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# The Challenges of Place, Capacity, and Systems Change: The Story of *Yes we can!*

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## Introduction

In 1999, the W. K. Kellogg Foundation participated in a planning process in its hometown, the city of Battle Creek, Mich. As part of this effort, foundation staff and key community partners reviewed data on a variety of indicators of community health. They discovered a disturbing link between geographic areas characterized by concentrated poverty, racial separation, and isolation, and a low level of academic achievement among children — particularly children of color. As a result of this planning process, a new community building initiative called *Yes we can!* was launched in 2002 by the Kellogg Foundation's Battle Creek Programming office. One core tenet guided the design of *Yes we can!*: Significant systems change was needed to address the structural inequities within Battle Creek. Because systems change is more likely to emerge when the individuals affected by the targeted problem collaborate to understand and change the local system (Checkland & Scholes, 1990), *Yes we can!* was primarily designed to promote the engagement of residents and local organizations in the process of transforming neighborhood, educational, and economic systems (Foster-Fishman et al., 2006). Toward this end, *Yes we can!* has supported a grassroots approach that aims to build the leadership of marginalized communities and help those communities mobilize and build their power and organizational infrastructure to be agents of change in the community and/or region. The initiative has also sought to strengthen

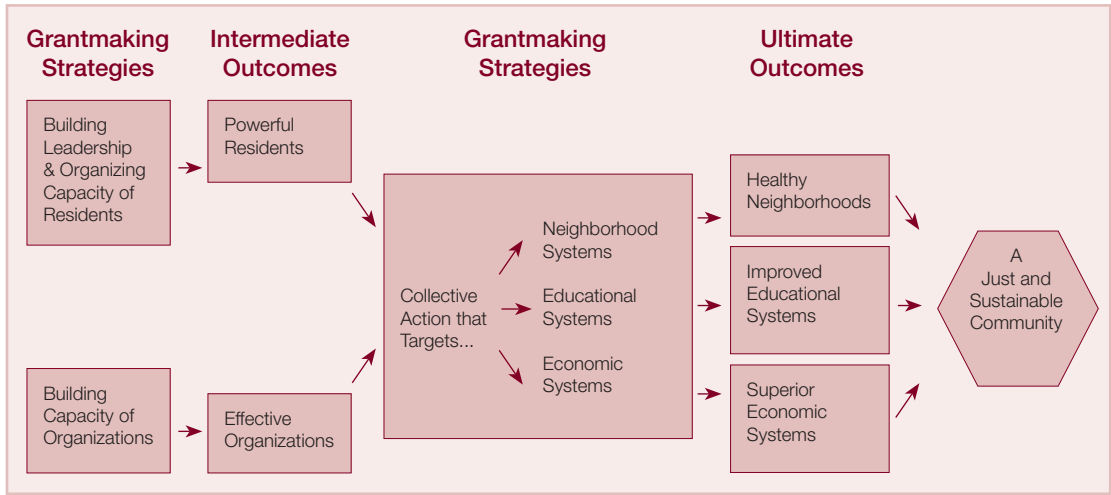
## Key Points

- *Yes we can!*, a comprehensive community initiative (CCI) funded by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, was designed to improve educational and economic outcomes within the foundation's hometown of Battle Creek, Mich. Since 2002, *Yes we can!* has supported five core strategies designed to trigger the systems changes needed to reduce educational and economic inequities in Battle Creek.
- *Yes we can!* has achieved some important wins to date; for example, more residents are involved, more neighborhoods have stronger neighborhood associations, and more organizations are engaging residents in their decision-making processes. However, the scale of wins remains small, and the targeted systemic changes have not yet emerged.
- Some common CCI design elements featured in *Yes we can!* may have inadvertently bounded its success: a) community building efforts targeted small-scale places, restricting the scale and scope of wins; b) demands for current work competed with building capacities for future work; and c) local partners who were implementing their individual grants struggled to maintain a focus on the larger vision and collective work.

the capacity of local organizations to engage these residents as valuable resources in change efforts and to expand the array of programs that target the core outcomes.

Overall, *Yes we can!* shares many design features found in other comprehensive community initia-

FIGURE 1 *Yes we can!*'s framework for change



tives (CCIs) in the United States. For example, it focuses on changing conditions in a geographically defined community (Auspos & Kubisch, 2004) — Battle Creek, Mich., a small town of approximately 53,000 residents. Like other CCIs, *Yes we can!* also assumes that by building an active citizenry, strengthening the local nonprofit sector, and fostering collaboration, more effective solutions to local issues can be identified (Fawcett et al., 1995) and local capacity will be enhanced (Smock, 2003).

*Yes we can!* has fostered some important wins within Battle Creek neighborhoods and the broader community. For example, more neighborhoods have active neighborhood associations, more residents are working together to make changes happen, and more local organizations are partnering with residents to design programs that more effectively meet the needs of low-income residents (Foster-Fishman et al., 2006). Despite these wins, the scale of change remains small, and the larger systems changes targeted by this initiative have not yet emerged — findings that are found in evaluations of other CCIs around the country (e.g., Brown & Fiester, 2007). In this article we describe *Yes we can!*, review its strategies and outcomes to date, and discuss how some key design features that are often found in CCIs may explain the limited success to date.

### An Overview of *Yes we can!*

Figure 1 illustrates the overall framework for change guiding *Yes we can!*. As this Figure illustrates, *Yes we can!* emphasizes two intermediate-level outcomes: (1) resident power and self-determination and (2) organizational effectiveness. Resident power refers to having residents, primarily those from low-income neighborhoods, recognized as individuals who can and should influence local decisions and who play an active role in making change happen (Zimmerman, 2000). This could range from affecting how local organizations provide services in low-income neighborhoods to shifting the policies of local institutions — such as the city — to better accommodate the needs of low-income residents. Organizational effectiveness refers to having a local nonprofit sector that has strong internal operations (e.g., strong leadership, strong fund development, mission driven) and a capacity to support resident engagement. The emphasis on these two outcomes emerges from the general recognition that sustainable community building efforts involve local residents (e.g., Gray, Duran, & Segal, 1997; Murphy & Cunningham, 2003) and build the neighborhood and community infrastructure (e.g., Chaskin & Peters, 2000). This dual focus on resident power and organizational capacity is a strategic design found in many CCIs (e.g., Chaskin & Peters, 2000; Smock, 2003).

