaign to promote filing for the Earned Income Tax Credit (a federal program that supplements earnings).



As Jim Riccio of MDRC noted at our workshop, well-delivered and formally institutionalized services were critical, but without leveraging bonds of trust and community referral, the Jobs-Plus program would not have been *utilized* as extensively as it was, nor would it have been as *effective* for those who did use it.

Reconciling the dual agenda

Thus far, I have outlined two community building agendas but not explored the potential conflicts between them. Problems arise when the roles, rhetoric, and forms of accountability are different for the two elements—*making political claims*, for example of public or private institutions with key resources, and *producing tangible outcomes*—and when a failure to recognize and address these differences can lead to unproductive conflict and disappointing results. Often, this happens in the context of partnerships, of one form or another, that drive local initiatives.

In principle, there's no deep chasm or standoff between the two agendas of community building. To the contrary, advancing each is crucial to the other: The ultimate aim of influence or voice is to change conditions, i.e., to promote tangible results. And one can hardly hope to productively engage communities as co-producers of change without treating their knowledge and voice as important.

On the forms, functions, success measures, conflicts, and pitfalls associated with partnerships, see “Perfect Fit or Shotgun Marriage: The Power and Pitfalls in Partnerships,” at our companion website: www.community-problem-solving.net

In principle, the same community capacity that mobilizes residents to demonstrate at City Hall on Monday night (acting as a watchdog or advocate vis-à-vis government) could function to help get kids vaccinated, or enroll their parents as part of an Earned Income Tax Credit campaign on Saturday afternoon (acting as a powerful extension to nonprofit or public sector capacity to change a social condition). Management gurus call this “dual use capacity,” and it's a vital resource for change.

But the devil, as they say, is in the details of *how* to reconcile the demands of two agendas that do not always and everywhere reinforce each other, that sometimes compete or come into conflict. For example, community constituents might resist coproduction as doing the work that someone else should do—or as a diversion from the “real work” of pressuring



authorities to change policy or the allocation of resources. Conversely, well-intended efforts to solve implementation problems might amount to “re-arranging the small stuff” where larger mobilization for change is also required. Or promising opportunities to shift planning and implementation tactics and get better results might be squandered if every discussion becomes a power analysis and every barrier to change is thought to be part of an influence game.

Having the capacity to *mediate conflict* can help. More and more tools and trainings are available to build skill in that important area, which has developed rapidly in recent decades and yet not been integrated into local community development very extensively—in spite of the clear need. The KDP development project in Indonesia—described as “the world’s largest community-driven development project,” it functions in thousands of villages where the ethnic and religious diversity is enormous—has successfully employed conflict resolution mechanisms, designated facilitators, and also cross-site learning from the start.

Map the bumps in the road ahead: Co-producing well is not about making things bureaucratic. But the formalism of management can drive out, or appear to drive out, the emotions of making a common commitment to other human beings, the vision of a better life to be created together, and the ethos of justice and shared responsibility. These things make community development a change-oriented *movement*, not just a performance-oriented *industry*.

It’s important for local partners to recognize that their struggles are not unique, nor are they signs of failure. It’s also crucial to be prepared for competition between the two core agendas and to find opportunities in this to have a focused conversation about how to define success and accountability among partners: What expectations are reasonable? What does each partner need to perform its special role effectively? Which barriers really are policy and influence barriers, and which are about implementation capacity and approach?

Here are some rules of thumb that include mediation of conflicts, learning from other communities, and other conscious strategies:

- *Acknowledge, loud and clear and from the outset, the importance of both agendas to local success.* Make explicit the fact that progress hinges on both legitimate and effective voice (or influence) and focused hard work on the tasks, with a good division of labor and strong coordination (the fundamentals of effective “production” anywhere).



- *Learn from prior experience (oral or written cases), have partners outline their specific expectations, and then negotiate these in the form of a compact.* Many problems arise from incomplete or vague expectations or from the failure to anticipate the need to revisit early agreements, amend them, resolve disputes fairly, and move forward. It may help if each partner thinks about the conditions under which it simply could not continue to be part of the partnership: What are the must-have's and what, if not *optimal*, would nevertheless be *acceptable*? Consensus building experts call it reaching “livable agreements” in that the stakeholders or their agents agree on what they can live with rather than expecting every party to get everything that it wants.
- *Map the bumps in the road ahead.* Be prepared. Explore the kinds of tensions that arise when one or the other agenda is ignored or when one seems to override the other entirely. Co-producing well is not about making things bureaucratic. But the formalism of management, with targets and indicators and controls, can all too easily drive out, or appear to drive out, the emotions of making a common commitment to other human beings, the vision of a better life to be created together, and the ethics of justice and shared responsibility. These are some of the things that make community development a change-oriented *movement*, not just a performance-oriented *industry*.

