

ASPEN INSTITUTE ROUNDTABLE ON COMMUNITY CHANGE

Assessment of the National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership, 2002-13

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Executive Summary

This report independently assesses the impact and operations of the National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership (NNIP) from 2002 to 2013. The study was conducted by the Aspen Institute Roundtable on Community Change under contract with the Urban Institute (Urban) and supported by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. The NNIP Network and its local partners share a mission to empower residents and institutions to use data in community building and policymaking that can improve low-income neighborhoods. NNIP aims to facilitate the work of local partners, document and share insights from partners' work, and advance the notion that neighborhood information systems are a necessary component in carrying out its mission. As a network, NNIP has organized its work into five categories: (1) informing local policy initiatives, (2) developing tools and guides, (3) strengthening local capacity by developing capacity in new communities, (4) strengthening local capacity by serving an expanding network, and (5) exercising leadership in building the field.

The purpose of the Roundtable's assessment is threefold:

- to determine how well NNIP met its stated goals to strengthen local capacity to use data for decisionmaking, to inform local and national policy, and to build national support for community information systems during the study period
- to elicit the views of NNIP members about the value of the network, the benefits of membership, and where improvements in service and supports can be made
- to identify possible directions for NNIP's future work

The assessment draws on two principal sources of data: 74 responses from an online survey of partner members in the NNIP network and 26 in-depth telephone interviews with NNIP partner members, Urban-NNIP staff, other Urban Institute staff, NNIP funders, and colleagues from other national organizations.

Overall Assessment

NNIP partner members, funders, Urban staff, and national colleagues all agree that Urban-NNIP staff and leadership have done an exemplary job developing the network as a community of practice that helps build local capacity to develop and use data. They believe that NNIP has made progress on informing local and national policy and in building broader support for community information systems. At the same time, most of the national partners and external observers, as well as some local partners, think NNIP could have more influence and impact on local and national policy and be even more successful in building national support for community information systems if it pursued a stronger program in content development and communication.

Many of the recommendations for strengthening network functioning can be implemented in the short term by Urban-NNIP staff, the NNIP Executive Committee, and partner members. But

building a stronger program in content development and communication implies new challenges—in raising sufficient funding to support the new work and in designing and implementing that work so that it strengthens, rather than disrupts, the effective functioning of the network.

Findings on Network Functioning

The survey responses and interviews with NNIP members show that membership is highly valued and members have high levels of satisfaction with NNIP support and services.

Benefits of membership. More than two-thirds of the survey respondents rated the opportunities for peer support, knowledge sharing on topical issues, and knowledge sharing on methodology and technical issues as very important benefits of NNIP membership. About one-half rated knowledge sharing on organizational strategy as very important. Members think the combination of support, personal connections, and information exchange makes NNIP both “unique” and superior to other networks. Respondents were more mixed in assessing NNIP membership as a way to increase local credibility, national visibility, and professional development and advancement, but the majority found these important or very important benefits of membership.

Participation. NNIP expects that its members will “contribute to the knowledge sharing and supportive network of the partnership.” The personal relationships developed at the semiannual meetings are seen as critical in fostering partner-to-partner connections and building the trust and goodwill that is essential for sharing knowledge and working together on projects. Many partner members think participation levels are sufficient and consider that Urban-NNIP staff is already doing the right things to encourage high participation levels. However, some suggested the network should make special efforts to encourage participation among newer members, junior staff, and less active members. They recommend making more targeted outreach efforts to nonparticipants, recognizing the contributions of a broader group of members, establishing a mentoring system to pair newer and longer-term members, and offering “scholarships” to attend semiannual meetings or support site visits to member organizations in different cities. About 90 percent of survey responders say they are in one-on-one communication with NNIP members in other cities at least once or twice, and 21 percent say they communicate with other partner members at least once a month.