Several assumptions guided the development of this theory of change:

- Powerful and self-determined citizens *and* organizations that are ready and able to engage residents are necessary to shift the structural arrangements within a community.
- When resident power and organizational effectiveness increase, greater partnerships and negotiations between residents and organizations will emerge.
- These partnerships and negotiations are assumed, in turn, to promote systems change — real shifts in the attitudes, relationships, policies, and practices that promote disparities in educational achievement and economic opportunity (Foster-Fishman, Nowell, & Yang, 2007).
- Systemic shifts will eventually lead to a sustained reduction in racial and class disparities.

The W.K. Kellogg Foundation initially invited seven distressed neighborhoods, defined as an elementary school catchment area (ESCA), within the city of Battle Creek to partner with them on *Yes we can!* These neighborhoods ranged in size from 1,930 to 4,500 residents and shared several characteristics:

- A higher concentration of residents of color. For example, though 18 percent of all Battle Creek residents were African American, 26 percent of the residents in these seven neighborhoods were African American.
- Concentrated poverty, with approximately 40 percent of residents living below the poverty line and 75 percent of school-age children qualifying for free or reduced lunch programs.
- Low educational attainment, with 42 percent of adults lacking high school diplomas and 80 percent of children not meeting state educational standards.
- Low levels of resident involvement and weak neighborhood infrastructures, including few neighborhood associations and block groups.

During Phase I (2002–2005) and Phase II (2005–2008) of *Yes we can!*, the foundation funded strategies to establish a support system for resident

organizing and advocacy and to develop resident leadership and a strong neighborhood infrastructure within these seven ESCAs. Starting in Phase II, resources also supported community residents and organizations in working together toward changing the neighborhood, educational, and economic systems in Battle Creek. This emphasis reflects the growing recognition that the nonprofit sector needs to play a critical role in promoting social justice and engaging local residents in democratic and social change processes (see [www.buildingmovement.org](http://www.buildingmovement.org) for several publications on this approach).

*The nonprofit sector needs to play a critical role in promoting social justice and engaging local residents in democratic and social change processes.*

### **Yes we can! Strategies**

To date, the foundation has funded five primary strategies to support the goals of *Yes we can!*: a neighborhood mini-grant program, resources for community organizing and neighborhood development, grants to local organizations to support programs aligned with the framework of change, networking events, and capacity building. These strategies are described below.

#### *Yes we can! Neighborhood Mini-Grant Program*

A Neighborhood Mini-Grant Program (NMGP) was created to provide grants of up to \$2,500 to support quick wins for residents who typically have not experienced success with community engagement efforts. The NMGP grants to residents and/or neighborhood-based organizations supported resident-identified neighborhood-improvement projects (e.g., cleanups, street light installation, and outreach campaigns to inform neighbors of pressing issues). Since 2002, over 550 grants have been submitted and over 400 have been funded.

### *Neighborhood and Block-Level Organizing*

To promote the development of informed, skilled, powerful, and engaged residents, several investments were made in community organizing. During Phase I, a national organization that specializes in community organizing was hired to develop and oversee a team of “neighborhood connectors.” The work of the connector was similar to that of a classic organizer and involved activities such as conducting one-on-one interviews with residents to identify common concerns and then working with groups of residents to address these issues. As part of the strategy to bring about greater community ownership of *Yes we can!*, four local organizations were funded to promote community organizing in Phase II.

***Evaluating CCIs is also complicated by the fact that some interventions are not evenly dispersed throughout the target community.***

### *Grants to Local Organizations*

At the beginning of Phase II, grants were made available to local organizations to initiate projects aligned with the *Yes we can!* theory of change. The explicit expectation was that local organizations would work to increase the quality and depth of the engagement of residents from low-income neighborhoods. Seventeen local agencies, including nonprofits, voluntary groups, and citywide institutions, became *Yes we can!* partner organizations. Projects spanned a range of activities, including a mobile recreation and youth-based program, a mentoring program for low-income women, and legal assistance to prevent home foreclosures and promote landlord code compliances.

A group of residents from the targeted neighborhoods was recruited to serve on a Resident Advisory Committee. The committee played an active role in program design, grantmaking decisions, and communicating *Yes we can!* information to residents.

### *Networking Events*

The Kellogg Foundation has a long history of gathering a group of residents and/or grantees to share their experience, learn from each other, build stronger relationships, and provide education in support of the goals of an initiative. In *Yes we can!*, early networking events served to garner resident interest in and commitment to the initiative. In Phase II, more formal networking conferences with educational goals aligned with the targeted outcomes of *Yes we can!* were sponsored. Both residents and partner organizations participated in the events.

### *Capacity Building*

Like other foundations involved in CCIs, the Kellogg Foundation supported ongoing capacity building opportunities throughout the course of *Yes we can!* A partnership was developed with a local support organization — the Nonprofit Alliance — to provide ongoing training in organizational development topics to partner organizations and residents. The Nonprofit Alliance also provided more focused training on resident engagement strategies during the networking events. The Nonprofit Alliance now provides leadership to the networking events and incorporates the participants in its own related programming with the Building Movement Project through the Detroit, Mich., office of Demos: A Network for Ideas and Action.