Too many local change agents place their faith, heroically, in good will alone or the capacity of diverse interests to find “common ground.”

- *Recognize entrenched conflict for what it is, and get help.* Too many local change agents place their faith, heroically, in good will alone or the capacity of diverse interests to find “common ground.” Conflicts over priorities, especially if aligned with community insider versus outsider status, or with divisions internal to a neighborhood, can operate in several levels simultaneously. Informal mediators, who may be influentials in the wider community even if they lack formal authority, bring legitimacy and trusted perspective that can help parties in dispute to recognize the stakes and find their way out of an impasse. Trained mediators, on the other hand, bring time-tested techniques for diagnosing conflict, generating space for dialogue, and managing a process to generate valuable and sustainable agreements—agreements that don't simply “paper over” conflict and risk destroying trust or future prospects for collaborating. As Christopher Moore notes in *The Mediation Process: Practical Strategies for Resolving Conflicts* (2003), mediators also bring tools for “diagnosing” conflicts, which come in various types and call for a range of approaches. And in *Breaking Robert's Rules* (2006), Lawrence Susskind and Jeffrey Cruikshank present a



proven approach to consensus building that can head off conflicts and build momentum for action.

3. Community building strategies should respond to important features of the local context, not just generic principles about being inclusive or building relationships.

For example, it matters how neighborhood institutions relate to local government in a particular place, which varies enormously across the country: from close and cronyistic or close-but-accountable to distant and disengaged; from mechanisms formalized as neighborhood planning offices in local government, say, to much more informal forums for consultation and bargaining.

In some places, political action—and squeaky-wheel “pressure politics,” in particular—is treated as the antithesis of getting “real” things done.

The specific ways in which financial resources are allocated by local public and private funders also vary widely across the country. For example, some cities have funders that welcome the chance to provide the risk capital for “upstart” community-based groups (the vanguard), while other funders support the established groups (the old guard). But other cities only recognize and reward the old guard, typically through grants or contracts for services or advocacy work. This is not a new-is-good-and-old-is-bad point, just an observation that who gets support varies not only by the individual funder’s appetite or mission but also by citywide and regional traditions.

Plus, it matters how dispersed or concentrated political influence is: In some cities or regions, a small cadre of civic influentials and/or a central political figure sets the agenda for big, long-range goals and initiatives. In other places, there are multiple influence blocs or leadership coalitions, including networks of neighborhood leaders whose support is crucial for certain kinds of citywide action. Finally, there are places where everyone seems well versed in the art of stopping things from happening, not building support to make things happen.

Another feature of local context relevant to community building strategy is whether and how particular organizations have evolved to incorporate political action in their approach to “development.” In some places, political action—and squeaky-wheel “pressure politics,” in particular—is treated as the antithesis of getting “real” things done. Put differently, being assertive and even adversarial is thought to have little to do with “developing.” In other settings, the political culture is suspicious of change agents that *don’t* pursue assertive political advocacy.



And of course an area's history and social make-up, including the presence of established versus newcomer ethnic groups, help determine what ideas will resonate if local institutions lead campaigns for change. So does the overall development trend for the region: Is it declining, restructuring, rapidly expanding, or a mix of these trends?

In short form, there are several key steps for adapting community building strategies and practices to local context:

Understand settlement patterns. The most basic issue—the “who” of community—is not always clear or well understood. Psychology teaches us that most people rely less on objective facts than perceptions, or what some call “mental models,” of a place and its people. That is, people have an unconscious stock of images and assumptions, and it may need updating, especially if a local area is undergoing important demographic shifts.

For example, I have had lead volunteers or staff of community-based organizations tell me, in one instance, that their neighborhood is stable and “highly participatory.” This is their mental model. Then come the facts: the neighborhood is undergoing significant residential turnover, replacing as much as half its population every five years, and it turns out that the *same* 100 people, out of a population of 5,000, say, come to all the community meetings. These data give planners and organizers a different way of thinking about community building: who it will reach, what the objectives should be, and more. Steadfast commitment by a small group of “frequent participators,” who may or may not be representative of the area's current demographics, and stable residence for the minority who stay a long time—these are ingredients for building community, but they are not indicative of a shared, neighborhood-wide reality, not in this brief example.

Recall the Bronx case above: Creative organizing by the local settlement house hinged on a close understanding of what the two major ethnic groups espoused, in the way of objectives, fears, and a story of themselves (past, present, future). But to get there, begin with the basics of settlement patterns: who's here, who has been moving in or out, etc. The fundamental dimensions to start with, the ones that predict much of how we use places and institutions around us, are: *ethnicity*, *life stage* (young singles, young families, older families, empty nesters, etc.), *social class* (levels of education and income, occupational status), and *housing tenure* (owner versus renter).