Ratings and recommendations on specific supports and services. The NNIP semiannual meetings are the most highly valued, used, and rated activity. Fully 91 percent of respondents rated the meeting as very important or important, and 98 percent thought the meetings were very well done or well done. Cross-site projects, consultations with NNIP staff, NNIP tools and guides, and connections to other organizations were considered important or very important and very well provided or well provided by about three-quarters of the survey respondents. The NNIP webinars, Google group, and opportunities to use the website as a showcase for one’s own work were considered less important and less well executed than other activities. No respondents

wanted to see any current services eliminated. Business models, data partnerships with the private sector, and analysis methods were ranked as the top three areas where members would like to receive additional technical assistance from NNIP. Recommendations to strengthen current services focused on organizing one of the two meetings around a topical theme or regional gathering, making greater use of social media (especially Twitter) and blogging, using webinars to showcase partner activities, and having partners take on some responsibilities to assist Urban-NNIP staff.

NNIP staff role. The Urban-NNIP staff, in conjunction with the NNIP Executive Committee, plays an essential role in guiding the NNIP network, keeping it operating smoothly, keeping the membership connected, maintaining high participation levels, and facilitating the network's growth. Survey respondents rated the tools and guides staff produces as both important and well executed. The Urban-NNIP staff and the NNIP Executive Committee are also valued for seeking out and being responsive to member opinions, interests, and recommendations.

Network strength. NNIP exhibits many of the strengths of a well-functioning network as network theorists define them. These include its openness to new ideas, new members, and connections to external networks; its emphasis on relationship building; and its attention to feedback mechanisms, shared decisionmaking, and inclusive participation. Evidence that network members are connecting with each other directly and creating a dense web of connections and a variety of connection hubs rather than having all the connections go through the central hub of Urban-NNIP staff is another indication of strength and resiliency.

Network growth. Urban-NNIP staff anticipate the network will grow by adding one or two members a year. A major concern for NNIP staff is how the network will continue to foster the close personal ties and network loyalty that are its hallmark. Partner members think that continuing the current mix of small and large sessions at the semiannual meetings will do that, but they also recommend more targeted outreach efforts, possibly organizing one of the two meetings around a topic or a region. External observers urge NNIP to be more strategic about bringing on new members by focusing, for example, on larger or more important metropolitan areas. All urge NNIP to maintain its current membership and ensure that new partners continue the same strong commitment to democratizing data.

Findings on Identified Goals

The assessment of three goals identified by Urban-NNIP staff suggests that progress has been made, but more could be accomplished if NNIP took on a larger and more strategic policy and communication role. Many of the people interviewed believe this is an opportune time for NNIP to do so.

Goal 1: Strengthening local capacity to use data for decisionmaking. Local partners provided numerous examples of how the information exchange, peer support, technical assistance, and external connections provided through NNIP have helped them develop local data capacity by

improving technology, methodology, and analysis; expanding community engagement; strengthening organizational planning; and broadening local data partnerships and data platforms.

Goal 2: Informing local and national policy. National partners, Urban staff, and NNIP funders agree that NNIP has made progress on its second goal, especially by disseminating the lessons and findings from its cross-site projects. They also agree that, given the decentralized nature of the network, significant challenges exist to achieving this goal. Nevertheless, they believe stronger, more focused, and more strategic work in substantive content development and communication could increase NNIP's ability to inform policy at the local and national levels. They recommend using journalists to document evidence of policy influence and communicate to a broader audience, making a more concerted effort to brand the NNIP network and its work, developing a one-page summary that explains what a data intermediary does, making greater use of Urban's policy centers to help disseminate lessons, and connecting to a broader group of place-based initiatives.

Goal 3: Building national support for community information systems. The challenges involved in using a decentralized network to build national support for community information systems are similar to those of influencing local and national policy. Observers think that NNIP has made advances but is well positioned to do significantly more. To strengthen NNIP's national influence, interviewees recommended that Urban-NNIP staff develop a better communications and messaging strategy; work with an individual or organization that is more experienced in communications; connect to a broader range of people at the national level, within and outside the federal government; and be more strategic about connecting to funders.

