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Voices From the Field III: Lessons and Challenges for Foundations Based on Two Decades of Community-Change Efforts

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Key Points

- Building upon a previously published volume on Comprehensive Community Initiatives, this article focuses upon the implications for foundations of what has been learned about CCIs.
- CCIs can demonstrate increased community capacity and improved outcomes for some residents in their target neighborhoods, but they cannot demonstrate population-level change in key indicators of well-being.
- Five key questions about the role of funders and how they engage in community change are posed and discussed.
- Deep engagement in the community; thoughtful collaboration among funders of various types and sizes; the willingness to use other resources, capacities and tools in addition to grants; and using evaluation for learning are some of the ways in which foundations might have a greater impact.

Introduction

In the 1990s, comprehensive community initiatives (CCIs) arose as an ambitious strategy to address the needs of residents of poor communities. They were intended to expand the achievements of community-based organizations by connecting up their work, concentrating resources in particular places, and combining the best of what had been learned from social, economic, physical, and civic development in order to catalyze transformation of distressed neighborhoods.

Foundations have played a major role in the CCI field. In the late 1980s, the Ford, Rockefeller, and

Annie E. Casey foundations all launched multisite CCIs, and marked the emergence of this nascent field in 1992 by convening the first-ever conference of their grantees, in Cleveland. For the next two decades, many other national, regional, and local foundations entered the field, and some have even had two or more generations of community-change initiatives. Foundations also invested in initiatives through the vehicles of intermediaries and anchor institutions such as universities and medical institutions. A rough, back-of-the-envelope calculation results in an estimate of at least \$1 billion in philanthropic dollars invested in CCIs over the past 20 years.

By and large, these national, regional, and local funders chose to organize their innovative place-based work in community and human development through the vehicle of an “initiative.” Although these initiatives varied enormously depending on location, sponsor, and community capacity, the classic CCIs had similar design features. They analyzed neighborhood problems and assets holistically, created a plan to respond in a comprehensive way, engaged community actors, and developed a structure for implementing the plan. Their goals included individual and family change, neighborhood change, and systems change. Each sought to achieve multiple results with a combination of inputs centered on some conception of “community.” They operated according to community- and capacity-building principles that placed priority on community engagement in and ownership of the work. A wide

variety of programmatic activities were open to them, from human services to economic development to strategies for building social capital. The initiatives and their sponsors generally invested considerable time, energy, and money creating the vehicles, systems, and relationships for implementing this model of how community change should unfold.

The Aspen Institute Roundtable on Community Change recently completed a review of 48 major CCIs and related community-change efforts of the last two decades, *Voice From the Field III: Lessons and Challenges From Two Decades of Community Change Efforts*.¹ It focuses on what these change efforts have and have not accomplished, lessons learned, and challenges that need to be addressed to improve the next generation of place-based work. It includes analysis by the authors of this article as well as contributed essays from a cross-section of leaders in the field.

The accomplishments of community-change efforts can be summarized as follows. Most can show improvements in the well-being of individual residents who participated in programs in their target neighborhoods. Some produced physical change in their neighborhoods through housing production and rehabilitation, some reduced crime, and a few also sparked commercial development. Most can demonstrate increased neighborhood capacity in the form of stronger leadership, networks, or organizations, or in improved connections between the neighborhood and external entities in the public, private, and nonprofit sectors. A few can point to accomplishments in policy and systems reform. While these are important, tangible outcomes, most of the interventions have not produced the degree of community transformation envisioned by their designers. For example, few (if any) have been able to demonstrate population-level changes in child and family well-being or rates of poverty.

Voices From the Field III discusses the implications of this experience – both the positive and the negative – for the philanthropic community.

¹ The full publication is available at <http://www.aspeninstitute.org/publications/voices-field-iii-lessons-challenges-two-decades-community-change-efforts>.

This article builds on and expands that discussion, lifting up five themes that are especially important for foundations. The reader is encouraged to refer to the complete book for specific examples of foundation initiatives, bibliographic references, and deeper discussion of a range of issues that can only be touched upon in this article.