### **A Brief Overview of the Evaluation Effort**

In 2001, an evaluation team from Michigan State University was hired to conduct an evaluation of *Yes we can!*. The evaluation is designed to assess the theory of change and answer four questions: (1) what difference has *Yes we can!* made in this community, (2) how did *Yes we can!* bring about these changes, (3) what lessons are we learning, and (4) can these processes and changes be sustained in the long run? How? The evaluators used a collaborative approach to inquiry, engaging local residents, key organizations, and foundation staff in the design of all evaluation approaches and in the interpretation of results. In addition, throughout the course of this evaluation, a mixed-methods approach has been used, and participa-

**FIGURE 2** Yes we can! evaluation framework for powerful residents

tory evaluation methods — such as Photovoice — were employed when possible.

### Overall Evaluation Design

It is widely recognized that CCIs are hard to evaluate (Auspos & Kubisch, 2004); traditional “best practice” evaluation approaches such as randomized designs are neither feasible (e.g., Kubisch, Weiss, Schorr, & Connell, 1995) nor desirable (Eisen, 1994). Evaluating CCIs is also complicated by the fact that some interventions are not evenly dispersed throughout the target community, leading to widely varying levels of program dosage among residents, neighborhoods, and even organizations (Wandersman & Florin, 2003). This dosage variation may have important implications for what outcomes are achieved because intervention dose influences how strong an effect a program has on individuals, neighborhoods, and organizations (e.g., Schooler, Farquhar, Fortmann, & Flora, 1997). Overall, these challenges suggest that alternative ways of assessing the effectiveness of CCIs are necessary (Granger, 1998). The *Yes we can!* evaluation adopted a dose-response approach to help understand the relationship between exposure to the strategies and changes in observed outcomes. Because the residents and organizations experienced a range of exposures to the various strategies, the dose-response approach proved effective in understanding the relationship between dose and targeted outcomes.

### Targeted Outcomes

To identify the core outcomes to target, the evaluation team developed, in collaboration with key stakeholders, a more detailed logic model for each outcome in the theory of change. The models fleshed out the immediate, intermediate, and long-term indicators associated with each component of the theory of change. For example,

Figure 2 illustrates the model developed around the Powerful Residents outcome. Each model guided the design of evaluation methods, including survey and interview protocol development.

### Overview of Selected Evaluation Methods

While there is not room in this article to fully describe all of the methods used in this evaluation, we will highlight here those evaluation efforts that are directly linked to the data and lessons learned that are shared in this article.

*Resident survey.* A mail survey<sup>1</sup> of a random sample of adult residents living in 52 of the most economically distressed neighborhood areas in Battle Creek was conducted in 2005 and again in 2007. In 2005, 1,049 of the 2,459 randomly selected households completed the survey (for a response rate of 42.6 percent). In 2007, we attempted to survey the same 1,049 individuals again; if the respondent had moved from the neighborhood, a replacement household was randomly selected.

<sup>1</sup> Although a door-to-door survey would have been preferable, a mail survey was selected for several reasons. First, key program staff for the initiative did not want a door-to-door survey, fearing that it would compete with their one-on-one community organizing campaigns. Second, a group of resident leaders who served as advisors to the evaluation team advocated strongly against a door-to-door survey, noting the high levels of distrust within the neighborhoods and fearing that residents would likely not provide honest answers to an interviewer. We used several strategies to offset the concerns about a potentially low response rate with a mail survey. First, we hired local resident leaders to “spread the word” about the survey: leaders went door to door informing residents about *Yes we can!*, how they could get involved, and about the upcoming survey. These outreach efforts were tracked and linked to household response rates; those households that had personal contact with an outreach worker were significantly more likely to respond to the survey. Second, we sent up to three mailings of the survey to each household and provided the survey in both English and Spanish. Third, households who completed the survey were given a \$30 gift certificate to a local store.

**TABLE 1** Linking *Yes we can!* Outcomes to the Resident Survey: Example Items for Each Construct

Targeted constructs	Example items
<b>Readiness for change</b>	
Capable residents	Organizing Skills: How good are you at...: Getting residents to work on neighborhood issues or projects? Creating a plan for action? Empowerment: How much do you agree with the following? My neighbors and I can influence the decisions that affect this neighborhood. I have connections to people that can influence decisions. People like me are generally well-qualified to participate in political activity and decision making in our country.
Strong, healthy neighborhoods	Sense of Community Items: How much do you agree with the following? In my neighborhood... My neighbors know me. People talk to each other about community problems. Most parents know that other residents are watching out for their kids. Neighborhood Norms for Activism Items: Residents in my neighborhood can be counted on to... Work with other residents on projects to improve the neighborhood (such as a park cleanup). Openly protest or participate in a boycott to get the city to listen to neighborhood concerns. Meet with other residents to discuss neighborhood issues. Neighborhood Problems Items: How much do you agree with the following? In my neighborhood... Crime is a problem. Prostitution is a problem. Abandoned, vacant, or neglected buildings are a problem. Drugs are a problem. Neighborhood Leadership: How much do you agree with the following? In my neighborhood... There is strong neighborhood leadership. The neighborhood association is active.
Opportunities for involvement	To what extent are there opportunities for you to... Be involved in my neighborhood. Be involved in decisions at the city level. Be involved in decisions in local organizations.
<b>An active citizenry</b>	
Joining action groups	How many times in the past 12 months did you attend the following meetings or work with the following groups? Your local Neighborhood Association, Block, or Watch Group. City Commission. School Board.

TABLE 1 *continued.*

Taking action	How many times in the past 12 months have you...
	Worked on a neighborhood improvement project?
	Contacted City officials to advocate for a change?
	Attended a public meeting to press for a policy change?
<b>Powerful residents</b>	
Powerful residents	Have your efforts helped to...
	Get your and your neighbors' needs met?
	Get leaders or organizations in Battle Creek to listen to your concerns?
	Influence decisions made by organizations within Battle Creek?
	Shape policy or practices within the community?