Conclusion: Challenges, Tensions, Opportunities

NNIP has demonstrated a winning formula for developing a peer network that has major benefits for its members and advances the work of building local capacity to use data to inform policy. Most national partners and external observers, as well as some local partners, think NNIP could take its local work and its efforts to inform policy and build national support for community information systems to a new level.

This activity would likely require working with outside specialists in communications to craft and deliver a message and plan of action. It would also need to be balanced with the critical work of building and maintaining the NNIP network as a community of practice and would require the development of new content on policy, organizational management, and technical issues.

A major effort to amplify and expand NNIP's messaging, branding, and communications so that NNIP can better inform local and national policy and build national support for local data systems will present challenges. One will be how to balance that work with maintaining and strengthening the peer network. Another will be how to raise additional resources to fund the work at a new scale.

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Introduction

The National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership (NNIP) is a collaborative effort by the Urban Institute (Urban) and local NNIP partners to further the development and use of neighborhood-level information systems in local policymaking and community building. Founded in 1996 with members in six cities, NNIP's membership as of 2013 included organizations in 37 cities.

NNIP asked the Aspen Institute Roundtable on Community Change to independently assess NNIP's network impact and operations from 2002 to 2013.¹ The purpose was to determine how well NNIP met its three stated goals of (1) strengthening local capacity to use data for decisionmaking, (2) informing local and national policy, and (3) building national support for community information systems. Urban-NNIP staff also wanted to elicit partner views about the value of the network, the benefits of membership, and where improvements in service and supports can be made. A third focus was to identify future directions for NNIP work. The NNIP Executive Committee and Urban-NNIP staff will use the findings to shape network plans for 2015–17. The study was carried out under contract to the Urban Institute and supported by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.

Background on NNIP

The NNIP Network and its local partners all share a mission to empower residents and institutions to use data in community building and policymaking to improve low-income neighborhoods. Inherent in this mission is the assumption that facilitating access to information and building the capacity of stakeholders to use data will lead to better decisionmaking for programs and policies and that informed decisionmaking will ultimately improve communities. This background section briefly describes what activities local NNIP partners and the network undertake in support of this mission and how the network has been staffed and funded. This information provides context for the assessment results that follow.²

The Partners

The NNIP network and its partners believe that the presence of a local data intermediary is essential to fulfilling NNIP's mission. Turning raw data into usable and actionable information is a challenging task that requires a trusted organization that is dedicated to organizing administrative data on neighborhoods over time, has expertise in interpreting data, and helps

¹ The Aspen Institute Roundtable on Community Change distills lessons about how to revitalize distressed communities and helps policymakers, practitioners, and funders develop and implement effective strategies for promoting vibrant, racially equitable communities. See its website at <http://www.aspenroundtable.org> for more information.

² For an in-depth examination of NNIP and the broader community information field, see G. Thomas Kingsley, Claudia J. Coulton, and Kathryn L.S. Pettit, *Strengthening Communities with Neighborhood Data* (Washington DC: Urban Institute, 2014), which is available for download at <http://www.urban.org/strengtheningcommunities/>.

community groups and government agencies use the data for a wide range of purposes, including policy development and program planning, performance measurement and evaluation, and education and engagement. NNIP believes that if local data intermediaries are to be efficient and effective in developing and using data for action, they must operate information systems that contain neighborhood data, are recurrently updated, and hold information across multiple policy domains. This enables them to serve as a one-stop shop for community information needs.