The field can no longer support the premise that an initiative-driven infusion of foundation money – no matter how flexible, generous, and long term by foundation standards – can transform conditions in a disinvested community over a few short years.

The Implications for Foundations

Foundations can play many roles in community-change endeavors. Some are more typical for foundations, while some stretch foundations to move beyond their comfort zones. We organize this article around five key questions that foundations must answer for themselves as they embark on community-change work.

1. What is the appropriate way for foundations to embark on a community-change effort?

The range of philanthropic actors working on community change has broadened significantly over the past 10 years. Many of the CCIs of the 1990s were catalyzed by national foundations. By and large, those foundations are now redefining their roles in this field while regional, local, and family foundations have become more engaged in comprehensive, community-building approaches to place-based work. Locally “embedded” funders and health conversion foundations are two examples of new types of philanthropies that are making long-term commitments to their local communities and attempting innovative place-based work.

There is no single way for foundations to enter the field. Typically, large foundations have embarked on their place-based change efforts by developing an initiative. Generally, these initiatives are externally catalyzed, foundation-identified, and time-limited. Over time, all of these characteristics have proven problematic and, in many cases, have even challenged the effectiveness and sustainability of the work. Moreover, the fact that that they almost certainly require new implementation processes and structures can distort local energy, provoke resistance, and disrupt existing relationships among local neighborhood players and programs.

Not every foundation needs to be a partner in a community-change enterprise, and not every foundation can be. For many foundations, the better strategy is to be a supporter of high-quality, place-based projects and programs that fit within the foundation's priorities.

This realization argues against relying on stand-alone, comprehensive community-change initiatives. In the words of one longtime analyst of the field,

foundations typically launch an initiative at a time which they believe is right for them. They may have completed a new strategic plan or their potential payout may have increased due to successful investments. But the timing is rarely, if ever, ideal for their potential grantees (David, 2008, p. 4).

The experience of the last two decades suggests that foundations should rethink the decision to structure place-based change in this way. The field can no longer support the premise that an initiative-driven infusion of foundation money – no matter how flexible, generous, and long term by foundation standards – can transform condi-

tions in a disinvested community over a few short years.

An alternative is to work in a neighborhood, gradually learn about its capacities and needs, and then develop a program of work based on an understanding of what is already there and how foundation resources can most effectively accelerate positive change. This allows for, and indeed requires, a careful and strategic assessment of the capacities and comparative advantages of all actors. In this approach, foundations act more as partners and less as distant patrons, goal setters, check writers, and accountability clerks. They do not seek to lead or control, but rather to find ways to add real value based on what is acknowledged to be weak or missing.

The outlines of this approach can already be discerned in practice. One contributor to the *Voices From the Field III* volume suggests that

the change effort begins with emerging activity in the target area, not with a concept developed by an external sponsor. The single external sponsor is replaced by multiple external partners. The external partner's commitment is open-ended and evolving, not time limited. No local organization is anointed or created by an external sponsor to unilaterally design or manage the initiative and maintain the primary channel to external partners (Joseph, 2010, p. 159).

As the work moves forward, many types of funders, of different sizes and histories, can find ways to add value and make appropriate contributions. To do so, they must first develop a deep understanding of the local community, and then think about which of their varied roles, resources, and relationships can best help to achieve real impact.

At the same time, not every foundation needs to be a partner in a community-change enterprise, and not every foundation can be. For many foundations, the better strategy is to be a supporter of high-quality, place-based projects and programs that fit within the foundation's priorities. If they wish to link to community-change efforts, a range of options is open to them:

- Foundations can fund high-quality, effective programs in the context of a broader community-change enterprise that is initiated by other philanthropic, public-, and private-sector investments or by the community itself.
- Foundations can contribute at key moments to overcome obstacles, compensate for weak or missing links, or leverage others as circumstances evolve.
- Foundations can invest in support activities such as capacity building, research, advocacy, and improving data systems or communication strategies.

