



THE ASPEN INSTITUTE

ROUNDTABLE ON COMMUNITY CHANGE



BUILDING KNOWLEDGE
ABOUT COMMUNITY CHANGE

Moving Beyond Evaluations

NOVEMBER 2004

Patricia Auspos
Anne C. Kubisch



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Preface and Acknowledgments

This report has two purposes: to summarize what we have learned over the past 15 years about how to evaluate community change initiatives, and to identify strategies for enhancing the evidence base about what it takes to improve conditions in poor communities. The conclusions in the report are based primarily on the experiences of a group of comprehensive community initiatives (CCIs) in the United States and the United Kingdom, which vary widely in terms of their size, institutional base, sources of funding, scope of activities, policy influence, and so forth.¹ Nevertheless, in both the United States and the United Kingdom, these initiatives have three common core attributes:

- ▶ *They are place-based.* They are anchored in geographically defined communities, or neighborhoods, and aim for change that can be felt community-wide.
- ▶ *They are comprehensive in their programmatic scope.* This manifests itself differently in different initiatives. For some, it means that they work simultaneously across a wide spectrum of social, economic, and physical community development strategies. For others, it means that they focus on a “strategic driver” but put into place a broad set of community-based activities that go beyond traditional services and programs. An example would be community-based employment initiatives that build “community supports for work” on top of standard job-training and job-search activities.
- ▶ *They operate according to community building principles.* This means that they focus on developing the capacities and connections of individuals and organizations in the communities through, for example, strengthening local leadership, building social capital, and stressing a community-driven process. Again, this can vary from initiative to initiative, from one that puts community empowerment at the forefront of its agenda to one that involves community members as a voice in planning and governance.

The assumptions behind the transatlantic examination of the evidence were that the independent experiences of each country might offer insights and lessons to the other, and that both

1. Throughout the book we use several terms to describe these initiatives. In the United States, the term comprehensive community initiatives (CCIs) has come to be associated with the most orthodox of the community change initiatives. Therefore, we often use terms such as community change efforts, community change, community building, and community-based initiatives to suggest a broader range of potential initiative structures. In the US context, we mean to include many community development corporations (CDCs), the Empowerment Zones, and programmatically focused but still community-based initiatives such as Beacon Schools or the Jobs-Plus Initiative, as well as classic foundation-led CCIs. For the United Kingdom, we mean to embrace the New Deal for Communities as well as the more programmatically focused Health Action Zones and Sure Start initiative.

could benefit from productive dialogue, and perhaps joint work, around common challenges and problems. The specific opportunities were:

- ▶ The emerging conclusions about what we have accomplished and learned from 15 years of experience in the United States with various types of comprehensive community building efforts could be useful to the United Kingdom as it embarks on a new generation of community change initiatives. Similarly, the United States's relatively rich history of evaluating social programs might suggest broader lessons that could inform efforts to evaluate and learn from community change efforts in the United Kingdom.
- ▶ On the other side of the Atlantic, the UK government's commitment to evidence-based policy, in combination with strong central policy leadership around equity and community regeneration, presents an important model for how a cycle of evidence-based policy making might play out in community change efforts. The UK government's efforts to undertake systematic reviews of research evidence around interventions that produce desirable social policy outcomes, primarily in health, also offer important lessons for the United States.

The discussions also highlighted important differences in the social policy infrastructure in the two countries that potentially limit what might be transferred from one to the other. Most notable is the very strong role that the central government plays in setting and implementing social welfare policy and related research throughout the United Kingdom, in contrast to the critical role that nongovernmental organizations, such as private philanthropies, research and technical assistance intermediaries, and community-based organizations play in catalyzing, funding, supporting, implementing, and evaluating social policy initiatives in the United States. As a result, each system poses somewhat different opportunities for developing evidence about what works and using such evidence to improve policy and practice.

Acknowledgments

This report draws upon and distills a series of discussions that took place between June 2001 and April 2004 in the United Kingdom and the United States regarding evaluation of community-based initiatives to improve outcomes for individuals and families. Over the course of six intensive work sessions, researchers, policymakers, funders, practitioners, and technical experts from both countries shared the problems they were facing, strategies for addressing them, and ideas for moving the field forward. The names of these people, who generously shared their time, experience, and expertise, can be found in the appendix.

The inspiration for the overall set of activities that led to the production of this report came from the leaders of the two foundations that have supported the work since June 2001: Julia Lopez and Darren Walker of The Rockefeller Foundation in the United States; and Anna

Coote, Julia Neuberger, and Niall Dickson of The King's Fund in the United Kingdom. They were deeply engaged at every step along the way, and we thank them for their leadership, their intellectual contribution, and their financial support.

After we started on this journey, three additional United States foundations joined us and supported the continuation of this work with particular reference to community initiatives in California.² They provided leadership and guidance as well as financial support, and we thank them: Alvertha Bratton Penny, Paul Brest, and Cynthia Ho from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation; Marion Standish and Alicia Lara from The California Endowment; and Sylvia Yee and Cheryl Rogers from the Evelyn and Walter Haas Jr. Fund.

A subgroup of the participants in the transatlantic dialogues deserves special mention. In June 2003, twenty people came together for five days and dedicated long hours to identifying, articulating, arguing over, and coming to agreement about the messages in this report. We thank the following people for the creativity, energy, honesty, and hard work they devoted to this project, and we hope they recognize their wisdom and their words in these pages: Jessica Allen, Prudence Brown, Robert Chaskin, Anna Coote, Claudia Coulton, Thomas David, Phil Davies, Thomas Dewar, Karen Fulbright-Anderson, John Gaventa, Craig Howard, Mark Joseph, Michael Kelly, Julia Lopez, Julia Neuberger, James Riccio, Lisbeth B. Schorr, Darren Walker, and David Woodhead.

We present here the conclusions and implications of all of these discussions, as well as related background research, for the field of community change actors in the United States. The King's Fund is producing a similar report for practitioners, researchers, and policymakers in the United Kingdom.³

About the Aspen Roundtable on Community Change

The Roundtable on Community Change was established in 1992 as a forum in which people working on improving conditions in poor neighborhoods—including foundation sponsors, initiative and program directors, technical assistance providers, evaluators, public sector officials, and community residents—can meet to discuss the lessons that are being learned by community initiatives across the country and to work on common problems they are facing. Since 1995, the Roundtable has focused on the problems associated with evaluating community-based interventions and has issued several publications exploring various dimensions of evaluation theory, methods, measurement, and analysis. (See www.aspenroundtable.org.) This report takes that line of work one step further and suggests new ways—beyond traditional evaluations—to learn how to bring about positive change in community conditions.

2. See Kubo, Wong, and Morales, 2004; Walker and Arbretton, 2004; California Works for Better Health, n.d.

3. Coote, Allen, and Woodhead, 2004.

1 || Introduction

This publication shares what we have learned over the past 15 years about evaluating community-based efforts to improve conditions in poor communities and using that knowledge to enhance the well-being of individuals and families who live in these communities. The report focuses on three issues simultaneously:

- ▶ *How are we learning about community-based change?* What are the dominant approaches to evaluation? How are the evaluations structured? What methods and measures are we using?
- ▶ *What are we learning from the evaluations?* What types of information are surfacing? Are the evaluations giving us the information we need? Is the information helping us develop better policies and programs and carry out the work in the best possible way?
- ▶ *Where do we go from here to increase learning in the future?* How can the evaluation process be improved? What other forms of knowledge building would be useful to enhance policy development and improve practice on the ground? What kind of infrastructure would be needed to develop and support systematic learning?

The report takes off from the observation that there has been and continues to be a misalignment between the goals, implementation experiences, and timelines of comprehensive community *initiatives* (CCIs), on the one hand, and the goals, implementation experiences, and timelines of their *evaluations*, on the other.

We expected, for example, that evaluations would produce conclusive information in a timely way about the effectiveness of the initiatives and which elements work best for which purposes. However, this expectation failed to account sufficiently for the complexity of the endeavors, the difficulty of implementing them, and the long-term nature of the change process. Measurable results were delayed because implementation required more time, resources, and capacity than we had anticipated. Evaluators, therefore, have had to struggle to identify the important processes and components of the initiatives, measure them, and then link them to the outcomes in a meaningful way. In the end, the evaluations have turned out to be more descriptions of the feasibility of implementing CCIs than tests of the effectiveness of the approach.

While we had an appreciation for the fact that CCIs were “different” from traditional social and economic development programs when they were launched 15 years ago—and that therefore their evaluations would be different—there was a general optimism that, over the course

of this period of experimentation, we would figure it all out. Unfortunately, we have not, although we have made progress and learned some valuable lessons along the way.

