

# The Ecology of Community Change: Some Lessons for Philanthropy

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November 2008

What is the most strategic way to transform poor communities? That question has stimulated a variety of initiatives from philanthropists since the days of Jane Addams' Hull House and the advent of the Carnegie Libraries. Is the best approach to build key institutions, to promote model programs, to create jobs by revitalizing the physical infrastructure, or to invest in the potential of individuals? In the 1990's a number of large foundations rejected categorical, program-focused approaches in favor of a more ambitious strategy that has come to be known as Comprehensive Community Initiatives or CCIs.

While they may differ from each other in some respects, CCIs tend to share a number of characteristics, including a focus on neighborhoods over an extended period of time. They also typically employ a multi-component, cross-disciplinary approach that might simultaneously include direct services, advocacy and public policy, leadership development, strategic communications, research and evaluation. At their heart, CCIs have sought to enhance individual and community capacity through a variety of efforts to promote civic engagement and build social capital. Their goal has been an audacious one: to "move the needle" on key community-wide indicators of well-being.

After nearly 20 years of experimentation and the investment of hundreds of millions of philanthropic dollars in CCIs, this is a good time for all of us to reflect on the lessons we are learning. It's particularly appropriate that this inaugural issue of The Foundation Review is devoted to this topic. Teri Behrens and her editorial colleagues have done the field a tremendous service by bringing together in one place this collection of reports on an excellent cross-section of CCIs, both past and present. My intent here is not to provide an in-depth scholarly analysis of these papers, but to share my personal reflections on the themes they raise and some of their implications for the day-to-day work of philanthropy.

## Adopting an Ecological Perspective

Public systems and funding streams and most private institutions (including foundations) tend to be organized around specific topics, e.g. education, health care, economic development, environment, social welfare or the arts. One of the fundamental principles of CCIs is that distressed communities require simultaneous, coordinated interventions across each of these traditional categorical domains if we are going to really make a difference in the lives of their residents. That necessitates a different mindset and a more comprehensive vision of communities as interconnected systems. For example, one can't simply improve the schools without considering the employment status of parents and expect to improve the lot of low-income families.

Embracing the complex ecology of communities has been an important shift in the conventional philanthropic paradigm. It has also stimulated alternative narratives, such as an emphasis on enumerating and building on local assets rather than fixating solely

on measures of pathology. Funders have expanded their definitions of health and well-being to incorporate concepts like resiliency, efficacy and social capital. Accordingly, much effort has been devoted to articulating theories of change that attempt to “connect the dots” among multiple interventions, rather than “simply doing a lot of things and hoping they add up to something.”

In cases where grantee organizations and community residents have been directly engaged in those conversations, it quickly becomes apparent that traditional linear “boxes and arrows” models of change can’t begin to capture a more complicated reality that includes multiple definitions of “community,” “root causes,” and barriers to success. Indeed, achieving a shared vision across diverse constituencies that can sustain effort over a multi-year period is a formidable undertaking. While tackling complexity head on is a necessary feature of the CCI paradigm, it certainly makes things much more difficult!

One of the key lessons learned by these CCIs has been the need for a “single broker” or “keeper of the vision” (whether that’s an individual leader, an intermediary organization or a governing body) to keep the sites focused and in alignment with the original intent of the initiative...and to help everyone hold to a shared image of success. That’s easier said than done, particularly over a multi-year period. Community boundaries tend to be highly permeable in low-income neighborhoods. People (including initiative leaders) come and go, making it difficult at best to sustain engagement , let alone to track cumulative impact.

While a commitment to “comprehensive” action logically flows from adopting an ecological perspective of communities and change, it can also set unrealistic expectations and open foundations up to charges of arrogance. Particularly in communities with a history of multiple failed change efforts, will philanthropic resources (no matter how sizeable) really be sufficient to achieve comprehensive impact at the individual, family and community level? I’ll come back to this question later under the topic of Scale.

Another lesson foundations have learned through CCIs is the limits of their power. In their typical dealings with grantseekers, many foundations have become desensitized to the immense power differential that colors those relationships. Consequently, when they embark on an ambitious venture like a CCI, they not only assume a certain amount of authority but also expect to be perceived as virtuous, if not benign, actors. But every community has its own unique power structure; foundations can be naïve about how their actions affect (and are affected by) the ecology of those relationships.

After all, what community would invite such a large-scale intervention in their lives? Those with the least choice are likely to be the most compliant. Meanwhile, those with more power will seek to co-opt the Initiative for their own purposes or to steer resources to their own organizations or pet projects. The story-within-the-story of CCIs is the elaborate dance they must engage in with elected officials and other (sometimes self-appointed) community leaders and entrenched organizations to pursue the goals of the Initiative with integrity.

### **Crossing Boundaries**

One of the most intriguing things about CCIs is the way in which they seek to connect individuals, organizations and resources across traditional sectoral and political

boundaries. Foundations have been able to use their presence to effectively leverage new kinds of collaborations in a number of ways. They have used their convening ability to bring nontraditional partners together. Funders have underwritten task forces on the condition that diverse constituencies were represented at the table. They have also encouraged broad-based participation by attracting other sources of funding in addition to their own. Foundations have also learned that they need to exercise patience, because this kind of bridge building takes time and effort to succeed.