Even in this more circumscribed role, it is important for foundations to be clear about the alignment between their goals, resources, and capacities and those of the groups and individuals who will be partners in the work. It further requires a commitment to stay the course, join in ongoing efforts to learn and reflect about the work as it emerges, and make adjustments as necessary.

2. What is an appropriate division of labor among local, state, regional, and national foundations in community-change efforts?

The last two decades of community-change efforts clearly demonstrate that place-based foundations are best situated to do place-based work. When a foundation is located in the city where it carries out its work, it overcomes two of the most important structural weaknesses of many CCIs sponsored by national and regional foundations. First, it can use its local knowledge, relationships, and legitimacy to ensure that design and implementation are appropriate and effective in the local context. Second, a local foundation has no intention of leaving its community, so it has no artificial start and end date for its place-based work. Instead, it commits to problem-solving with the community over time, as successes and failures unfold and as local circumstances evolve. Taken together, these two attributes mean that the foundation can use and adapt its multiple resources optimally over time.

The counterpoint to the “locals do it best” argument is that a national or regional foundation can spark new activities in a community precisely because it is external. It can, for example, bring

national-level knowledge and significant amounts of new funding that can leverage otherwise untapped local resources. It might also be regarded as a neutral agent free of the kind of political baggage that local institutions inevitably bring after a long history of community work.

With regard to national foundations bringing significant new funding: most of the national foundation funding for CCIs that ended up directly invested in the local communities was in the hundreds of thousands of dollars annually, not millions. While this is nothing to scoff at, it has not yet proven to be a transformative amount.

For the most part, however, over the last two decades of CCI history, these advantages have either not held up or have been counterbalanced with disadvantages. In fact, national-level knowledge is far more widely and quickly accessible today than it was 20 years ago; as a result, local and national foundations have essentially equal access to it. With regard to national foundations bringing significant new funding: most of the national foundation funding for CCIs that ended up directly invested in the local communities was in the hundreds of thousands of dollars annually, not millions. While this is nothing to scoff at, it has not yet proven to be a transformative amount. Finally, it is naïve to assume that national foundations are free of baggage of their own. One clear lesson from CCIs is that every institution has a history, a reputation, a modus operandi, and a set of constraints that influence how it can engage with local communities.

So, if locals are best placed to take on local work, what is the most appropriate role of national

and regional foundations in community-change efforts? In general, their contributions would be better directed to three main lines of work.

In the words of one family foundation leader: “The question we always ask is, ‘What business are we in?’ Our business is community improvement, not grantmaking. Grants are just tools.”

The first is field building. This includes investment in leadership development and building capacity of technical support organizations and intermediaries. It also includes building knowledge that can guide local practice, ranging from basic social science research and improving data systems to developing evidence about important but under-investigated core themes in this field, such as civic capacity or collective impact assessment. The second is investing in efforts to change federal, state, and local policy to support community-level efforts. This policy work can create the environment for more effective community-change work and for sustaining gains into the future through systems change. Finally, national and regional foundations can use the significant resources at their disposal to support local foundations, anchor institutions, and governments in their own community-change efforts. In this scenario, national and regional foundations would follow the lead of the locals, rather than the other way around. While these kinds of philanthropic strategies can sometimes feel frustratingly distant from real-time contributions to child, family, and community well-being, they are critical for significant and sustainable impact in low-income communities.

3. What is the appropriate use of foundation resources in community-change efforts, especially in light of other public, private, and nonprofit actors?

As the field moves forward, public- and private-sector funders need to work together to understand and appreciate each other’s assets and constraints while also strategizing about how to cover the costs of all dimensions of community-change work. Ideally, philanthropic intervention would be a linchpin for catalyzing public- and private-sector investment that could, in turn, trigger much larger social and economic realignment to benefit low-income communities. The current question is: What have we learned about how to structure the philanthropic role based on the recent experience of local community-change efforts? The answer calls for a shift in foundation thinking about how to engage in this work.