Where do we go from here?

One possible conclusion is that community change initiatives are so big, unwieldy, multidirectional, and difficult to implement that they are no longer a promising route to achieving substantive community change and should therefore be abandoned. Another possibility is to conclude that because community change initiatives are so big, unwieldy, multidirectional, and difficult to implement, they are virtually impossible to evaluate in any meaningful way, and we should stop trying to do so.

Across the field, we need to dig deeper around some key questions, draw on different sources for evidence, and develop a broader knowledge base that goes beyond formal evaluations of programs and initiatives.

This report assumes that there will continue to be an identifiable branch of antipoverty work that is community-based, pursues broadly defined and integrative programmatic strategies, and promotes community-building principles of participation, empowerment, and the strengthening of local capacity and social capital. Similarly, there will continue to be efforts to study the results of this work. The challenge is learning how to structure the effort so it yields more useful lessons about how to improve practice and policy.

At the same time, it is important to recognize that the field of CCIs and related community-based interventions is at a crossroads. Having the evaluations of the earliest CCIs in hand, many foundations and public policymakers are rethinking how they

can most productively invest in communities and community change efforts. Many important questions about improving conditions in poor communities remain unanswered.

As we go forward, the commitment to rethinking intervention strategies must be paired with a commitment to new strategies for learning. Leaders in the field must identify how to build the knowledge base in ways that are most likely to strengthen community change efforts and develop evidence about what works and why. The effort will require different ways of doing business and different ways of conceptualizing evaluation on the part of funders, practitioners, public policymakers, and researchers. Across the field, we need to dig deeper around some key questions, draw on different sources for evidence, and develop a broader knowledge base that goes beyond formal evaluations of programs and initiatives. We also need better ways to feed this information back to the practitioners who do community change work on the ground and the policymakers who fund and support their efforts.

To move forward:

- ▶ We must engage in an honest appraisal of what has been done well and what has been done poorly in CCIs and in their evaluations. We need to identify

where there has been success in aligning initiative goals and strategies, evaluation methods, and expectations for learning, and expand these efforts. At the same time, we need to identify where there have been misalignments, where the evaluation methods did not match the workings of the initiatives or serve the learning objectives, and develop approaches that would do the job better.

- ▶ We must develop more clarity about the priority questions that need to be answered about community revitalization and be more realistic about the likelihood of being able to answer them given the power and limits of CCIs and the power and limits of our research methods and tools.
- ▶ We must utilize alternative sources of information and alternative methodologies—beyond initiative evaluations—to develop strategies for improving the work on the ground and feeding back those strategies to policymakers and practitioners.
- ▶ We must build a new infrastructure for supporting this work and ensuring that it proceeds in a cumulative and systematic way.

The New Paradigm for Learning

It is possible to envision a *more commonly determined, collective knowledge development enterprise* than currently exists in all the stand-alone CCIs and stand-alone evaluations. This endeavor would begin with taking stock of the existing knowledge base in the field, followed by efforts to organize systematic learning around core questions, challenges, and unknowns.

An example might illustrate this point:

Because of the work that has been done on CCIs over the past 15 years, we can now begin to specify what we mean by terms like “building internal community capacity” and “external community influence” with enough clarity that we can better describe their role in an initiative’s theory of change. This clarity and specificity should allow us to develop indicators and measures of these otherwise murky community-building concepts. Having accomplished this, the next step becomes clear: We need to determine what community building contributes to community change efforts and *focus on demonstrating the connection between community-building outcomes and other key indicators of community well-being*, such as higher employment rates, better health outcomes, and improved educational achievement.

This new work can be done, as in the past, on an initiative-by-initiative basis. But greater progress could be made if it were undertaken at multiple sites or across multiple initiatives. This

would allow *systematic comparisons* of how strategies, implementation, and outcomes vary according to, for example, the history and trajectory of the neighborhood, the local political and economic environment, the capacity of the organizations participating in the initiative, and the level of social cohesion among the residents of the neighborhood. Evaluations will, of course, continue to be an important part of this knowledge development process, but they will make the greatest contribution if they can be more focused and intentional about answering high-priority questions that have field-wide significance.

Community change efforts and related research could be further strengthened if communities and other stakeholders were to draw on the insights and lessons generated by *a broad spectrum of disciplines* and social policy fields, such as community organizing, community and issue advocacy, public health, neighborhood safety, low-income housing, or regional planning. Reviews of published sources and systematic reviews of evaluation literature from these and other related disciplines will be critical as the field develops.

At the same time, we need *other sources and methods for learning about community change and community building* that are more in keeping with the principles and values of how the work is done. There are several interesting models for capturing lessons as the work unfolds and for tapping the knowledge, experience, and insights that practitioners have acquired over years of work—information that does not necessarily find its way into published materials. Over the past decade, a number of creative approaches to practitioner learning—such as structured peer-learning groups, communities of practice, and study circles—have been developed. Action research has emerged as a tool to ensure that research is organized so as to be of direct use to practitioners. And recent pathways mapping efforts and replication projects provide possible models for distilling lessons in new and different ways.

Because so much is still unknown about what kind of change is possible and how to implement the strategies for change, developmental approaches to research and evaluation should be given high priority in the community change field for the foreseeable future. The challenge is to *organize these research endeavors so that they produce immediate benefits to practitioners and also develop a cumulative body of learning* about practice that can inform other efforts. Being able to systematize the knowledge is key.

Finally, we need methods for disseminating information that are in keeping with the structure and principles of the community change field and that focus on reaching practitioners on the ground as well as policymakers in high positions. That is, we need to *develop lessons for policy and practice* in a way that builds community capacity to use the information and to engage in the policy process.

All of this supports the conclusion that the field of comprehensive community-building efforts needs a new paradigm for knowledge development and new structures to manage the knowledge development process. This will be no simple task, for a wide variety of reasons: Fundamental community-building concepts and practices are not always clearly defined; practitioners need to apply core principles that embody values and philosophy as well as pro-

grammatic and technical expertise drawn from many different disciplines; the work is done by organizations that are typically small, underfunded, and disconnected from larger systems and supports; and current efforts to promote “what works” and what is “best practice” are handicapped by the perception that, because every community is unique and has been shaped by a unique set of circumstances, there are few universal lessons that can be extracted for use elsewhere. As a result, information is both developed and shared in very unsystematic ways.

This report argues that it is both possible and necessary to think about intentional community change more scientifically and to treat community change and community building as a technical field rather than simply a set of principles, values, and philosophies. The report describes both the kinds of information that need to be produced and strategies that can be used to develop it in ways that will build the field and increase the effectiveness of interventions to improve outcomes in poor communities.

2 || *Evaluating Comprehensive Community Initiatives: Where We Have Been and What We Have Learned*

Comprehensive community initiatives pose special challenges for evaluation because they do not fit the accepted paradigms of social program evaluation in the United States—paradigms that emphasize the “gold standard” of random assignment trials, the testing of well-defined research designs, and the development of quantifiable outcomes to judge effectiveness. The Aspen Roundtable summarized the CCI features that challenge traditional evaluation approaches as follows:⁴

- ▶ *Horizontal complexity.* They work across multiple sectors (social, economic, physical, political, and others) simultaneously and aim for synergy among them.
- ▶ *Vertical complexity.* They aim for change at the individual, family, community, organizational, and systems levels.
- ▶ *Community building.* They aim for strengthened community capacity, enhanced social capital, an empowered neighborhood, and similar outcomes that are not easily quantifiable.
- ▶ *Contextual issues.* They aim to incorporate external political, economic, and other conditions into their framework, even though they may have little power to affect them.
- ▶ *Community responsiveness and flexibility over time.* They are designed to be community specific and to evolve in response to the dynamics of the neighborhood and the lessons being learned by the initiative.
- ▶ *Community saturation.* Because CCIs aim to reach all members of a community, it is infeasible to randomly assign individual residents to treatment and control groups for the purposes of assessing the CCI’s impact; finding equivalent comparison communities is also extremely difficult.⁵

The technical challenges of evaluating CCIs have been exacerbated by the fact that the science of designing and implementing initiatives to promote positive community change is still in its infancy. As a result, CCI evaluators face the difficult task of assessing a model of intervention that is still under construction, using tools that were developed for different purposes and are

4. Connell, Kubisch, Schorr, and Weiss, 1995.

5. The lack of suitable comparison groups in CCI evaluations is discussed at greater length in Hollister and Hill, 1995.

inappropriate to the task. Like the initiatives they were studying, the evaluators of this first generation of CCIs had to make up the rules of good practice as they went along. In this process, several problems emerged consistently across the evaluations.