For the purposes of this article, we are reporting data from the longitudinal sample of residents that responded in both 2005 and 2007. Of the 954 households that we could locate again in 2007, 656 residents completed the second survey, for a longitudinal response rate of 62.5% (only 616 surveys were usable, however). This sample size is large enough to detect even the smallest effects, as determined by our power analyses. Overall, both the 2005 and 2007 response rates are significantly higher than the average mail survey, and both samples were representative of the demographics of residents living in the target neighborhoods.

This survey was designed to assess all of the outcomes and indicators listed in the Powerful Residents Framework for Change and to assess self-reported levels of involvement with *Yes we can!* efforts (the latter was used to create self-reported dosage scores). See Table 1 for some example items used to measure each of the outcomes. Survey scales were adapted from pre-existing measures and demonstrated high reliability and strong construct validity.

The results reported here emerged from statistical analyses conducted on our longitudinal sample of 616 residents. Analyses included multivariate regressions, paired *t* tests and analysis of variance (i.e., differences between 2007 and 2005 scale scores) on targeted outcomes, and the linking of these outcomes to the extent to which residents were "touched by *Yes we can!*" (descriptions of the specific analyses and statistical findings are

included in referenced footnotes). To conduct this analysis, both self-reported dosage scores (from the resident survey data) and more objective dosage scores based on data supplied by local organizations regarding the location and purpose of their grant activities were created.

*Resident interviews.* A purposive sample of 32 to 55 residents and resident leaders were interviewed in 2002, 2004, and 2008. The primary purpose of these interviews was to understand the residents' experiences with *Yes we can!*, to gain insight into the outcomes achieved to date, and to identify ways to improve this initiative. This data was transcribed and the content analyzed using ATLAS™.

*Organizational survey.* A longitudinal survey of 23 local organizations (partners and other local agencies) key to the work of *Yes we can!* was conducted in 2006 and 2007. This survey assessed: (a) current levels of organizational capacity, (b) current partnerships with local residents and other organizations, (c) leaders' perceptions of resident engagement and resident power, and (d) involvement in *Yes we can!* activities.

*Organizational leader interviews.* In 2002, 2004, and 2008, 70 interviews were conducted with organizational leaders. In these interviews, organizational leaders were asked to describe their experiences with and perceptions of *Yes we can!*, identify outcomes achieved to date, and discuss lessons learned. This data was transcribed and the content analyzed using ATLAS.



*Dosage Analysis.* The link between *Yes we can!* activities and observed outcomes was assessed in two ways:

- The resident and organizational surveys asked respondents to self-report their involvement with and exposure to the various activities supported by *Yes we can!* For example, both residents and organizational leaders were asked to list the number of mini-grant project grants they had received. Residents were also asked to identify which partner organizations they had worked with or received support from in the past 12 months. This data was used to create self-reported dosage scores for each respondent. These scores were then related to the shifts in targeted outcomes.
- We used GIS mapping to geocode the physical location of mini-grant projects and *Yes we can!* community building activities, such as neighborhood-improvement projects, crime-reduction efforts, and resident-mobilization efforts. Because the approach to community building was mostly oriented around neighborhood blocks or geographically defined neighborhood areas, it was feasible to demark the specific boundaries of most activities. Secondary data sources and interviews with all project grantees were used to identify the specific location (i.e., the actual street boundaries) and purpose of project activities. For the purposes of this article, we used both an absolute measure of dosage, determining if a neighborhood area was or was not exposed to the work of the four community organizing grantees, and a cumulative dosage score, counting the amount of *Yes we can!* efforts that occurred within a particular geographical distance from each survey respondent or tallying the number of exposures to *Yes we can!* reported by the residents.. Resident survey data was aggregated to create neighborhood-level scale scores for each of the 52 neighborhood areas, and these scale scores were merged with the GIS database to assess the relationship between average changes at the neighborhood level and exposure to the *Yes we can!* organizing activity.

## Overview of Key Findings

Overall, the evaluation data suggests that *Yes we can!* has made some important progress toward the targeted intermediate outcomes. For example, comparing data focused on the Powerful Residents outcome between 2005 and 2007, residents reported<sup>2</sup>

- a stronger sense of community,
- more capable neighborhood leadership,
- becoming more active in making changes happen in their community,
- participating in neighborhood groups and city-level meetings, and
- working more with their neighbors and local organizations on change efforts.

In addition, interviews with local residents and organizational leaders and analyses of secondary data sources indicate that 14 new neighborhood watch groups have formed, involving over 300 residents to date, in efforts to improve their neighborhoods. Although these wins are important to acknowledge — and are particularly notable given the low levels of resident engagement and neighborhood quality prior to this initiative — it is also important to highlight that the scale of these improvements is really quite small. For example, though resident engagement has certainly increased, *Yes we can!* has only realized a 4 percent increase in reported levels of citizen engagement from 2005 to 2007. The scale of reported improvements in the other outcomes targeted in Figure 2 is similar.

In regard to the impact of *Yes we can!* on local organizations, a similar trend is found. Some wins are beginning to emerge, but the amount of change is relatively small. For example, interviews and organizational survey data suggest that organizations are now<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Paired *t* tests were conducted on the powerful residents' outcomes with the sample of 616 longitudinal respondents, comparing 2005 and 2007 scores. The outcomes listed in this section were significant at the  $p < 0.05$  level.

<sup>3</sup> Paired *t* tests were conducted on the targeted outcomes with the longitudinal sample of 23 organizational leaders, comparing 2005 and 2007 scores. The outcomes listed in this section were significant at the  $p < 0.05$  level.

- partnering more with other organizations and residents,
- engaging residents in more decision-making opportunities, and
- seeing more benefits accrue through their partnerships.