Effective community-change efforts call for a more expansive vision of the role of philanthropy. Foundation leaders and staff need to move from asking, “What kind of grants will have the most direct and appreciable impact?” toward asking, “How can we use all of the resources and roles at our disposal to leverage and improve the effectiveness of other public, private, and community investments in poor communities?” In the words of one family foundation leader: “The question we always ask is, ‘What business are we in?’ Our business is community improvement, not grantmaking. Grants are just tools.”

Surely this kind of philanthropic re-orientation can be applied in many fields, but it might be most vital in the community-change field. It suggests a change in orientation from “grantmaker” to “change maker” and a concomitant change in how resources are allocated. One local foundation, for example, estimates that its staff spends as much as one-third of its time on strategies for aligning various local interests, leveraging, and brokering, very often humbly and behind the scenes.

The more that foundations are willing to use the various resources at their disposal, the more powerful their nongrantmaking roles become. As one experienced philanthropic leader has pointed out, foundations have resources and capacities that go far beyond their grantmaking capacity (Joseph, 2008). These include their ability

to make significant nongrant investments (such as program-related and mission-related investments) and leverage money, their moral and civic authority, and their intellectual and technical resources and skills. *Voices From the Field III* describes how some foundations are already testing out new roles in the community-change field, and suggests areas where they could be even more effective. Ultimately, no other actors bring a wider array of capacities to this work than foundations, and none have the potential to be more creative, responsive, and flexible in the context of community circumstances.

Traditionally, the public, private, and philanthropic sectors each have different roles in funding community-change work. The public sector generally funds direct programs, usually oriented toward human, physical, or economic development. The private sector invests when the ultimate profit for them is clear or when financial incentives help to subsidize costs. In most community-change enterprises, it is foundations – almost exclusively – that support community planning, community building, community organizing, and the like. Foundation funding has been particularly critical in efforts to build community capacity, a first step in helping to position poor communities and strengthen their ability to interact effectively with outside public- and private-sector forces. They support seed programs and startup costs for new activities and provide incentive financing. They fill critical gaps and provide wraparound funding to connect lines of work. Philanthropy also typically covers the costs of technical assistance and evaluation in community-change efforts.

Finally, the complexity of community-change work creates special need for foundation resources. In order to be effective, these change efforts must address a multitude of interdependent problems and work with an array of partners. This strategy requires deliberate effort – and investments of funding, staff, and time – to align the various interests, keep the partners working smoothly together, structure accountability, and ensure that the activities and projects are mutually reinforcing and working toward collective

All of these actors expend time as well as political, social, and economic capital in order to work together, and these must be subsidized, literally and metaphorically, until new habits of thinking, acting, and collaborating enable alignment to occur more naturally. Foundations can help to subsidize this new way of working.

impact.² It requires managing a complex web of relationships among residents, neighborhood organizations, consultants, and intermediaries, as well as public-sector agencies, private-sector institutions, and philanthropic funders. All of these actors expend time as well as political, social, and economic capital in order to work together, and these must be subsidized, literally and metaphorically, until new habits of thinking, acting, and collaborating enable alignment to occur more naturally. Foundations can help to subsidize this new way of working. *Voices From the Field III* identifies the need for some type of broker to align these various actors. Interestingly, it appears that there is no single prescription for which type of broker is most effective – it can be an individual, informal group of advisors, a community-based organization, an intermediary, a foundation, an elected official, and so on. What is clearly important is to value brokering and aligning as legitimate functions in a community-change enterprise – and to recognize that these need to be underwritten. Foundations engaged in community change must be prepared to underwrite the cost of these alignment and brokering activities.

² See Kania & Kramer, 2011, for a discussion of the value of collective impact.

4. What is the appropriate role for foundations in scaling up and maximizing impact in the community-change field?

Implicit in the theories guiding many community-change efforts of the last two decades is an assumption that community-level actions will trigger significant change in large and entrenched systems to the benefit of poor neighborhoods. This line of reasoning expects that a successful neighborhood-based effort would model new types of service delivery, community development activities, and other institutional arrangements that would, in turn, infuse or catalyze change in public- and private-sector systems at the city, county, or state level. Recent experience in this field shows no evidence to support assumptions that successful community-change work alone will “bubble up” and trigger larger system reforms.