Persistent Problems

The evaluations of the early CCIs have produced richly textured accounts of what has happened in individual communities and a great deal of descriptive information about the key processes that have been involved, such as community planning, collaboration, resident engagement, and leadership development. Collectively, they yield important cross cutting lessons about planning, mounting, and managing complex community change initiatives.

CCI evaluations have also documented what might be called first-order effects. They show, for example, that CCIs have successfully implemented new services, built low-income housing, improved the quality of the physical environment, helped establish small businesses, helped neighborhood organizations to partner and work together, and so on.

These are important accomplishments, and they should be recognized as such. But the lack of information about longer-term outcomes and impacts, and the lack of evidence about the effectiveness of the overall approach as a revitalization strategy, significantly limit the cumulative learning the initiatives provide and the ability to draw lessons from them about good practice.

Why didn't these evaluations accomplish more? There are several reasons, each of which has implications for future work.

Evaluation Time Frames Were Too Short

In many cases, the mismatch between the time frames of the initiatives and the evaluations became an insurmountable problem. The kinds of changes that CCIs are expected to produce in communities will not be manifested for a much longer period than initiatives typically track. A particular problem is that the time needed to get an initiative up and running has turned out to be much longer than anticipated. It is not uncommon for the planning, capacity building, and start-up phases of an initiative to take three or more years. This means that an evaluation that tracks an initiative for its first five years—a very long time for social policy evaluations—will cover only a relatively short period during which the initiative is functioning at full capacity, the period that provides the strongest test of the initiative's effectiveness. This is one reason so many of the early CCI evaluations, which begin tracking the initiative during the planning phase, do not document much beyond these early phases, provide little insight into the workings of the initiative in its later, most mature stages, and do not even begin to assess the initiative's long-term impact.

If the goal of an evaluation is to assess the effectiveness of a particular type of intervention, the "fair test" standard would require that the intervention be allowed to play out. Based on

their recent experience tracking the lengthy start-up phases of CCIs, evaluators report that the pressure to begin collecting a lot of information starts earlier than it should. They suggest conserving evaluation resources during the early years of the initiative and focusing on planning the evaluation carefully and collecting only the necessary baseline data. More fundamentally, the field needs to develop a different mind-set to accommodate the long-term nature of the community change process, including strategies for drawing on the experience of initiatives in their later stages in order to assess the impact and sustainability of these change efforts. Pressure to show results quickly can skew evaluations away from a focus on knowledge building and toward the documentation of first-order questions.

Extending the time frame of the evaluations would solve some problems but raise others. One issue is the difficulty of maintaining the focus of the evaluation, as well as the initiative, over the long term, and retaining the interest and commitment of the funders. Anybody who expects quick—or clean—results is bound to be disappointed. The key is to balance the various evaluation purposes more effectively.

The Guiding Theories of Change Were Inadequate

The emphasis on developing a “theory of change” was seen as a way to handle many of the CCI evaluation challenges, from identifying the goals and activities of the work to helping to build a case for causal attribution. But in virtually every case, the theories of change that drove the initiatives and their evaluations were not really adequate to substantiate the connections between activities and outcomes.

In some cases the problem was that the guiding theory of change was underspecified. As one veteran evaluator put it, there has been too much “fuzzy thinking” in the efforts to articulate the operational pathways and explain how the components of an initiative are expected to produce the desired outcomes. In these cases, the causal assumptions too often reflected leaps of faith rather than reliance on good research evidence or informed experience.

In other cases the guiding theory of change was overspecified. There are examples of theories of change developed by sets of stakeholders that were far too complicated to be useful in evaluating the results of an initiative or in identifying the critical points that could measure progress toward an ultimate goal. In these cases, so many potential actions and results are identified that it is impossible to know which ones are key determinants of longer-term success. They do not help to set priorities for action or identify markers for judging the likelihood of future success.

The underlying problem that explains both these tendencies is that there is still not enough good science on which to base the theories of change in community interventions and their evaluations. Theory needs to be grounded in or at least informed by prior research evidence, experiential knowledge, and knowledge of good practice. It must also clearly identify the rationale for assuming that specific actions, strategies, or approaches will contribute to the hypothesized results. There is a striking need in the CCI field for better theories and evidence about the process of community change and the likely contribution of specific types

of strategies. It is this need that drives the demand for a new and different way to build knowledge about community change.

Data Collection Efforts Became Too Comprehensive

A related problem in the early CCI evaluation efforts has been a tendency to indulge in what one evaluator calls “omnibus data collection” efforts, which result in an almost overwhelming amount of data. Evaluators (as well as funders and other stakeholders) acknowledge that they have been hard-pressed to make sense out of the huge amount of data that is routinely produced and have had great difficulty using them to identify patterns, develop lessons, and draw conclusions.

Some of this is unavoidable. Since the field is new, casting a wide data net may be a necessary first step prior to sorting what is important from what is not. There is also a natural tendency for evaluators to err in the direction of collecting too much data rather than not enough or not the right data, because they know that the data cannot be gathered after the fact, and they fear that the absence of critical information will undermine the analysis.

However, undifferentiated data collection and presentation also create problems. It is expensive and uses up a lot of resources. It can create burdens for organizations and project staff that have to spend time producing data for the evaluators and answering their questions—and typically are not compensated for doing so—and can create a sense of intrusiveness. These tensions are only intensified if the data turn out not to be used, or not used in ways that seem meaningful to program staff or local stakeholders.

A focus on outcomes—whether they are community building outcomes or programmatic outcomes—can supply needed discipline and clarity for both initiatives and evaluations.

The lesson is that it is impossible to evaluate all aspects or elements of CCI; choices have to be made. Evaluation efforts need to be clearer from the start about the kinds of questions they hope to answer, the kinds of data they need to answer them, and what it will take to build a convincing case about the initiative’s effectiveness. Developing grounded theories of change that lay out a logical and clear pathway from actions to outcomes can help evaluators focus the data collection efforts and identify the information needed to build a case about the efficacy and value of what the initiative is doing. A focus on outcomes—whether they are community building outcomes or programmatic outcomes—can also supply needed discipline and clarity for both initiatives and evaluations.

The Tensions between the Community Building Principles Guiding the Initiatives and the Technical Demands of Evaluation Were Difficult To Resolve

As the initiatives unfolded, the competing demands between the values underlying community building and the requirements of a technically sound evaluation were difficult to sort through. The main tension, which must be addressed and balanced in structuring research efforts, is the need for community building to move toward standardization of an intervention, or parts of an intervention, for cross-site learning purposes, while also respecting local circumstances, priorities, and voices.

The Good News: Where Progress Has Been Made

Over the course of the past 15 years, researchers working on CCIs have struggled with many evaluation conundrums, and while they have not been fully resolved, there has been progress on a number of them. Examining the areas in which new approaches, conceptual frameworks, and methods have been developed provides some guidance as to the most fruitful questions and strategies to pursue in the future.

Developing More Realistic Assumptions about the Magnitude and Timing of Community Change, and Matching Research Strategies to Those Realities

It is now clear that the mismatch of the time frames associated with the duration of community initiatives, the rate at which change can be expected to occur in poor communities, and the length of evaluations have been extremely problematic for knowledge-building objectives. Fifteen years ago, the pressures to promise quick results from this new generation of interventions was strong, and most stakeholders succumbed to that pressure. This included not just the program directors and grant seekers, but also program officers in foundations who needed constituents and support for their grant making. Evaluations, unfortunately, were structured to meet these more political time frames, and learning opportunities were lost.

An honest appraisal of the cost of this approach to knowledge building may open up avenues for more patient inquiry. This is an appropriate moment to call for sustained research on well-articulated questions in specific locations over a reasonable length of time. We can proceed with discussions about what can and cannot be learned from evaluations, and we can put new approaches to long-term knowledge building on the table, such as retrospective case studies, panel studies of communities, or focused research on specific questions over realistic time frames across sites.

Incorporating the Community Building Dimensions into the Evaluation

CCI evaluators have worked hard to address two common complaints that community-based change agents have consistently expressed about traditional evaluations. One was that evaluators were seen as uninvolved technicians who parachuted into the community, made enormous data demands on the local organization, analyzed the data in a distant research office without involving key stakeholders, and then made life-or-death judgments about the effectiveness of the work without giving sufficient feedback to local stakeholders who could most benefit from what they discovered. The second was that evaluators often failed to capture what community-based actors perceived as their most important work: community building activities that resulted in capacity development, social capital and network creation, leadership development, and community empowerment. On both of these fronts, CCI evaluations have made important headway.