If a CCI is to take root, the foundations involved must actively seek to identify the institutional self interest of potential partners and ensure that those interests are aligned with the goals of the Initiative. It must be recognized that collaboration often goes against established structures and incentives for organizational behavior. Simply building relationships among neighborhood organizations that have traditionally competed against one another for resources can be challenging. It is even more complicated to engage elected officials and public sector agencies in a project that they have not initiated and do not control.

Too often, foundations place their emphasis on the nature and the quality of the interventions they are supporting rather than the complex web of institutional relationships, roles and arrangements that will ultimately determine the success or failure of the effort. Real clarity of understanding of goals and mutual responsibilities can be hard to nail down, particularly when there's new money on the table, and everyone's eager to get to work. The nuances of these kinds of collaborative partnerships are difficult enough to work out at the beginning of a venture, and are even more challenging to sustain over a multi-year period. Continuous candid communication among all parties is essential, but tough to achieve in practice.

Navigating and negotiating those kinds of relationships is not the strong suit of most private foundations. Accordingly, many CCIs have positioned Intermediary Organizations as the day-to-day managers of the enterprise and associated relationships. If the Intermediary is well chosen, it can bring substantial skills, technical knowledge and a relatively neutral stance into a politically charged environment. But it also brings a point of view, and may not completely agree with the funders' theory of change or sense of what it is most important to accomplish. It may give mixed messages to grantees, and the funders of a CCI have to be alert to the potential for "mission creep."

Partnering with public agencies and elected officials can be particularly complicated. A number of CCIs have wisely recognized early on that the potential sustainability of their efforts will ultimately hinge on their adoption or absorption by the public sector. Repurposing and realigning public resources, including blended funding streams and new forms of interagency collaboration is frequently the ultimate goal of an Initiative. To that end, some CCIs have targeted relationships with high-ranking public officials as one of their most important strategies. That can be a two-edged sword, however. A project closely identified with a departing mayor can be viewed with disinterest by his successor.

There is also a delicate balance to how many philanthropic dollars can be seen as a magnet for coordinated action before they become a disincentive for public investment. In some instances, communities that were receiving substantial foundation dollars for CCI-related work became perceived as less in need of public resources by local legislatures. In such cases, it's not sufficient to build working relationships with local officials. State officials and legislators also need to be included in the mix. Systems

arguments to “rationalize” public expenditures can also backfire in tight budget times, when programs or facilities in high need areas may be most vulnerable to closure because they are perceived to be underutilized (or substantially subsidized by private dollars).

Another dilemma for CCI funders as they forge working relationships across traditional boundaries is how much control they are willing to cede over the proceedings. Funder control is not a topic that receives much open discussion, but it is central to the grantor-grantee dynamic, and that is particularly the case in a high stakes venture like a CCI. As more voices (and potentially competing agendas) are brought to the Initiative table, everyone will be watching to see to what degree the foundations are truly committed to “walk the talk” about community engagement. Non-negotiables and other funder expectations need to be stated clearly and unambiguously up front in the relationship development process to avoid conflict down the line.

High performers will typically resist external control of their behavior. Others may put up less resistance, but they will require technical assistance to help them meet the standards being established. A major lesson learned from all CCIs is the degree to which capacity building is central to the success of the enterprise, whether that was part of the original plan or not.

### **Building Capacity**

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. They may have lots of other business to deal with, and will likely be all over the map in terms of their readiness to fully participate in (and potentially benefit from) a CCI. Funders have gotten better over the years at assessing grantee readiness, but frequently grantees are chosen for other more important political reasons than their existing internal capacity. Consequently, capacity building is a significant and ongoing need in Comprehensive Community Initiatives. The new roles and relationships to be developed will require new capacities on everyone’s part.

Foundations themselves rarely spend much time assessing their own readiness to undertake a demanding, labor-intensive project like a CCI. It’s a radically different way of doing their business compared to responsive grantmaking. As a result, they often end up building their own capacity in the midst of implementation. They would be wise to first assess their own structure, leadership, staff roles, internal systems and culture.

The most successful CCIs have benefited from significant flexibility and risk taking on the part of their funders. How many foundations genuinely possess that kind of appetite for risk? Foundation Boards have also struggled with CCIs. Despite the best staff work, they can still harbor unrealistic expectations and favor timelines at odds with what is possible. Even though they may intellectually appreciate the need to invest in a more complex, cross-systems effort, they can still be frustrated by the lack of clear cut short-term outcomes. The extended length of an Initiative can also lead to an erosion of trustee support, particularly among those who have joined the Board midstream in the program and will not have shared in the initial enthusiasm for the venture.