Often foundations are hesitant to support organizing and advocacy out of concern that it is too political or that its outcomes are too amorphous. Poor communities, however, have little power and few natural allies, and so it is difficult to imagine how community-change work can be successful without strengthening their voice.

Voices From the Field III examines how place-based work can link with the kinds of systemic and structural reforms that help residents of low-income communities gain access to the full range of assets and opportunities that can change life outcomes. Here the role of foundations is vital. They need to develop intentional strategies to identify necessary local and state system changes that can support community-change work, help communities link to regional and federal oppor-

tunities, and support advocacy and policy reform efforts to create a more fertile environment for antipoverty, community development and social justice work.

Successful changes in private investment decisions or public policies have come from deliberate efforts to identify a specific action that will benefit poor communities and pinpoint the decision-makers who can make the change. These require strategic actions and strategic actors working in one of two ways.

One mobilizes the community’s power to exert pressure on decision-makers, for example, to preserve a funding stream or modify a development plan to ensure that poor communities benefit appropriately. Often foundations are hesitant to support organizing and advocacy out of concern that it is too political or that its outcomes are too amorphous. Poor communities, however, have little power and few natural allies, and so it is difficult to imagine how community-change work can be successful without strengthening their voice.

The second strategy is to create alliances between communities and powerful brokers or partners who can advocate for them in the broader public and private arenas. There are many examples of intermediaries and even local foundations that have used their access and influence to point out problematic regulations that block local innovation across the city or opportunities for public- and private-sector action in target neighborhoods. Foundations can help by drawing out learning and experience from ongoing work on the ground, using their own standing and reputation to promote change, bridging differences and bringing people into common dialogue with one another, and catalyzing and facilitating action by others.

Some foundations have focused on building a system-reform track of work that parallels their community work. This can include working hand-in-hand with the public sector on “good government,” such as city-level efforts to increase government efficiency, improve the quality of services, and track government performance. Others

utilize a two-level, “grassroots to treetops” strategy that works locally on community priorities and, simultaneously, on policy reform at the city or state level. This generally means supporting policy analysis and reform strategies, advocates and advocacy coalitions, and reform campaigns. Many of the most strategic policy efforts employ both an “inside game,” working directly with policymakers to provide them with information and policy alternatives, and an “outside game,” with advocates who can exert pressure on decision-makers.

A core theme in all community-change work going forward must be to position disadvantaged communities to engage effectively with the forces of change operating outside the community. Regional dynamics are increasingly recognized as critical determinants of the economic and demographic forces that affect poor neighborhoods and their residents. Foundations can use their civic resources and knowledge-building capacity to ensure that what is being learned about effective community-change work translates to the theories behind regionalism, influences regional-level decision-making, and helps low- and moderate-income neighborhoods become better integrated into the regional economy.

At this moment, there is a unique opening at the federal level for community-change efforts. President Obama’s recognition of the Harlem Children’s Zone led to the creation of the federal Promise Neighborhoods initiative. In addition, the White House has instructed all departments to ensure that their work benefits communities in need. The Neighborhood Revitalization Initiative is bringing together several key Cabinet departments – Housing and Urban Development, Health and Human Services, Education, Justice, and Treasury – to help local communities develop and obtain the tools they need to transform neighborhoods of concentrated poverty into neighborhoods of opportunity. Many national foundations have recognized the potential of this moment, and are finding ways to ensure that philanthropy provides timely and complementary support to these federal initiatives.

Finally, foundations can help to lay the groundwork for broader policy reform that focuses on changing the structures that reproduce inequity in America and allows the field to address the larger contextual factors that affect community conditions. As one contributor to *Voices From the Field III* points out, “For the most part, comprehensive community initiatives of the last two decades did not place issues of power imbalance, institutional racism, and social equity front and center in their work” (Bruner, 2010, p. 172). Many would argue that this has limited the effectiveness of neighborhood-based work over the last two decades.