In the context of CCIs, evaluators have developed better strategies to engage and respect community residents, involve them in the evaluation process, and use evaluations to build community capacity to plan, implement, and monitor progress. While there has been some improvement in the methods that evaluators use to report back their findings to the local community—for

example, evaluators have worked to develop a variety of user-friendly formats for making the findings accessible to nonresearchers—evaluators still need to work to provide formative feedback that helps stakeholders take corrective action and use the findings in other ways that benefit the community. Tailoring findings, developing specific messages for specific audiences, and dealing with the political implications of the work are areas that still need work.

Another challenge that CCIs presented to evaluators was the need to capture elements of the initiative that go beyond investments designed to produce narrow programmatic outcomes (such as the numbers of child care slots created, job seekers given guidance, clients served by a health program). It has become increasingly clear that evaluations that fail to track and interpret community building strategies and outcomes are in danger of missing a major part of what has been accomplished.

While the progress made by evaluators in defining these community building elements and developing tools and instruments that can help measure them is critical, there is still a long way to go in constructing our knowledge base about community building: a great deal of work remains to be done to understand both the intrinsic value of community building outcomes as well as their role in producing “hard” outcomes related to reduced poverty and improved well-being.

The Theory-of-Change Approach to Evaluation: A Useful Methodology

The theory-of-change approach to evaluation has proven to be helpful in clarifying the goals and strategies of community interventions, and in designing, implementing, and evaluating large-scale initiatives. In this type of evaluation, groups of stakeholders work together in a facilitated process with the evaluators of the initiative to articulate their theory of change, identifying key elements in the initiative, as well as its anticipated impact. Ideally, this exercise develops what is essentially a testable research hypothesis about the change that is expected to happen as a result of an initiative. By laying out key stages or steps in multiple pathways of change, it also identifies interim activities and outputs that can be used both as performance management checkpoints for project staff and as interim outcomes in an evaluation.

Helping stakeholders to develop good theories of change is a time-consuming, resource-intensive process that requires several iterations, good facilitation, and access to information. Stakeholders need to be guided through the process of thinking systematically about change, drawing connections to establish causality, identifying the possible effects of their actions, and understanding the potential interactions among the components of their initiatives. A number of tools and resources have been developed in recent years to help in this endeavor, including a growing pool of skilled and experienced individuals who can facilitate the process and train others to do so. There are also several how-to guides and manuals.⁶

Other resources are needed to help stakeholders develop theories of change that are better grounded in real-world evidence. It is important that communities not think they are drawing

6. For theory-of-change resources, see, for example, the website www.theoryofchange.org, and Anderson, 2004.

on blank slates as they develop their theories of change and strategic plans for action, but that they are aware of and utilize the existing evidence base about the problems they are trying to solve. The process will go more smoothly and produce better results if stakeholders and facilitators have access to information that allows them to draw on the existing body of research and current literature from a range of domains and disciplines, and to think more systematically about what it will take to promote and sustain the changes they want to bring about. This point echoes one made earlier in this chapter: A better knowledge base will help us develop better theories of change, and better theories of change will improve both the design of our initiatives and the opportunities for learning about change.

The San Francisco Beacon Initiative is a prime example of an evaluation in which the stakeholders developed the underlying theory of change and used it as a management tool as well as an evaluation framework. The sponsors, intermediary organizations, evaluators, and program managers of the initiative all agree that applying the theory of change in this way was instrumental in keeping the initiative on track, holding the various stakeholders accountable for agreed-upon strategies and outcomes, and focusing the evaluation on a few key outcomes.⁷

Making the Case for Effectiveness: Three Evaluations Offer Insights

A few CCIs and their evaluations have made considerable efforts to draw conclusions about the effectiveness of the initiative and lessons about effective implementation practices. Three evaluations (of the Jobs-Plus Initiative, the Plain Talk initiative, and the Empowerment Zone/Enterprise Community [EZ/EC] Program) illustrate the strategies for addressing what has long been seen as one of the most challenging issues facing CCI evaluators: convincingly demonstrating, in the absence of a traditional random-assignment design, that a community-wide initiative has been effective in improving community-wide outcomes.⁸ These evaluations provide additional important lessons about the issues that proved so problematic in other evaluations.

In all three evaluations, “making the case” was a multistage process that used a combination of methods and data sources—both qualitative and quantitative—to build evidence about the effectiveness of the initiative. The process involved delineating a hypothetical pathway of change to explain how and why the planned activities were expected to lead to the anticipated outcomes, developing quantitative measures to show whether the outcomes of interest changed in the anticipated direction, comparing the measured change to the change that occurred in other communities over the same period and to preinitiative trends, examining whether the initiative was implemented in a way that was consistent with producing those outcomes, and determining whether other contextual factors provided a better or alternative explanation to account for the change.

7. Presentation on the Evaluation of the San Francisco Beacon Initiative at the West Coast Conference on Evaluation of Community Interventions, April 29, 2004; see also, Walker and Arbreton, 2001; 2004.

8. The three evaluations were discussed in detail at the January 2003 US/UK seminar, “Finding Out What Works: Advances in Evaluating Community-Based Initiatives.” See also, Riccio, 1998; and Bloom and Riccio, 2002; Grossman et al., 2001; Walker and Kotloff, 1999; Hebert et al., 2001.

All three evaluations build a case around a theory of change or a hypothetical pathway of change that delineates a causal pathway and identifies intermediate steps in the change process. These became points at which change could be measured by interim outcomes that could show that progress had been made toward reaching the ultimate outcomes. The interim and ultimate objectives were clearly identified at the start of the initiative, and the evaluation design and data collection efforts were focused around them.

Being able to develop evidence that supported a grounded theory of change was important to making the causal case, but it was not sufficient: evaluators devoted considerable effort to developing a counterfactual so they could measure the change that would have occurred in the absence of the initiative and compare it to the change that occurred where the initiative was in place. The difference could be identified as the effect of the initiative. One evaluator used a methodology known as cluster random assignment to create a pool of communities to serve as controls;⁹ another used statistical modeling to project what pregnancy rates would have been in the absence of the initiative;¹⁰ and the last compared employment growth in the zones with those in comparison areas and contiguous areas of the same city.¹¹ Information about program implementation, the community context, and community building processes was vital to understanding how much and what kinds of change had occurred, and why there were improved outcomes in some sites but not others. Another important aspect of making the case about effectiveness was being able to develop evidence that showed that all or most of the change was in the right direction and therefore consistent with the theory of change.

Within these general parameters, the three evaluations used very different approaches to developing evidence and making a case. How successful each evaluation has been in making its case is up to the field to decide. It is clear, at least, that the appropriate standard of judgment should not be, “Do they prove their case beyond a shadow of a doubt with incontrovertible scientific evidence?” but instead, “Do they make a strong enough case that the preponderance of evidence would permit reasonable people to conclude that the initiative made a difference?” and “Is the evidence convincing enough to warrant continuing the initiative or adopting it in other locations or on a larger scale?”

Although each of these initiatives has a strong community building component, they were more subject to central management and development, more narrowly focused, and more driven by research needs than most CCIs and their evaluations. Both the core components and the outcomes of interest were specified by the national stakeholders based on prior research findings, although local communities had the freedom to develop the details of the components of each. These three initiatives are thus closer to the traditional paradigm of developing and “testing” a demonstration model and of using an intermediary organization to manage the implementation and evaluation of the initiative.

9. Bloom and Riccio, 2002.

10. Walker and Kotloff, 1999; Grossman et al., 2001.

11. Hebert et al., 2001.

This approach to design, management, and evaluation of a community change initiative has both benefits and drawbacks for the CCI world. It is not clear that this research model could be used to evaluate the participatory, broad community change initiatives in which many choices are made at the community level and little is specified by the sponsor in advance. On the other hand, greater focus and specification of some design elements would be advantageous from a knowledge-building perspective, and possibly from an implementation perspective as well.

Lessons for Moving Forward

Taken together, the observations and lessons discussed in this chapter suggest ways to strengthen CCI evaluations and the role they play in developing knowledge for the field. The aim of the chapter is to build the case that future evaluations should place less emphasis on showcasing the accomplishments of a particular neighborhood, initiative, or foundation, and more emphasis on adding to the cumulative body of knowledge that can advance the field. While the authors understand the various political, administrative, financial, and other reasons why highlighting the payoff of an investment is important, the field as a whole would benefit from some restructuring of the research emphasis in the next generation of initiatives.

This suggests some new ways of conceptualizing the evaluation enterprise. For example, an important implication of this rethinking process is that not all initiatives are worth evaluating in a major, intensive way. Another is to stress that the intensity and scale of the evaluation should be linked to the intensity and scale of the initiative. Yet another is that CCI evaluators and stakeholders need to keep in mind that standards of evidence differ for different types of questions.