Interviews with both residents and organizations confirm that although change is happening in Battle Creek, the amount of change is really quite small.

Why are these changes so small in scale? Certainly one explanation is that more time is needed to realize the full potential of this initiative. It can take years for a CCI to reach full capacity (Auspos & Kubisch, 2004). However, our evaluation data suggest that some design features found in *Yes we can!* may also explain these weak effects. Specifically, we have learned that (a) the small geographical scale of the community building efforts may have inadvertently bounded the impact of *Yes we can!*, (b) the focus on current versus future capacity-building needs constrained the momentum of change, and (c) the funding of specific programs or projects versus actual systems change endeavors impeded the progress toward the collective vision and larger-scale changes. Because the strategies used by the Kellogg Foundation are approaches often found in other CCIs, the following lessons learned may resonate with other foundations and could significantly shape how funders pursue this work in the future. These lessons learned are discussed below.

## Lessons Learned to Date

*Lesson #1: The Concept of "Place" Within a CCI Is Multilayered, With Programs and Supports Often Targeting Places That Are Much Smaller Than the Scale of the Desired Impact. Unless Strategies Are Employed to Leverage These Smaller Successes Into Larger-Scale Change, the Desired Systems and Population Level Changes Are Unlikely to Emerge*

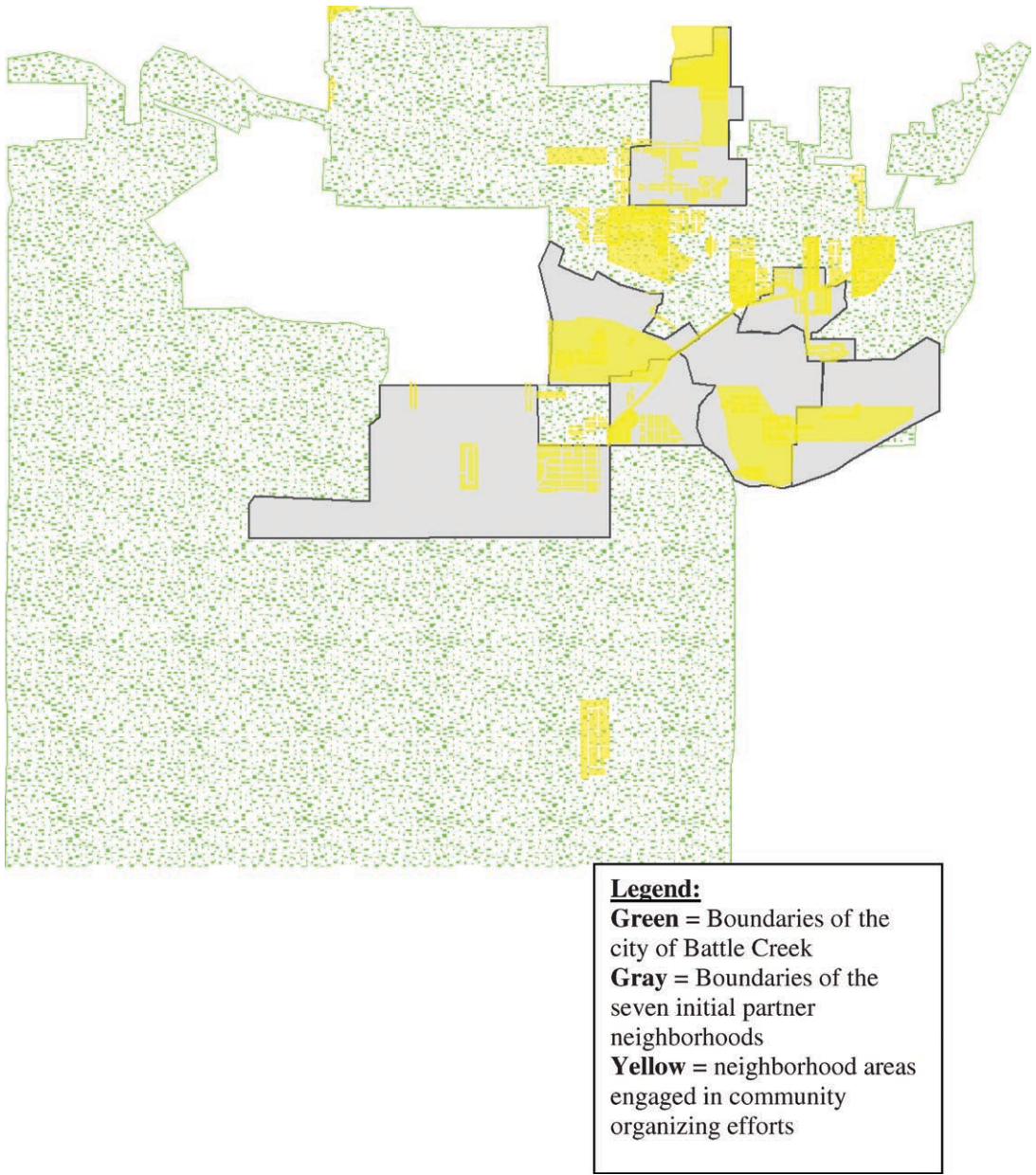
CCIs are designed as place-based efforts: they target specific neighborhoods or whole communities, with the goal of improving conditions and outcomes within that targeted geographic space. We have found in our work with *Yes we can!* that the element of place plays itself out at another,

perhaps even more critical, level: where the work of the CCI actually happens. Although CCIs target whole neighborhoods or whole communities, the location of CCI efforts — such as the community organizing and neighborhood improvement efforts — is actually much smaller than the geographic boundaries of the initiative. The consequences of this are relatively straightforward — residents who live in neighborhood areas that become engaged in the community building work tend to benefit more from the CCI effort than residents who live in neighborhood areas that are less involved.