Likewise, regional development patterns reveal much about where investment is going or not going—an important driver of neighborhood-level change (see the linked brief in this series, “Stocks, Flows, and Dreams: Shaping and Measuring Change in Community Development”). More and more local indicator systems and reports chronicle these region-wide trends, and regional planning agencies, in particular Metropolitan Planning Organizations recognized by the federal government, are valuable sources of data and insight.



Map local political structure and informal “rules of the game.” Local politics is not simply a map of interests and resources, though mapping those well can help and more and more “influence mapping” and “stakeholder analysis” tools are available online. Political action is shaped by *institutional structures* that vary from place to place. In terms of the *formal* structure of government, for example, some local governments make the mayor a “first among equals” on the city council, and so concentrate decisionmaking power over resources in the hands of individual councilmembers and/or city managers and their agency heads. In other cities, with strong-mayor forms of government, support from the mayor is much more crucial, agency decisionmaking is subordinate to the mayor, and councilmembers may hope, at best, to act as a check on mayoral authority and on a mayor’s decisions to target resources to particular parts of the city (neighborhoods or districts). In some places, the division of authority and resources between city and county governments is crucial, in other places much less so. There is also a formal structure to the nonprofit and for-profit sectors, as “organizational fields” with roles and patterns of resource dependence having a durable character if observed at most points in time—even if they are prone to shift over time.

Some cities have durable coalitions of influential public and private players, usually senior officials in business, government, and prominent nonprofit organizations, such as a university, hospital, or grantmaking foundation. Much cooperation happens through these durable arrangements, which are crucial for moving significant policy agendas over time.

Robert Chaskin maps these roles and structures one way in “Fostering Neighborhood Democracy” (2003), which emphasizes formal versus informal features that structure interactions among neighborhood organizations, local government, private philanthropic organizations, and sometimes business groups. As Chaskin writes,

efforts to promote neighborhood-level decisionmaking and action ... take place within a dense context of already-existing of organizations and mechanisms that in different ways seek (or are seen) to speak for and act on behalf of particular neighborhoods. The result in each city is a loosely coupled system of organizations and associations interacting in highly improvised ways with one another ... (p.186)

Ronald Ferguson and Sarah Stoutland map the civic infrastructure another way, emphasizing implementation and support roles and the degree of proximity particular kinds of



organizations have to neighborhood-level activity, in their analysis of community development systems in *Urban Problems and Community Development* (1999).

To elaborate on the *informal* structure, as Todd Swanstrom emphasized at our workshop, some cities have durable coalitions of influential public and private players, usually senior officials in business, government, and sometimes prominent nonprofit organizations, such as a university, hospital, or grantmaking foundation. Much cooperation happens through these durable arrangements, which are crucial for moving significant policy agendas over time, such as for major real estate development, school reform, etc. Clarence Stone and collaborators have examined these arrangements in *Regime Politics* (1989) and *Building Civic Capacity* (2001). These networks often *need* nonprofits, including neighborhood-level organizations, to play a variety of constituency building or service delivery roles, as Marwell’s research highlights.

But other cities are what some political observers call “regime-less,” lacking durable coalitions and relying on issue-based coalitions, ad hoc mobilization, or self-protecting “everyone-for-himself” rules of the game that make it hard to act in common cause. Peter Burns and Matthew Thomas have analyzed New Orleans in this light—and argued that the absence of durable arrangements for public-private cooperation has severely undermined recovery and rebuilding efforts in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina (see “The Failure of the Non-regime,” 2006).

Finally, Phillip Thompson, another workshop participant, emphasized the priorities of elected officials who need bases of community support (but may not have much to gain, politically, in helping the neediest neighborhoods), the role of race, and more specifically the importance of political competition driven by demographic shifts, including rapid immigrant growth in many cities. Thompson explores these issues in his book *Double Trouble: Blacks Mayors, Black Communities, and the Call for a Deep Democracy* (2006).

Labor unions are becoming more important, Thompson noted, as multi-racial organizers of the working class and working poor in key cities, yet coalitions that engage labor and community development organizations *together* are still few and far between.

Leaders may emerge, Thompson finds, to build coalitions that bring African American and Latino constituencies together in electoral coalitions, as we see in some cities, or established groups with a civil rights advocacy tradition may resist changes that seem to threaten their influence, competing more than cooperating with rising groups, especially with Latinos but also



with Asians in some cities. Labor unions are becoming more important, Thomson noted, as multi-racial organizers of the working class and working poor in key cities, yet coalitions that engage labor and community development organizations together are still few and far between.