To strengthen individual evaluations and increase their contribution to cumulative knowledge building in the field, the following lessons should be kept in mind:

- ▶ Be clear about the purpose of the evaluation and the learning questions it is attempting to answer.
- ▶ Be realistic about what can be accomplished and what can be learned.
- ▶ Develop the evaluation design along with the initiative design.
- ▶ Focus the work around key outcomes.
- ▶ Be sure to value and document the nonprogrammatic outcomes relating to community building and work to link them to programmatic outcomes.

The next chapter discusses the questions that should be the focus of future work and suggests that evaluations alone will not be adequate sources of information.

3 || *What We Need to Know about Community Change: The Critical Role of Community Building*

To increase the effectiveness of community change interventions, we will need to improve our understanding of the key factors that produce positive change in community conditions and the strategies that can influence them. To accomplish this, we need to be more deliberate and thoughtful about our approach to learning and evaluation and more attuned to the cumulative nature of knowledge building. We need to focus our work, be more strategic about devoting resources to key areas of investigation, and more systematic about developing answers. This requires drawing on a wide range of information and conducting other types of research in addition to formal evaluations.

As a first step, we need to start analyzing community change by disaggregating, dissecting, and classifying its component parts. Too often, we have tried to understand the whole without having sufficient knowledge about the various working parts and how they function separately and together. Once we understand the pieces and their interrelations better, we can more accurately identify potential levers for catalyzing change and improving practice on the ground.

Key topics around which we need to deepen our analysis and understanding include:

- ▶ The community-building strategies that most effectively produce community-building outcomes, such as increases in civic infrastructure, social capital, political strength, and other community capacities;
- ▶ The ways that community-building strategies and outcomes interact with programmatic interventions and outcomes;
- ▶ The ways in which improving outcomes across a range of domains, such as health, employment, crime, and safety, creates synergies and other added value;
- ▶ The ways that neighborhood history, context, and connections to the outside affect the implementation and success of a community change initiative; and
- ▶ The threshold that interventions must meet to produce particular outcomes.

Understanding the Role of Community Building

To illustrate what a more systematic approach to knowledge building might look like, we consider a key issue: understanding the connection between community-building strategies, community-building outcomes, and more programmatic approaches to community improvement.

By community building, we mean democratic and participatory efforts to enhance the capacities of individuals and organizations in communities and the connections between community actors and outside resources.¹² The outcomes that community building potentially affects fall into two general categories:¹³

- ▶ outcomes that describe the well-being of populations of children and families and of neighborhoods, including health, education, employment, income, housing, and neighborhood safety (hereafter, social or programmatic outcomes), and
- ▶ outcomes that describe elements of community efficacy, including civic and democratic engagement, neighborhood empowerment, and policy/advocacy successes (hereafter, civic, democratic, or empowerment outcomes).

Many questions remain about how to foster community building and how community building helps to achieve programmatic outcomes.

This report suggests that community building and the value it adds to community change efforts should be a priority topic for investigation because community building is such a central element in many broad-based community change efforts. Moreover, it is typically this component that makes the implementation of community change initiatives so lengthy, “messy,” and difficult to manage or direct. Many questions remain about how to foster community building and how community building helps to achieve programmatic outcomes. Given how difficult and frustrating stakeholders often find the community-building process to be, it seems especially important to gain clarity about its dimensions and effects.

This will allow community change agents to make a stronger case for why and under what conditions they should maintain a focus on community building, and it will clarify when this more complex and oftentimes cumbersome strategy may not be necessary to community change efforts.

Although most stakeholders rightly stress the importance of both programmatic and empowerment outcomes in community change efforts, the different outcome scenarios suggest different rationales for undertaking certain types of community-building activities, different pathways to link community building and outcomes, and different criteria for judging whether the investment is worthwhile.

Popular assumptions and rationales assert, for example, that:

12. Community-building strategies include but are not limited to: resident engagement in planning, management, and implementation; leadership development; creating connections among residents for affective and instrumental purposes; community organizing and mobilization; local organizational capacity development; creating collaborations among community organizations; and increasing the representational and advocacy power of the community vis-à-vis political and economic entities beyond the community's border.

13. Xavier de Sousa Briggs, 2003. Informal comments at Aspen Roundtable meeting, Aspen, Colorado.

- ▶ involving community residents in planning, designing, and implementing change efforts in domains like housing, employment, crime and safety, education, and health will increase the effectiveness of programmatic interventions and lead to better programmatic outcomes or improved community conditions;
- ▶ community building creates resources and assets within the community that will better enable the community to take advantage of opportunities, resist downturns, and solve problems in the future;
- ▶ community capacity building produces civic or political outcomes that are good in themselves and provide access to power bases that can benefit a particular neighborhood or its residents.

Step One: Getting Clear about What We Mean by Community Building

Despite all of the evaluations of the past 15 years, the assumptions about what community building can accomplish and why it matters remain poorly articulated and largely unproven. One difficulty has been that too often the literature on CCIs treats community building as an umbrella concept and does not adequately distinguish its primary features and how they lead to different types of outcomes.

To facilitate this work as we move forward, the field would benefit greatly from focusing its collective resources on developing the following information, analyses, and tools:

- ▶ clear definitions for the key concepts, elements, and outcomes of community building;
- ▶ a taxonomy that identifies and classifies key dimensions of community building;
- ▶ standard measures or indicators that would make it possible to identify and measure the outcomes of a community-building process (such as social networks, local leadership development) and their relationship to increased community capacity and empowerment;
- ▶ a diagnostic tool that could be used to assess where specific communities fall along these dimensions.

Step Two: Getting Clear about Why Community Building Is Important

Once this type of information is assembled, the field will be in a better position to design and test actionable strategies and approaches to community building and community change. Here, the emphasis must be on creating *theoretical models or hypothetical pathways* of change that map the processes by which community-building and community-capacity strategies might produce programmatic or civic outcomes. It is particularly important to identify and analyze the circumstances and ways in which programmatic strategies for change and community-building strategies might complement each other, as well as when and how they might compete with each other.

Such information will also make it easier to answer the following types of questions and thus develop important lessons to guide practice on the ground:

- ▶ Does a community-building strategy look different if the purpose is achieving programmatic outcomes versus achieving democratic/empowerment outcomes?
- ▶ Are some community-building attributes specific to particular outcomes or strategies? That is, are there generic skills, knowledge, processes, or connections that can be transferred from one issue area or topic to another, or are they really issue or domain specific? Are there some that matter more for particular outcomes?
- ▶ Do particular community-building strategies, capacities, or practices make more sense in some contexts or communities than others?
- ▶ Do certain types of programmatic interventions require a level of preexisting capacity to implement effectively and efficiently? If so, what practical implications are suggested? Are there threshold levels that can be identified?

As discussed in the next chapter, the information needed to answer these questions will have to come from empirical research, case studies, and experience, as well as from formal evaluations. What is important at this point is having a shared sense of the type of information that is needed to guide future work.

Step Three: Getting Clear about When, How, and Under What Circumstances to Invest in Community Building

The next step after dissecting the key elements and dimensions of change is to identify and analyze the mediating factors. Critical to this effort is the need to develop an understanding of the ways neighborhood history, context (e.g., demographics, institutional structure, and

capacity), and connections affect the implementation and success of a community change initiative, and to use that knowledge to develop analytical tools, assessment criteria, and guidelines for practice. We expect, for example, that certain capacities, combinations of capacities, or levels of capacity may prove to be more important to achieving programmatic outcomes in some specific domains than in others. The type, depth, and extent of the institutional and social infrastructures are other potentially critical elements.

Many of these contextual factors can be identified and classified. Developing evidence about how similar strategies or interventions have played out in different types of communities in order to draw comparative lessons would be enormously useful in this effort. Information about critical elements and factors for success could then be formulated and presented as a series of “if, then” statements and disseminated to the field as guidelines for good practice. This work can be adjusted and refined and can become more nuanced and sophisticated as more evidence is developed over time. It could even lay the groundwork for developing more rigorous tests of key issues and hypotheses in the future.

A very simple example of the type of guidance that could result from this work illustrates how it could be useful in matching strategies and initiatives to the capacity of specific communities:

If a community already has a number of established, well-functioning community-based organizations and a core of resident leaders, *then* it may be well-positioned to take on fairly sophisticated programmatic interventions or initiatives that focus on systems change. Conversely, *if* a community lacks an organizational infrastructure and its residents are socially isolated and alienated, *then* initial efforts may be best focused on bringing residents together and building ties of familiarity and trust.