The two programming strategies used in the *Yes we can!* effort to promote resident engagement well illustrate these place-based constraints. Consider first the NMGP. Given the nature of the work supported by NMGPs, the benefits of this program are often only experienced by residents who live in close proximity to the neighborhood area that has directly participated in the project. In addition, within the context of *Yes we can!*, we found that neighborhood areas varied significantly in the extent to which they took advantage of the mini-grant program. This variability had significant consequences for the residents of those neighborhoods. For example, residents in areas that had more neighborhood improvement mini-grants were far more likely to experience increases in their sense of community and hope for the future than residents who lived in neighborhoods less saturated with these efforts (Pierce, Foster-Fishman, Quon-Huber, & Van Egeren, n.d.).<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup>We used data we had collected from 112 potential and current resident leaders in 2003 and 2005 to examine the impact of mini-grant dosage on Powerful Resident outcomes. Data from our 2003 and 2005 mail survey was needed, given the insufficient number of mini-grants that occurred between 2005 and 2007. The survey distributed in 2003 paralleled the one used in later years. Mini-grant exposure was determined by geocoding the addresses obtained from mini-grant applications. Two hierarchical regressions were conducted to assess the impact of neighborhood improvement mini-grants on gains made in sense of community and hope for the future. Population density, neighborhood association status, leadership status, and receipt of personal mini-grants were used as control variables. All failed to account for significant amounts of variance in the outcomes. However, the cumulative number of neighborhood mini-grants that occurred within a three-block radius of the respondent's home address was significantly related to increases in sense of community and hope for the future ( $p < 0.05$  for both regressions).

**FIGURE 3** Location of community organizing activities in relationship to the original 7 neighborhoods



During one meeting with 25 local resident leaders, some leaders described how conditions in their neighborhood were shifting “block to block with some blocks getting better because of *Yes we can!* and others not changing at all” They attributed these successes, in part, to whether neighborhood areas were engaged in the migrant program.

The community organizing efforts supported by *Yes we can!* experienced similar “place” dilemmas. Figure 3 illustrates where the four community organizing efforts actually engaged in this effort relative to the seven initial ESCAs targeted by *Yes we can!*. As Figure 3 demonstrates, only some of the neighborhood areas targeted by *Yes we can!* (as indicated by the gray boundaries in

the figure) became involved in and/or were supported by the organizing efforts sponsored by the four local organizations (as indicated by the yellow sections in the figure). In fact, of the 52 neighborhood areas we surveyed in our evaluation, less than 50 percent were engaged in the *Yes we can!* community building efforts. And, similar to the impact of the NMGP, neighborhood areas that were “touched” by the community organizing efforts were often better off. For example, residents living in neighborhood areas that were touched by *Yes we can!* (as reported by community partner organizations and recorded in secondary data sources) were far more likely to report improved organizing skills and reductions in neighborhood problems (e.g., drugs, crime, prostitution) than residents living in neighborhoods that were not touched by *Yes we can!*<sup>5</sup> These findings are particularly important to note, given that there were no significant improvements in reported organizing skills or neighborhood problems when the resident survey data, as a whole, was analyzed. In other words, the wins achieved through the initiative were obscured in the large, random household survey because residents varied significantly in the extent to which they received supports and services from this effort. This also suggests that the smaller, place-based wins may not have been substantial enough nor the appropriate levers to stimulate change throughout the whole community.

Why is this place-based nature of CCI strategies a problem? First, CCI efforts like *Yes we can!* aim to see improvements across the whole place targeted by the initiative. In regard to the *Yes we can!* core intermediate outcome “more powerful, engaged residents,” the evaluation has only found small improvements in resident participation when the data is examined across the whole community. However, more significant increases in resident participation emerge if the extent to which the

<sup>5</sup> Chi-square analyses were conducted to determine if the neighborhoods that improved in their outcomes were more likely to be “touched by *Yes we can!*.” A two (neighborhoods improved/did not improve)-by-two (neighborhood touched by *Yes we can!*/not touched) chi-square table was created for both organizing skills and neighborhood problems. Significant chi-square results were obtained for both analyses ( $p < 0.05$ ).

residents have been exposed to the organizing efforts or the mini-grant program are included in the analysis. Specifically, the evaluation found that residents were more likely to become more engaged in a variety of ways in the community, over time, if they worked with community organizers or participated in the mini-grant program (as indicated by respondents’ self-reports).<sup>6</sup> Thus, when CCIs’ strategies unintentionally restrict who is “touched” by the community building effort, they also unintentionally restrict the potential effect of the programming strategies. This may ultimately result in an initiative that fails to create the desired changes.

*The smaller, place-based wins may not have been substantial enough nor the appropriate levers to stimulate change throughout the whole community.*

Second, constraining a CCI’s wins to small geographical spaces, such as small neighborhood areas, reduces the ability to take the initiative to scale. Small, geographically defined wins are typically not designed to leverage the types of systems changes needed to ultimately create the kind of social justice impacts targeted by CCIs (Smock, 2006). For example, though a community organizing effort supported by *Yes we can!* led to improved relationships between residents on several neighborhood blocks and the local police department, this win was not sufficient to make the police department more responsible to all poor residents in poor neighborhoods.

<sup>6</sup> Bivariate correlations were calculated to assess the relationship between the self-reported level of exposure to *Yes we can!* and several resident engagement outcomes in our longitudinal sample of 616 residents. Overall, the amount of reported exposure to *Yes we can!* mini-grants/networking events and *Yes we can!* community-organizing partners was significantly related to increases in levels of citizen participation, including efforts in neighborhood mobilization and advocating for change (all were significant at  $p < 0.05$ ).