Recognizing that community distress is a political issue that reflects choices about how public resources are allocated means that foundations need to ensure a continuous public discussion about our national values and ideologies, and how they are expressed in public policies and institutional practices. This will raise attention to race and racism, individual and public responsibilities, the role of government and the market, and other issues related to our social contract.

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and racism, individual and public responsibilities, the role of government and the market, and other issues related to our social contract. Occupying a space that bridges the private sector and the public sector, foundations are uniquely positioned to highlight the structural sources of poverty and disadvantage, and explore strategies for taking action to undo them. Bringing to bear their moral authority and leadership, they can set the stage for informed analysis and respectful discussion of the connection between place, race, and poverty, and approaches for dealing with structural economic changes, social injustice, and entrenched power imbalances.

More than any other sector, philanthropy can keep an eye on the field as a whole and help ensure that important knowledge is produced, infrastructure and capacity exist, and resources and sectors are aligned. Supporting and harnessing all of these inputs will allow the community-change field to broaden its scale, scope, and reach. As weak spots emerge, philanthropy should step in to shore them up. The perch that foundations occupy allows them to see the whole picture better than any sector.

5. What is the appropriate way for foundations to support evaluation and learning in community-change efforts?

The conceptual and technical challenges of evaluating community-change initiatives are well known. So, too, are the difficulties these initiatives face in gathering and using data to inform strategy and resource decisions in real time. Nonetheless, during the last decade the field made considerable progress in developing evaluation and learning practices that improve community-change efforts and build knowledge. Foundations have contributed to this progress because they typically play a key role in setting the goals and parameters of evaluation, as well as supporting it financially.

A key component of this progress is the greater adoption of shared evaluation frameworks (often created through a theory of change or logic modeling process) through which to articulate goals and strategies and specify measurable interim and long-term outcomes. It is often in the process of

defining outcomes and identifying how they will be measured that key stakeholders discipline their strategic thinking, specify their roles and expectations, and establish shared accountabilities and realistic timelines. A particularly promising development is that foundations increasingly recognize that their own actions influence the outcomes of community-change efforts and therefore include their own performance in the evaluation framework.

Once a strong theory and robust evaluation framework have been created, the challenge is to specify interim outcomes or benchmarks of progress. In an attempt to build a culture of results and data-driven decision-making, a risk is to land on indicators of progress that are easily measured but have little significance or reflect only distant, long-term outcomes. Foundations should help to ensure that the emphasis on metrics and accountability leads to use of measures that are meaningful and relate well to the theory of change. Good practice requires all stakeholders to monitor progress toward the goals for which they are accountable, but evaluation should neither stifle innovation nor ignore the dynamic complexity of community change.

Over the last decade, foundations and their partners have developed a better understanding of the “attribution problem” and the difficulty of drawing a straight causal line between investments in community change and specific outcomes. This more nuanced appreciation of the complex and dynamic nature of community change has led evaluators to focus more on understanding how such investments add value and capacity, serve a catalytic role toward achieving desired outcomes, build on or accelerate existing momentum, help shape relevant resource and policy decisions, and leverage new resources and partnerships.

An emphasis on contribution rather than attribution in no way devalues the importance of incorporating rigorous methodologies and evidence-based practice into the work when appropriate. Nor does it mean that each stakeholder is not accountable for measurable results (as opposed to program outputs). Investors in community-change efforts understandably want

clear evidence of success with which to persuade other partners to join them. A robust evaluation framework can help foundations test their theories and generate the evidence that both staff and trustees need to inform decision-making and champion the work more widely.

Perhaps the most powerful shift in evaluation practice is that foundations have given learning a more central place in their own missions, goals, strategies, internal structures, and external partnerships. Evaluation in community-change work has been increasingly viewed as a means to enhance real-time learning and decision-making, refine strategy, and institute midcourse corrections. The iterative process of learning and doing helps to position evaluation as a tool for improving practices and nurturing change at every level. No longer an outsourced function, it becomes the collective responsibility of all stakeholders. Soliciting the opinions and priorities of multiple and diverse stakeholders in developing key evaluation questions cultivates ownership of the learning process and increases the likelihood that results will be useful, relevant, and credible for potential users.