Taxonomies and guidelines of this sort could also help to set reasonable standards for judging success: Communities with less capacity should not be judged by the same standards as higher functioning ones. The two hypothetical capacity building efforts in the example should not be expected to reach the same level of proficiency within the same amount of time. In other words, these examples suggest the need for incorporating a developmental perspective into judgments about the accomplishments or success of specific initiatives.

The following chapter discusses moving beyond evaluations for sources of information that would make this knowledge development effort possible.

4 || *Thinking Differently about How We Learn about Community Change: Moving from the Old to a New Paradigm for Learning*

The previous chapter describes the priority topics needing investigation and deliberate knowledge building in order for the community change field to advance more quickly. This chapter focuses on the mechanisms and support systems needed to develop, organize, translate, disseminate, and utilize this new knowledge about community change.

Moving Away from the Traditional Paradigm

The prevailing paradigm about evidence-based policy making in the US social welfare field is that good evidence will produce changes in policy (i.e. laws, regulations, or funding practices) at the federal or state level, and that these policy changes will in turn create mandates, incentives, and supports (or alternatively, disincentives or restrictions) that will change practice at the ground level. While there are many examples of policies that have been adopted without regard to evidence, there are some powerful examples in which this paradigm has worked well, notably in welfare-to-work programs, preschool education, and home health visiting. In these cases, rigorous research findings have had a strong impact on determining the programs, policies, and practices that are funded and supported at the federal and state level.¹⁴

This report recommends that the community change field needs to operate along a different paradigm for developing and using evidence to influence policy and practice than the traditional model that has dominated social policy research in recent decades. There are a number of reasons why the view that “research influences policy and policy produces changes in practice” is not so applicable to the community change field.

First, it is not likely that many community change initiatives will be able to generate the kind of rigorous evidence that has been so influential in the social policy fields in which the ideal evidence-based policy model has worked. The length of time needed to achieve substantive change is much longer than the typical time frame of, say, welfare-employment evaluations. Moreover, because community change initiatives place a strong emphasis on community involvement, community choice, and community building, evaluators cannot simply impose an intervention and a research design. Instead, community-building initiatives and activities must be tailored to community circumstances and adapted over time. Nor do the outcomes that are typically targeted lend themselves to the simple quantitative measures that are the hallmarks of randomized trials. Finally, because the initiatives are trying to change entire

14. For the impact of welfare-to-work research, see Gueron, 2000, and Wiseman, 1991; for preschool education, see Crane, 1998; for home visiting, see Schorr, 1988.

communities, it is not feasible to use a classic randomized control trial. As a result, the question, “Does it work?” cannot be answered with the same level of certitude.

Second, the community change field is constructed very differently from the education system or the welfare-employment system. This difference affects the way policy and practice are developed and the way lessons are absorbed and applied. The community change field is highly decentralized and dependent on multiple, discrete funding streams, all of which have their own complex sets of rules and regulations. The body of policymakers whose actions can affect community builders is also more diffuse, including a wide array of philanthropies as well as an array of administrators and legislators at the federal, state, and local level. Finally, community change, community development, and community building are all done at the ground level by a diverse set of organizations and groups that are typically small and unaffiliated and work independently rather than as part of a larger network. There is, therefore, no route or mechanism that can easily leverage change throughout the field.

Third, experience shows that changes in both practice and policy relating to community change occur via many different avenues. Lessons about good practice in community change activities are more likely to emerge from and be fed back to those who actually engage in the work on the ground, independent of changes or refinements in federal- or state-level policy. And major policy changes that affect poor communities and their residents have more often been driven by political, ideological, or fiscal priorities than by research findings. Many of the most significant positive and supportive policy changes have resulted from advocacy efforts on the part of networks or coalitions of community organizations and politically powerful change agents including, at the federal level, the passage and continuation of the Community Reinvestment Act; at the state level, the educational reforms and health care funding changes that resulted from the organizing efforts of the Industrial Areas Foundation in Texas; and at the municipal level, the passage of living wage legislation in Baltimore and elsewhere.¹⁵

Moving toward a New Paradigm

Having now completed a set of first-generation comprehensive community initiatives and their evaluations, it is time to turn our attention to developing “next generation” learning strategies that reflect lessons from recent experience. Even as the first generation of CCI evaluations sought out innovative methods to address the particular challenges presented by the initiatives, they largely followed the standard model of evaluating a social experiment: They assumed that a clearly defined intervention would be implemented effectively and would produce outcomes that could be anticipated, tracked, and analyzed for causality. The evaluators of this first generation of CCIs were creative in developing new techniques that responded to the lack of fit between the standard social experiment and the demands of the comprehensive

15. On the Community Reinvestment Act, see Dreier, 1996. On the Texas successes, see Warren, 2001. On living-wage campaigns, see www.livingwagecampaign.org.

community-building intervention. They developed techniques for specifying an initiative's guiding theories of change, measuring community-building processes, and using innovative methods to "make the case" for causality. But they nonetheless bumped up against the boundaries of the classic change model.

To take the next step, the strategies that we develop for addressing what we need to learn, as described in the previous chapter, must go hand in hand with careful consideration of how we learn. The field needs to develop a more coherent system or infrastructure for distilling and disseminating conclusions and lessons from recent and current initiatives, applying knowledge from related disciplines and fields, identifying new knowledge needs, and designing next-generation interventions and evaluations.

Bringing Coherence to Knowledge Building for Community Change: Developing a System to Strengthen the Knowledge Development- Practice-Policy Cycle

The most ambitious knowledge development system would have funders, policymakers, practitioners, and researchers aligned around a common agenda, which, in turn, would lead to demonstration research experiments that test well-informed hypotheses and practices in a systematic way. This model would include sophisticated information dissemination, technical transfer, and policy change strategies so as to create the highest likelihood of producing significant change in outcomes for individuals, families, and communities. The management of this process would occur in some centralized way, either through a single intermediary or through a well-structured consortium of actors.

Short of this vision of the ideal infrastructure, there is work that can be done on the component elements that will improve on current ways of learning about community change. The pieces that need attention and that can be improved upon are:

- ▶ ***Developing systematic learning opportunities*** to strengthen the knowledge development-to-practice-to-policy cycle. This will require new ways to conduct research and new ways to share the findings and lessons. There are ways to build on ongoing interventions and research to enhance the learning that they provide, and there are fertile opportunities to create new information resources.
- ▶ ***Supporting structured information sharing*** to ensure that lessons about good practice, successful interventions, and effective policies are shared in a timely way across the field.
- ▶ ***Strengthening the role of practitioners*** in identifying knowledge development needs and priorities, as sources of information and lessons, and as targets for the information that is produced.

- ▶ *Casting a wider net to expand the research base* about community change and community-building strategies by mining other disciplines and programmatic domains.
- ▶ *Blending practitioner knowledge information with social science and empirical research* in order to develop and test new theories of community change.

Developing Systematic Learning Opportunities

A key challenge to the field is to bring coherence to the array of resources and information that exists and develop a more systematic way of designing interventions and learning from them. One approach would be to build on research opportunities provided by current or recent interventions or ongoing studies. Others would borrow from research strategies developed in other fields. Possibilities include:

- ▶ *Adding a layer of research to ongoing evaluations of current initiatives:* A series of secondary questions, interviews, or other analyses about community-building practices and their results could be overlaid on top of ongoing research or evaluation efforts, even after the original evaluation is in place. Evidence developed from systematic attempts to elicit structured information from a number of existing sites has the advantage of providing more consistency and comparability than information derived from individual case studies or retrospective data collection.

A key challenge to the field is to develop a more systematic way of designing interventions and learning from them.