These larger political structures and mechanisms help define the local context, and as such the structure of opportunity and challenge, in which the most local community building strategies—rooted in neighborhoods—take shape.

4. Track progress at several levels, from the “bottom” up.

This follows from the first two “ideas in practice” points: that several types of ties matter (not just interpersonal “neighborly” ones) and that community builders often have a dual agenda and should consciously address both elements—making political claims and changing tangible outcomes—in their strategies.

For example, indicators of trust and a willingness to act in common cause, which can be surveyed reliably through well-tested questions, show powerful results at the micro-level of blocks and streetcorners, where ties among neighbors can be key, for example, to community safety.

The big challenge for measurement is satisfying distinct needs: on one hand, finding indicators of progress or shortfall that help activists and implementers make better choices and, on the other hand, finding indicators of output and impact that help funders (mainly) to make better investment decisions in the context of limited resources.

But higher up, other measures are more telling, such as indicators of: active resident engagement in neighborhood institutions (how diverse, how extensive, how sustained?), specific uses of those institutions to promote survival or mobility (e.g., getting a ride to the hospital at a critical moment or getting job referrals through a local basketball league), and ties between those near-at-hand institutions and the sources of influence and resources that lie beyond the neighborhood (e.g., open lines of communication with a well-positioned local banker or real estate developer).

The past decade has seen a proliferation of relevant measurement projects, each with a distinct motivation, focus, and contribution. The World Bank, for example, has sponsored and compiled a wealth of social capital measurement tools (available online in a clearinghouse). These run from measures of interpersonal trust and community engagement in “community-



driven” development projects to measures that test for “synergy” between a community’s formal and informal institutions versus replacement—i.e., when informal bonds and community self-help are made to *substitute* for nonperforming or unaccountable public agencies or other formal structures.

Planners, who have a long-standing interest in strong community as a “cause” and “effect” of good planning, have likewise produced useful new frameworks and measures linking social capital to community development. Judy Hutchinson organized a group of planning researchers and others to outline such concepts and measurements in a set of essays called “Using Social Capital” (*Journal of the American Planning Association*, 2004).

The Aspen Roundtable on Community Change has sponsored pilot efforts to develop and apply measures of community building effectiveness and richly documented local community building work, its promise and dilemmas (also available online). The United Way of America has produced “impact measurement” and related materials (online) that seek to integrate more traditional program evaluation measures with measures that reflect the aims of empowerment and community connectedness. And so has NeighborWorks America, in an effort more focused on community development organizations specifically (with tools online).

This is a small sample of the measurement options documented and critiqued in recent years, many of which build on earlier work on “participatory development,” community action, and more, and some of which draw on concepts and practices in performance management. The big challenge for measurement in community building is satisfying distinct needs for better measures: on one hand, finding indicators of progress or shortfall that help activists and implementers make better choices (ideally, in real time, as efforts unfold) and, on the other hand, finding indicators of output and impact that help funders (mainly) make better investment decisions in the context of limited resources.

For more on defining success and tracking progress in community development, see the references highlighted above as well as the second brief in our Working Smarter series, “Stocks, Flows, and Dreams” (2007).

Final thoughts

Community building may come in and out of fashion as a “hot” topic, but thankfully, it won’t go away. It reflects not only our fascination with the *idea* of community but, more importantly for the field of community development, the *need* to make bonds of community, broadly defined, a more central, vital force in a rapidly changing world.

The turn toward community building in theory and practice also reflects deep misgivings about the impersonal, expert-led solutions to social problems that yielded neither enough expertise (of all the right kinds) nor enough “solution.” Without community building, many local



development strategies produce neither satisfactory end outcomes nor collective capacity to respond to shared problems in ways that reflect basic democratic values, such as voice, inclusion, respect, and responsibility.

There will always be skeptics and opponents: change is always threatening to some. The other big challenge for the field, though, is making the tangible practices, not just the value principles, clear and discussable, teachable and learnable, improve-able and more widely supportable.□

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(A list of workshop participants and a list of readings and resources follow.)



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Further reading and other resources

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Networks, Power, and a Dual Agenda:
New Lessons and Strategies for Old Community Building Dilemmas

Page 35 | 39

Working Smarter | web.mit.edu/workingsmarter



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See more resources at www.commbuild.org (Aspen Roundtable), www.chapinhall.org (Chapin Hall Center), www.community-problem-solving.net (The Community Problem-Solving project @ MIT), www.knowledgeplex.org (portal for community development), www.ksg.harvard.edu/saguaro (Saguaro Seminar on Civic Engagement in America), and www.web.worldbank.org (search “Community Driven Development”).