In order to support this process, foundations must work hard to provide sufficient resources and structures to support learning, and to create a culture that values candid dialogue and analysis and embraces the idea of learning while doing. Few would challenge the value of learning, but it is easy to underestimate the time, tools, and resources needed to do it well. Time to examine and reflect is often trumped by the need to act. But learning by doing works only if learning is translated into action in the form of new skills, improved practice, and reformulated theories. And it cannot be done in isolation. The long-term success of a complex community-change enterprise depends more on building broad problem-solving capacity among diverse players than on developing any one player's short-term knowledge or expertise. Progress and innovation occur when all the players contribute and reflect together on what they have learned from diverse experiences. This is why the traditional hub-and-spoke model, with the funder at the center of the work, is no longer appropriate. Creating new or-

ganizational arrangements that encourage – even insist upon – learning as a group challenges foundations that have tended to focus on the lessons from “their” initiatives and grantees.

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Two examples of other contributions that foundations can make to evaluation and learning include building local data intermediaries and developing broad knowledge for the field. Local data intermediaries can generate geo-coded data to facilitate learning about neighborhood context, assist in community planning, foster informed public discourse, gain support for the change effort by educating the public about economic and racial disparities, and evaluate neighborhood change over time. Investments in research about how communities change and, for example, the dynamics of such contextual factors as migration and mobility, regional economic forces, and local politics, can help build broader knowledge about community change that goes beyond any one initiative.

Community-change work is about learning, adaptation, and building the collective capacity among diverse stakeholders to work toward common goals. Evaluation and learning involves time, intention, and resources to do well. Instead of thinking about these resources as “evaluation costs” that compete with the operating costs of a change effort, they should be seen as inseparable from the work itself. Foundation investments in evaluation and learning can help make the work smarter, more powerful, and more sustainable over time.

Conclusion

When the first community-change initiatives were created more than two decades ago, the foundations that took the lead understood that alignment of their many parts and players would be key to generating meaningful change in poor communities. The assumption was that a “comprehensive” approach to neighborhood change would generate the necessary alignment in programs and strategies, and that “community building” would generate the necessary alignment among stakeholders. As it has turned out, the problems that community-change efforts grapple with remain “wicked problems” in the sense that they are complex, defy easy definition, lack permanent solutions, and involve multiple stakeholders (Sherman & Peterson, 2009). But the experience of the last two decades offers many lessons about how community-change efforts can be better implemented, and about the unique roles that foundations can play to ensure that these efforts are more efficacious.

If foundations choose to embark on community-change efforts – and not every foundation can or should – they should be willing to draw upon the full range of the capacities and resources that they have to offer.

If foundations choose to embark on community-change efforts – and not every foundation can or should – they should be willing to draw upon the full range of the capacities and resources that they have to offer. Foundations can make long-term investments in the essential elements of community change that include best practices and programs, but also go beyond them to include building community capacity. They can bring to bear what has been learned about managing a complex change process, including techniques that help articulate goals, develop a theory of change, specify measurable outcomes,

and build in real-time learning and strategy refinement. They can use their own civic capacity to bring various stakeholders together in collaborative partnerships and identify local, regional, and federal opportunities to enhance the local work. They can underwrite the costs associated with ensuring that all of the parts and players of a community-change effort are in alignment. The alignment that is needed is about fundamental ways of working, and addresses goals, activities, capacities, relationships, and learning priorities. In short, foundations can be “changemakers,” not merely grantmakers, in their own communities (Brown, Colombo & Hughes, 2009).

As is the case with most ambitious change endeavors, there is no silver bullet in the community-change field. We need new ways of being strategic when we are working in a complex adaptive system. We need new ways of managing the work when we have to interact with so many actors. We need new ways of defining success when we are innovating and trying unproven strategies. We need new forms of accountability when we control so little. We need new ways of learning when causal connections are diffuse and linearity is neither possible nor desirable. This is the charge to the next generation of foundations engaged in community-change work.

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