- ▶ *Defining focused and feasible research projects to begin to get data on key community-building questions:* New research projects that require smaller investments of time and money than formal evaluations could be undertaken as stand-alone projects to learn about community-building practices and their relationship to more programmatically determined outcomes.
- ▶ *Undertaking case studies of communities undergoing community-building/ community-change efforts:* Efforts to dig deeper into specific communities and carefully track some of the core community-building questions over time would greatly enrich the knowledge base. This would lay the groundwork for analyzing a community-change process in a variety of neighborhoods over time. While much could be learned from retrospective case studies, efforts should be made to build this in-depth research into current and future initiatives.
- ▶ *Developing evidence about the longer-term outcomes or sustainability of past initiatives and related efforts:* Because a key hypothesis in community building is that capacities are created at the community level that promise long-

term benefits, special research projects might identify some of the longer-term outcomes and sustainable elements of past CCIs and related initiatives.¹⁶

- ▶ *Assessing successful CCIs and other community change interventions and organizations to understand what contributed to their success and what elements might be replicable:* The “science” of replicating effective social interventions is developing. The key steps that have been defined include undertaking systematic efforts to identify the essential elements of successful programs, capturing good practice lessons, developing implementation guides, and providing on-site technical assistance and other supports to organizations or localities that are interested in operating the model. While it would be impossible to replicate an entire community-based initiative with all its complex working parts, it is possible that certain elements of an intervention or a particular combination of strategies might be replicable and effective in different communities. In each case, it would be important to identify the features of the intervention that were critical to its success and the contextual elements that made a critical difference. The process that has been defined by those who are attempting to build the “technology” of replication in other social policy fields may not be directly transferable to the community change field, but does provide guidance for the kinds of products that could be created.¹⁷

- ▶ *Undertaking longitudinal panel studies of communities:* Finally, and most ambitiously, a longitudinal panel study of several communities would offer a rich data set through which any number of research questions could be fully investigated. Researchers often point out that part of the reason our understanding of the community change process is so limited is that we do not yet have an organized and systematic information base to work from. Other longitudinal studies—such as the Panel Study of Income Dynamics or the national longitudinal surveys mounted by the Department of Labor—have provided a rich information resource for policy, research, and practice. This would be a large undertaking and would require cooperation among philanthropies, the federal government, and local public and nonprofit institutions.

Supporting Structured Information Sharing

An important step in bringing greater coherence to knowledge-building efforts in the community change field is simply to ensure that there is information sharing across the many actors working on these topics. The standard avenues for sharing findings and lessons of social interventions have begun to be applied to the community-building field. They include:

16. For an example of this type of study, see Hahn, 2001; and Hahn et al., 1998. This qualitative study documented the lasting effects on civic leadership and organizational capacity of some of the older initiatives after ten years.

17. Public/Private Ventures has been a leader in this work and is currently managing the replication effort for the Plain Talk Initiative, a community-based effort to reduce teen pregnancy. For information on their methodology and the replication products, see www.ppv.org; Summerville and Gale, 2003; and Summerville, 2002.

- ▶ Clearinghouses, many of which are using the Web as a main vehicle for dissemination;
- ▶ Membership organizations that hold regular conferences or provide other lines of support for local affiliates; and
- ▶ Research centers, intermediary organizations, and evaluation firms that provide technical assistance to local communities, develop and manage community-building initiatives or their evaluations, or conduct research on issues of interest to the field. These organizations publish relevant research, synthesize findings, and often try to develop crosscutting lessons and guides for good practice.

But because community building is not a technical or scientific field and because it is a cross-cutting topic that does not find a home in any single domain, these dissemination vehicles do not yet add up to an organized set of field-building institutions. It is therefore a major challenge in the community change field to build an infrastructure that can systematically review the emerging findings, organize them, maintain the focus on practitioner lessons and policy implications, and disseminate them. Successful approaches in other fields—such as the efforts of the Cochrane Collaboration and the Campbell Collaboration to systematically review the results of randomized control experiments in health care, education, crime and justice, and social welfare and organize the findings for policy making purposes—highlight the importance of this type of undertaking.¹⁸ The Campbell Collaboration is also doing important work in exploring alternative evaluation methodologies, such as cluster random assignment, and developing protocols for synthesizing evidence from implementation studies. Both are potentially applicable to the community change field. Also relevant are efforts to systematize and categorize research findings that do not meet the standard of randomized control trials but are nonetheless useful for policy purposes and field development.¹⁹

Strengthening the Role of the Practitioner

One important step is to make a much better marriage between research and practice. The past decade has demonstrated that complex community change efforts are extremely difficult to implement and manage. Information about how to define goals and then translate them into a work plan that can be implemented, managed, and evaluated remains a key need. Finding ways to capture the knowledge and expertise of the people who actually do this work on the ground could greatly enhance understanding about the elements of community building and commu-

18. An international organization based in the United Kingdom, the Cochrane Collaboration sponsors 49 review groups and 13 centers that provide training and infrastructure support. It has produced more than 1,500 systematic reviews on research of health care and updates them every two years. The Campbell Collaboration is a sibling organization that focuses on systematic reviews of research on education, crime and justice, and social welfare. Groups affiliated with the Campbell Collaboration in the United States are undertaking systematic reviews in the fields of education, adolescent pregnancy, and criminal justice. For more information, see www.cochrane.org and www.campbellcollaboration.org.

19. Child Trends, for example, produces a series on “What Works” to improve outcomes and services for children and adolescents that includes positive findings from nonexperimental studies. See Moore and Hair, September 2004 and www.childtrends.org. See also, National Institute of Justice, 1998.

nity capacity, the attributes of good practice, and the kinds of outcomes that result from community-building efforts. Weaving this practitioner knowledge together with programmatic, technical, and scientific information about “what works” will take us down the learning path envisioned by this report.

The aim here is to move beyond the notion that practitioners are merely a source of information for evaluation design and an audience for the executive summary of the evaluation report. Instead, practitioners’ needs and perspectives should help drive the design, implementation, and evaluation of an intervention, and a key test of the information’s value should be whether it is usable by practitioners.

Methodologies have been developed in the past few years that can greatly enhance the power of peer-group forums for both initiative-level learning and field-level learning. Practitioner learning groups, clusters, or networks that are organized as ongoing and structured learning opportunities around particular issues or particular types of interventions—such as programs to stimulate microenterprise development or sectoral employment strategies—provide local actors with opportunities for joint exploration of common operational problems and implementation challenges. They also offer researchers and technical advisors opportunities to develop knowledge about innovative social policy approaches, identify good practice on the ground, and develop lessons that can guide other practitioners in the field.

These structured learning models have developed and tested methodologies that could be readily adapted for the community-building field. The potential of this approach is particularly powerful because it would allow the CCI world to draw on experience and expertise developed in an array of allied fields that are highly relevant to the community-building field but largely untapped by it. Potential sources include, for example:

- ▶ The field of community mobilizing, community organizing, and community advocacy is closely related to the work of the recent community change initiatives and can offer lessons from several decades of experience in a wide range of neighborhoods.
- ▶ Veteran community builders, directors of community development corporations, and other community-based organizations, some of whom started out in the community-based initiatives spawned in the 1960s, now have a lifetime of experiences, reflections, and insights that need to be captured and shared.
- ▶ Practitioners in allied fields, such as public health, criminal justice, and education, can also offer lessons and insights about effective community-building strategies and outcomes.
- ▶ Technical assistance providers, evaluators, foundation staff, government employees, and others who have been involved in the design or management

of community initiatives are rich sources of information about the results of a variety of community change efforts and strategies.

Systematically eliciting the knowledge and experience of these people—through interviews, focus groups, and structured learning groups—could be a first step in developing much-needed good-practice lessons about such topics as:

- ▶ How to operationalize community-building philosophy and principles, and how to build community capacity;
- ▶ How to make better community connections with external resources and organizations;
- ▶ How to assess neighborhood capacities and context in order to select the most appropriate community-building strategies; and
- ▶ How to incorporate the most appropriate community-building practice into initiatives aiming for specific programmatic outcomes in, for example, education, employment, or criminal justice. Here explorations would focus on how, when, and whether to do these programs in a “community-building” way, looking at such issues as involving community residents, building community capacity, and making connections among community institutions.

Casting a Wider Net to Expand the Research Base

If we are more resourceful in how we think about knowledge building and widen our field of vision to incorporate learning from related fields, past experience, and nontraditional sources, it may be possible to harvest a rich set of additional sources of published and unpublished information on community building and community change.

As the principles and strategies of community building become better defined, new disciplines and lines of inquiry present themselves as potentially relevant to the community field. Just a decade ago the concept of “social capital” swept the world of social policy research, and the work that has been produced under that umbrella has been relevant and enriching to the community-building field. Now, as it becomes clear that basic capacity issues must be addressed at the outset of a community change initiative, it might make sense to explore organizational development literature and models of change in the private sector. Similarly, as it becomes clear that the community-building approach to change has not adequately attended to the need to address power structures and dynamics in the change process, we might examine political science scholarship related to advocacy theory for lessons about how to address these elements.

There are other programmatic and institutional venues that could be sources of relevant information, just as there are other repositories of practitioner expertise that need to be drawn on. There are surely lessons embedded, for example, in community-based initiatives that sought

narrower programmatic outcomes, such as public health and criminal justice, but nonetheless embraced a community-building approach. Supporting institutions that have played critical roles in this field to date—notably, foundations and technical assistance organizations—are likely to have unpublished information, referred to as “grey” material, which incorporates analyses of community or organizational capacity across a wide variety of neighborhoods. These could be culled to develop a better understanding of the critical factors that matter in the change process and the criteria that might be used to assess them in specific neighborhoods. Such information could be invaluable in efforts to develop the kinds of neighborhood taxonomies discussed earlier.