Third, having the efforts and successes constrained to only a few spaces within a targeted community indirectly exacerbates the very inequity that CCIs are often designed to reduce. Recently, the evaluation team had a conversation with youth and adult resident leaders and asked them to describe what is happening within their neighborhoods as a result of *Yes we can!* As one leader began to describe how things are improving with the police in his neighborhood — because of organizing efforts supported by *Yes we can!* — leaders from other neighborhoods exclaimed in dismay, “Just typical. The southside (their neighborhood area) is always forgotten. How come the police are helping you out but not us?” As the conversation continued, it became readily apparent that residents felt that some areas were seeing more benefits from *Yes we can!* than others.

Disentangling why some neighborhood areas become engaged in the community building work of a CCI and others do not is complex work. In *Yes we can!*, the evaluation data suggests that neighborhood areas became engaged in the work in one of two ways: either the neighborhood itself was ready and able to participate in a community building effort or the area became the focus of the CCI due to particular conditions that existed in the neighborhood, such as drug houses or gang problems. Ultimately, in Battle Creek, only a few neighborhood areas met these conditions and took advantage of the resources available through the initiative.

So, what does this mean for foundations interested in CCIs? Overall, we have learned that when launching an initiative like *Yes we can!* one needs to pay as much attention to where programming activity happens as to what activity is supported. Tools like GIS mapping provide excellent forums for visually tracking where activity is occurring and for linking programmatic outcomes to the “presence” of community activity. As long as CCIs keep their efforts confined within the boundaries of a specific neighborhood and a targeted issue within that neighborhood, the degree of change that can occur will be restricted (Smock, 2006). In addition, for those foundations interested in larger systems change, a critical analysis of how

to leverage the wins located in smaller geographic areas in order to gain the impacts ultimately targeted in initiatives like *Yes we can!* is essential if CCIs are to achieve what they were designed to do (Foster-Fishman et al., 2007).

In conclusion, in an initiative like *Yes we can!*, where much of the work occurs at a small, localized level often only tackling a few neighborhood blocks at a time, it can be difficult to create the scale of wins needed to generate improvements for all residents within the city. Thus, the challenge becomes how to scale-up the neighborhood-based efforts so that more residents and more neighborhood areas can benefit from these successes.

*Lesson #2: When Participating in CCIs, Organizations and Residents Need Flexible and Responsive Capacity-Building Support*

CCIs are intentionally designed to challenge the status quo, requiring local residents and organizations to adopt new roles, responsibilities, practices, and even mindsets. Though the notion of capacity building was not new to the Kellogg Foundation, capacity building within *Yes we can!* required a new lens for how to think about building a capable community. The challenges around capacity building are described below.

*Challenge 1: Because different residents, leaders, and local organizations vary considerably in the capacities they have to engage in a CCI, the pace at which different individuals, neighborhoods, or organizations can move through the theory of change can vary extensively.* For example, in Year 4 of *Yes we can!*, some residents were just beginning to grasp the importance of working together to improve their neighborhoods while other residents were ready to mobilize to tackle more entrenched, citywide problems and partner with local organizations. Meanwhile, in Year 4 some partner organizations were ready to expand their work to tackle structural inequities within the community while other organizations were still struggling to launch their funded programs.

Overall, simultaneously supporting these diverse capacity needs was challenging. The capacity-

building efforts were designed around the distinct needs of each phase of our theory of change. This capacity-building work was offered sequentially, meaning that the capacity-building needs in Phase I were targeted in the capacity efforts offered in Phase I, etc. Though this approach certainly served the needs of some residents and local organizations, it failed to accommodate the range of capacity needs in Battle Creek. Consequently, some residents and organizations were left behind while others were inadvertently made to pause their momentum and desire to forge ahead because the supports they needed to move to the next phase of the work were not in place.

Overall, this suggests that perhaps a new approach to capacity building may be needed in CCIs. Some national training institutes are starting to move toward one-on-one coaching techniques as a way to handle a diversity of learning needs. Other training centers are launching more online training courses that allow participants to move through the curriculum and exercises at an individualized pace. Perhaps a more customized approach to capacity building may have more effectively met the needs in Battle Creek. In fact, within the past year, a more individualized approach to capacity building has emerged through the foundation's partnership with Battle Creek's nonprofit intermediary support organization, the NonProfit Alliance.

*Challenge 2: The capacities developed in one phase of a CCI do not necessarily prepare individuals and organizations for the next stage of the work.* In a multiphase initiative like *Yes we can!*, the skills, knowledge, behaviors, and relationships that are needed in the local community to successfully implement the work often varies considerably over time. For example, the capacities that residents needed to successfully work with their neighbors to improve local neighborhood conditions (in Phase I) — like cleaning up a neighborhood park or getting street lights installed — did not fully overlap with the capacities they needed to participate in the decision-making processes of local organizations (in Phase II). Because the participants in later phases of the work are often selected because of their successes in prior stages,

residents who were successful in Phase I were often placed into positions or given opportunities in Phase II that they were not yet fully equipped to engage in. Even when capacity-building supports were provided to help with this transition, the demands these residents faced were often immediate and urgent. As a result, residents were often not fully prepared for the opportunities and the work they were asked to pursue. Organizations were challenged in a similar manner. For example, local organizations that received grants through *Yes we can!* were provided with capacity-building supports *while* they were also expected to implement their newly funded programs. As a result, several local partner organizations found themselves trying out new practices that they were not yet fully able to support.

Overall, the demands placed on residents and local organizations often did not allow the time for them to develop the skills they needed to effectively engage in the effort. In the end, this sometimes meant that the work moved forward without the full benefit of the knowledge and skills needed to make it succeed. So, what does this suggest for how to approach capacity building in CCIs? It seems imperative, as much as possible, to anticipate the capacities that will be needed in the future and provide capacity-building opportunities that will address these future needs in earlier stages of the work. For example, local organizations should have been funded to first participate in a capacity-building process that prepared them to partner with local residents *before* they were funded to implement new programs within the community and expected to pursue such partnerships. Residents should have been trained to participate in local decision-making processes *prior* to the launching of Phase II.