Every CCI represented in this volume has confirmed the importance of an ongoing investment in capacity building, including training and technical assistance, convenings, and skill development. Ideally, organizations and individuals require flexible and responsive capacity building support geared to the pace at which they can navigate the different phases of the Initiative. Groups will vary significantly in the pace of their development, and funders need to be prepared for that reality. A particular challenge for funders is to anticipate the specific capacity that participants will need at each stage of the CCI and to provide those resources in advance. When community residents are engaged as direct participants in a CCI, one of the most important contributions funders can make is to build their skills and to invest in their capacity as leaders and advocates. That need does not diminish over the life of the Initiative.

Two areas of capacity that feature prominently in lessons learned by these CCIs are data and strategic communications. Both play an important role in galvanizing grassroots and public support for the enterprise. Both are also likely to require a significant investment on the part of the Initiative's funders. The capacity of most community-based organizations to collect, analyze and utilize data is uneven at best. Often, their public sector peers are also lacking in systems to generate up-to-date information. Statistics often lag two to three years behind practice. Skill building in communications is also necessary not only to share data in a comprehensible fashion but also to tell the story of the Initiative and its communities and to encourage support by policy makers and other constituents.

### **Investing in Process**

“A sense of urgency” is perhaps the favorite contemporary phrase in the lexicon of foundation executives and trustees. And they have a point. The problems faced by poor communities require our active engagement rather than complacency. And communities are also hungry for action. But these CCIs have repeatedly taught the importance of investing in appropriate process in order to lay the groundwork for lasting community change. Finding the right balance between urgency and deliberateness is one of the key challenges for CCIs.

An initial investment in planning is essential. Particularly if community members are directly involved in that process, skilled facilitation is important along with time and resources devoted to building appropriate skills (e.g. data interpretation). Even with professional help, it's not unusual for community deliberations to become bogged down in interpersonal issues and controversy. There is also likely to be push back against the funders' assumptions about change. But the planning process can also serve a key educational function by exploring what is known about best practices and allowing for the sharing of different perspectives. It can help to establish a group culture of iterative learning that can serve the Initiative well in the long run.

Challenging as it may be, maintaining direct feedback loops with the broader community is an important part of the community change process. Setting ground rules for governance by consensus (directions everyone can “live with”) rather than majority rule also helps to bring everyone along while honoring individual contributions. Forcing the pace of change adds undue stress to the proceedings. The pressure to produce results too quickly can really get in the way of necessary trust building. That said, communities have a right to be impatient with process as well. A mechanism to provide mini-grants to

neighborhood groups for short-term tangible “wins” while planning proceeds can be a valuable morale booster. It also sets the tone for a continued flexible approach to funding throughout the life of the Initiative as opportunities arise.

### **Achieving Scale**

The ultimate *raison d'être* of CCIs is to “roll up” work at the neighborhood level to achieve community-level outcomes. While there is ample evidence that CCIs have been successful in engaging community residents, building local capacity and achieving small-scale results, those hoped-for large scale outcomes have proven more elusive to document. In part, that is due to the largely insurmountable methodological problem of attribution. No matter how sizeable the activities sponsored by a CCI, they are not the sole contributors to community change. Absent appropriate “control group” neighborhoods (virtually impossible to achieve in the real world) a definitive causal relationship between a CCI and community-level outcomes cannot be established.

But I suspect that the deeper challenge is one of dosage. No matter how many resources a CCI devotes to a neighborhood, the exposure of most residents to those interventions is likely to be limited. Time and again, we’ve observed a fairly small group become deeply engaged in the work of an Initiative, but achieving true community-wide mobilization requires massive concentrated resources (witness the recent presidential campaign). After all, as we often note, the scale of philanthropic dollars pales in comparison to public sector funding in those same communities. In which case, why do we expect our marginal dollars to catalyze large-scale changes?

Despite high expectations about “getting to scale,” CCIs have uncovered no magic formulas for turning promising programs into citywide practice. Given what we have learned about the need for intensive capacity building to support neighborhood-level change, a comparable urban-scale investment would be beyond the reach of private philanthropy. Absent new government funding streams (unlikely but not impossible), it will take significant political will to repurpose existing public funding to underwrite system wide innovation. Meanwhile, embattled public schools, health care and criminal justice systems are operating under duress in most major metropolitan areas, leaving them with little excess energy for public-private partnerships, no matter how promising.

There is also a fundamental paradox of expectations. Although we frequently note that the purpose of long-term investment in communities is to allow the complex, decidedly non-linear process of change to unfold over time, for some reason we continue to expect easy-to-measure, short-term linear outcomes. But if we are really seeking intervention at the level of “root causes,” shouldn’t the appropriate timeline be generational? It can take years just to get groups to work effectively together. Given the experience of some CCIs, it’s not unrealistic to expect that investment in a traditionally disenfranchised neighborhood may just begin to really pay off after ten years of concerted effort. But how many foundations have that kind of patience?

### **Laying the groundwork for Sustainability**

The ultimate legacy of a CCI should be long-term sustainable change, and there’s no question that many lives have been transformed by participation in these efforts. New

affordable housing has been built, new services have been provided to enhance child development and family stability, new neighborhood associations have been formed, and countless individuals have become engaged as advocates for change in their communities, just to cite a few examples.

There have been few long-term follow-up studies to determine what remains changed after a CCI has run its course. I suspect that often the most important outcomes are in

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