Blending Practitioner Knowledge with Social Science and Empirical Research in Order to Develop and Test New Theories of Community Change

Building the field’s capacity to improve on current interventions and produce greater knowledge about community change will require improving the connection between research and practice and using that to develop new theories of change. We need to blend the existing information to create better definitions of community-building concepts, strategies, and outcomes, so that they can be operationalized, measured, and assessed. Comparisons across interventions and across communities should suggest patterns that can be developed into taxonomies. The findings and conclusions that emerge will need to be systematically reviewed, integrated, and “triangulated” with each other, and with other sources, in order to distill the findings that are confirmed or supported by other sources.

The goal of this work is to create a new learning cycle that integrates information from various sources, organizes the information and assesses its value, takes the most promising elements and turns them into hypotheses, designs interventions that can test hypotheses in a high-quality way, and evaluates the results.

The evidence and conclusions that are considered sound should then be utilized to develop more specific definitions of community capacity and community-building practices, hypothetical pathways of change, and testable hypotheses that could become the basis for future program design and policy making as well as future research. This information could then be formulated and presented as a series of “if, then” statements and disseminated to those in the field as the principal questions that need to be tested.

There are no established protocols for how to carry out this work, although recent work suggests that convening groups of knowledgeable practitioners and researchers to share what they have learned from theory, reading, and experience could be a first step. One such effort brings together experienced researchers and practitioners who represent diverse perspectives and beliefs, and asks them to use their experience as well as their knowledge of research and theory to identify ways to reach the outcomes under consideration. Participants also discuss the specific attributes that make the strategies and approaches effective and identify the elements of community and systems infrastructure that contribute to effectiveness. These discussions elicit guidance not only on what to do but also on *how* to do it. The assumption is that because this

“mental mapping” process involves participants with a rich mix of backgrounds and outlooks, claims that do not elicit consensus or have only weak support in theory and evidence will be discarded. As a result, individual and group bias will be minimized. Supporting information—either in the form of social science research or evaluations—is then gathered from the field and organized for practitioners to use. A similar process might be used to develop specific pathways for community change or to explore the connections between community-building efforts and specified outcomes in particular domains.²⁰

The goal of this work is to create a new learning cycle that integrates information from various sources, organizes the information and assesses its value, takes the most promising elements and turns them into hypotheses, designs interventions that can test hypotheses in a high-quality way, and evaluates the results. This is how new knowledge about community change will be produced.²¹

20. See Schorr, 2003; and www.pathwaystooutcomes.org.

21. The Aspen Roundtable has sponsored some preliminary work on this topic in its Contribution of Community Building Project, which focuses on the connection between community-building strategies and outcomes relating to civic capacity, public health, and community economic development. For additional information see www.aspenroundtable.org.

5 || *Implications for Key Actors in the Field*

If there is one important message to take away from this report, it is this:

Community-based approaches to improving outcomes for residents of poor neighborhoods have been shown to have great potential. In order for them to fulfill that potential, we need to learn how to do them better. Learning how to do them better will depend on improving the knowledge base about how to bring about community change, how to implement community change strategies, how to assess what is working and why, and, finally, how to ensure that all of the key actors make use of and apply that knowledge.

This can no longer happen haphazardly or in unconnected ways. The challenge is to develop and operate a more deliberate system of knowledge development and application. Coordinating the type of knowledge development agenda discussed in this report would entail the following tasks: keeping abreast of developments in the field and related disciplines, articulating key research questions, identifying promising avenues for experimentation, organizing learning efforts, catalyzing cross-site research opportunities, developing funding, providing safe space for institutional sharing, and distilling lessons learned at the end into informed theories about community change. This effort will require considerable coordination and management in a structured way, ideally by a centralized body that could be a single organization, a partnership of organizations, or a collaborative board.

This conclusion has important implications for all of the key actors in the ecology of community change. These key stakeholder groups include:

- ▶ Public- and private-sector funders and policymakers;
- ▶ Evaluators and researchers;
- ▶ Practitioners; and
- ▶ Community residents.

All of these players must adapt their standard ways of doing business so that, collectively, the field establishes a more systematic way to build new knowledge about community change and test that information effectively. All must contribute to setting the tone for the work so that we are building this knowledge in an open, honest, and reflective way. And, finally, all must understand that the knowledge will be developed over time, in an iterative and cumulative way, and through tapping into and weaving together many sources of information.

The particular messages for each of these key actors are discussed below.

Public- and private-sector funders and policymakers:

- ▶ You have a leadership role to play in reorienting evaluation research in the community change arena from an emphasis on outcomes accountability to well-structured learning for the field as a whole. Focus your investments on deeper, higher-quality, longer-term, and, if necessary, fewer interventions and structure accompanying research around issues that have long-term policy value. Avoid the temptation to produce quick wins that do not test promising community-building approaches that are of value to the field more broadly.
- ▶ Continue to press for outcomes, but be clear about what is plausible and reasonable to expect of community change efforts in distressed communities. Recognize that achieving outcomes will depend on many community capacities (social, institutional, political, technical, and so on) that are, in themselves, critical to invest in and learn about. Target your programmatic and research funds in ways that will build those capacities, assess and measure them, and ascertain whether and how they lead to desired outcomes for children, youth, and families in poor neighborhoods.
- ▶ Set high standards for open and honest communication about what you learn. Provide easy access to all materials produced through your community change work. This will not only allow for better cross-institutional learning, but will set a tone of honest learning for the field as a whole.
- ▶ Partner with your colleagues in these endeavors. The community change enterprise is larger than any one institution can take on, and the field has suffered because of lack of coherence, coordination, and collective effort. In terms of funding, there is a wide range of partnership options, that include:
 - Commit to a common knowledge development agenda; each institution can pursue independent work but within that common framework.
 - Create a consortium of funders that provides a dedicated pool of funds for common community change investments and knowledge development.
 - Cosponsor an intermediary organization (or set of organizations) to serve as manager of high-quality “demonstration research” around priority community change questions.

Evaluators and researchers:

- ▶ Community change initiatives can be and have been large and messy. Your challenge is to focus the research on meaningful and answerable questions. Avoid the temptation to track too much. Help all initiative stakeholders to define their work precisely, and then use the intervention as a source of information for structuring specific research questions around high-priority questions for the field.
- ▶ Place priority on developing measures of community-building concepts—such as community capacity, social capital, community access to power and resources, and so on—and determining:
 - which strategies are most effective in enhancing those community-building outcomes, and
 - whether and how they then lead to improvements in “hard” outcomes for individuals, families, and communities.
- ▶ Learn how to assess implementation of community change efforts effectively but efficiently.
- ▶ Listen to practitioners. Identify their greatest information needs, and design your research to respond to them.
- ▶ Community change initiatives encounter difficulties and evolve over time. Keep track of whether your research design matches the pace, scale, dose, etc., of the intervention, and be willing to make changes.
- ▶ Set high standards for open and honest feedback to all stakeholders at all points in the intervention.

Practitioners:

- ▶ Be as clear as possible about what you expect to achieve, over what period of time, and how you expect your work to lead to outcomes (i.e., your theory of change).
- ▶ If your work emphasizes community-building activities, be forthright about it so that aspect of the work can be legitimized and tracked in the evaluation. Define your community-building activities as precisely as possible, and be clear about the outcomes that you expect to occur as a result.

- ▶ If implementation is off-track, make sure that the funder and the evaluator know it.
- ▶ Be clear about your own information needs, and convey them to your evaluator. Make sure you get the formative feedback, program data, community information, and so on, that you need to do your work as well as possible.

Community residents:

- ▶ You are a key source of information about what your neighborhood needs and what is likely to work in your neighborhood given its history, leadership, organizations, and culture. Your role is to ensure that such information becomes a key part of any change process.
- ▶ Be an active and informed consumer of evaluations and other research about your community and others. Hold researchers accountable for their products.
- ▶ The information produced through all community interventions can be a valuable political and advocacy tool for you. Use it to make the case for investment in your community and for promoting the potential of your community.

These strategies offer a general framework for how the work should proceed from here. If they undergird the work, a new generation of interventions and research could be defined in a way that holds greater promise for improving the circumstances of poor communities and the lives of resident children, youth, adults, and families. Now that the field has a clearer sense of what needs to be done, the challenge is to generate the commitment to make it happen.

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