Of course, this approach also has its limitations. The work of community change is complex and dynamic. In Year 1, the form and function of the efforts in Years 4–6 could be anticipated based on the theory of change. However, as the work unfolded within the community, adjustments needed to be made. In fact, many CCIs have had to make midcourse adjustments in response to changing social and political dynamics and les-

sons learned about the work (Foster-Fishman, Nowell, Siebold, & Deacon, 2003). This suggests that funders and on-the-ground capacity-building providers must constantly consider the shifting context and adjust training and supports to prepare the community to more effectively meet future demands.

*Lesson #3: It Can Be Difficult to Keep Local Residents and Organizations Connected to the Larger, Collective Vision of a CCI When They Are Funded to Implement Specific Programs and Strategies*

Most CCIs are designed to foster systems change, aiming to shift the form and function of existing neighborhoods, communities, and service delivery systems. This change occurs when strategies shift a system's component parts and the interconnections across these parts and/or when communities develop new visions that guide the purpose of their supporting systems (Foster-Fishman et al., 2007). For example, in a CCI like *Yes we can!*, systems change could occur if the local school system adopted a vision to eliminate educational inequities across Battle Creek and redirected resources and programs accordingly. Or, it could occur if the city and police department developed strong, sustainable connections with low-income neighborhoods, ensuring response to emergent needs.

Although such systems changes were necessary to achieve the ultimate goals of *Yes we can!*, systems change itself was not necessarily the target of the work that local grantees were funded to implement. Instead, it was expected that shifts in resources, policies, practices, and norms would occur as the collective body of *Yes we can!* efforts took hold within the community. This indirect approach to systems change can work if grantees and local residents keep in mind the overarching vision and systems change goals and use these frameworks to guide decisions and implementation processes as they pursue their efforts. In fact, the ability to keep the focus on the larger vision for change is often cited as a critical component of any transformative change endeavor (Kotter, 1995). Unfortunately, in *Yes we can!* it was particularly difficult to have residents and local

organizations remember these larger goals when also charged with implementing programs or processes — particularly if those funded efforts required new capacities. Instead, organizations became mired in the process of establishing their new programs, and residents became enmeshed in the hard work of improving their local neighborhood. As a result, important connections or changes that were critical to the larger vision were often ignored or forgotten. For example, community organizing and neighborhood improvement efforts were rarely connected across neighborhood areas, even if these different blocks shared similar problems and improvement goals. Local organizations often forgot to take advantage of other supports or resources that were made available through *Yes we can!* that may have further supported their mission and the larger collective work. In fact, in recent interviews conducted with local organizational leaders, this issue of the “lost vision” was often reported. As one organizational leader recently described:

It's almost like each organization got their little money and they are charged with doing what they put in their proposal and for working towards the outcomes that they said they would meet. But collectively as a community we aren't talking about the larger vision or how we are going to get to those root causes, and what each of our roles are in doing that.

—*Yes we can!* Partner organization, 2008

How could the W. K. Kellogg Foundation have more effectively linked the ongoing work of *Yes we can!* to the larger, collective vision? One strategy could have involved creating a “linking” role within a community. For example, a local partner or intermediary organization could have been funded to identify, foster, and support the linkages and processes to connect to the larger vision and systems change focus. The establishment of a local collaborative body, where key partner organizations and local resident leaders meet to discuss their progress towards the larger vision, may have also facilitated this larger focus (Foster-Fishman, Berkowitz, Lounsbury, Jacobson, & Allen, 2001). Finally, as Kotter (1995) recommends, a media or social marketing campaign could have

been used to continually communicate the larger collective vision and strategic goals.

In conclusion, when CCIs aim to create systemic change, they need to help grantees and local organizations move beyond the work of their discrete programs or projects and strive towards the larger collective goals. If these attempts are not made, it will continue to be difficult to create a strong alignment between the strategies used by local organizations and residents and the overall goals and philosophy of initiatives like *Yes we can!*

### Some Final Thoughts

To date, many CCIs have failed to achieve what they promised. Certainly this work is complex, and the selected issues are often deeply entrenched within the targeted communities. Yet, these efforts will never succeed if the strategies used are unable to trigger the process of change that the theories of change indicate. The insights we shared in this article suggest that the foundation world needs to become better at addressing the more subtle aspects embedded within this work. It is simply not enough to support community building efforts; foundations also need to attend to who receives supports through implemented programs and which residents and neighborhood areas may be unintentionally excluded from these efforts. It is simply not enough to fund capacity building; foundations need to develop a critical consciousness about the need for flexibility in their capacity-building programs and the need to continually prepare individuals and organizations for the next phases of this work. Finally, it is simply not enough to have a vision and theory of change that guides a foundation's funding decision. Foundations need to continually work to help local organizations and residents link their efforts to this larger collective vision.

As it begins its seventh year, *Yes we can!* continues to strive to engage residents and local organizations in the hard work of transforming their local community. Recent efforts to launch a Building Movement Project ([www.buildingmovement.org](http://www.buildingmovement.org)) in Battle Creek suggests that *Yes we can!* has helped to trigger a new mindset among some lo-

cal organizations and residents about the purpose of their work in the community. As the community begins to tackle more difficult challenges, such as worsening economic conditions and expanding gang related-problems, we anticipate that the questions of where to leverage change, what capacities to create, and how to create sustained systems changes will continue to dominate the conversation. Overall, we encourage other foundations to pay greater attention to where and who benefits from their CCI efforts, to the emergent capacity needs of partnering communities, and to the linkage of programmatic efforts to more sustainable systems change. Such reframing of this work may help CCIs like *Yes we can!* become more effective at achieving the transformations they desire.

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