The NNIP local partners represent a mix of institutions. About two-thirds are university centers or nonprofits; the rest are other types of local institutions or partnerships of two or more local organizations. A full list of organizations and cities that participate in the network is available at <http://www.neighborhoodindicators.org/partners/profiles>. Even though the members are different types of organizations with varied overall missions, by joining NNIP, all partners agree to carry out the shared mission and perform three activities in their communities:³

- ***Assemble, transform, and maintain data.*** NNIP partners access data from multiple local agencies across topic areas through data-sharing agreements or open-data portals. They build and maintain the data holdings over time, in response to local priorities and the overall mission of the partner organization. NNIP partner organizations also clean the data and translate data into forms that are easier to use and more directly applicable to program planning and policymaking.
- ***Democratize information and apply the data to achieve impact.*** NNIP partners consider their most important activity to be applying the data to address local community issues, with a particular focus on the opportunities and needs of distressed neighborhoods. Once raw data are transformed, the information needs to be disseminated to stakeholders who can make use of it. NNIP partners disseminate information primarily through websites and neighborhood profiles, convenings, reports, and briefings. They work with local stakeholders to identify emerging issues, target resources and investments efficiently, motivate collaboration, and craft innovative ways to address community issues.
- ***Use data to strengthen civic capacity and governance.*** NNIP partners also work to cultivate local capacity for informed action by enhancing the data capacities of other local institutions and promoting a culture of learning and collaboration.

The Network

The NNIP network was formed in 1996 after six founding partners asked the Urban Institute to first research the strategy of using neighborhood data in local communities to accomplish social goals and then to coordinate a peer learning network. In 2002, NNIP introduced a six-member Executive Committee elected by and from the local partners. The Executive Committee is central to planning the work of the network overall. Designated Urban Institute staff members (referred to in this report as Urban-NNIP staff) coordinate and staff NNIP. They work closely with the

³ For details, see G. Thomas Kingsley, Kathryn L.S. Pettit, and Leah Hendey, “Strengthening Local Capacity for Data-Driven Decisionmaking” (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2013).

elected members of the Executive Committee to plan and implement network activities. The Executive Committee and Urban-NNIP staff meet monthly.

For the past several years, the network has organized its overall agenda of work into five key areas:

1. Informing local policy initiatives. Efforts to inform local policy initiatives focus primarily on NNIP’s cross-site action initiatives. These initiatives incorporate the use of data in developing solutions to address local issues. Because they are implemented in a comparable manner across multiple NNIP cities, they provide lessons for national, as well as local, policy and practice. Urban-NNIP staff coordinates the work in the participating cities and then documents lessons and best practices to guide other cities interested in working on the topic. The topics, time frames, and funders of NNIP’s cross-site initiatives are listed in table 1:

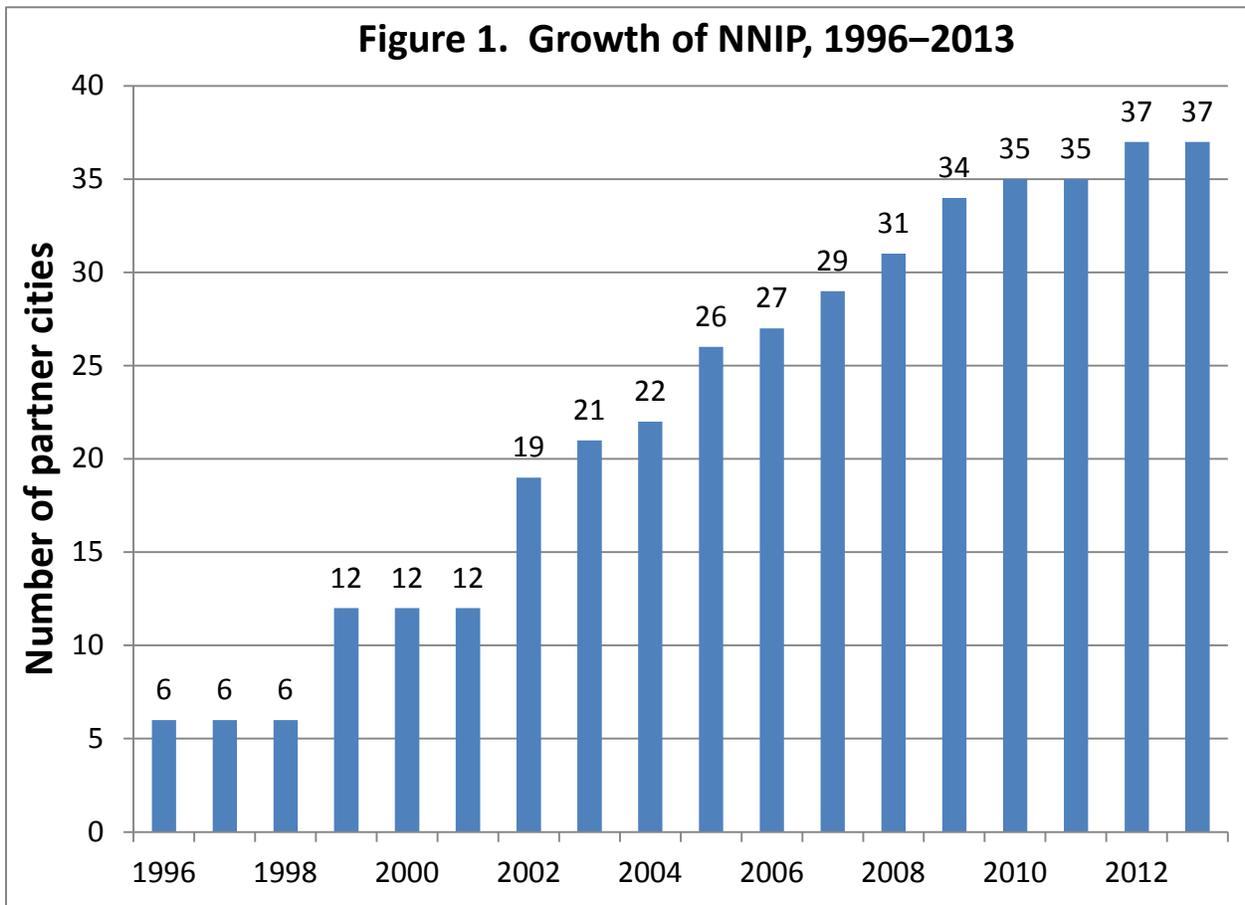
Table 1. NNIP Cross-Site Initiatives

Topic	Time frame	Funder
Integrated data systems	2013–15	Annie E. Casey Foundation
NNIP and open data	2012–14	John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation
Kids and foreclosure	2009–12	Open Society Foundation Annie E. Casey Foundation
School readiness	2007–10	Annie E. Casey Foundation
Foreclosure crisis	2008–09	Fannie Mae
Guiding land markets	2004–08	Brookings Institution
Reentry mapping network	2001–04	Annie E. Casey Foundation National Institute of Justice
Neighborhoods and health	2001–03	US Department of Health and Human Services
Welfare-to-work	1998	Various

2. Developing tools and guides. To advance the state of the field, NNIP publishes guidebooks, tools, and presentations. Topics range from descriptions of promising practices developed in cross-site initiatives and the projects of individual partners to technical guidebooks documenting available data sets and techniques related to analysis, display, and systems operation. These materials are available on the NNIP website.

3. Strengthening local capacity: developing capacity in new communities. Expansion normally occurs when Urban-NNIP staff is contacted by organizations that are already building relevant capacity and have learned about the NNIP approach through its website or presentations. Urban-

NNIP staff can offer some coaching on the start-up process (most often by phone) and provide access to topical tools and guides, but NNIP has very little funding to help nascent partners in new cities. When the new group has made enough progress to meet NNIP membership requirements, it submits a formal application to join the network. As of 2013, Urban-NNIP staff members were working with an additional 12 locations where organizations had expressed interest in joining the network. The pace and scale of growth between 1996 and 2013 are shown in figure 1.



Source: Data compiled by the Urban Institute and NNIP.

4. Strengthening local capacity: services to an expanding network. This category includes two types of activities and supports. Services available only to the staff of NNIP partner organizations include the semiannual meetings and participation in cross-site initiatives, topical work groups, a partners-only Google group, and webinars.⁴ The semiannual meetings offer a mix of formats and content that spans topical issues; technical issues relating to data, analysis, and dissemination; and business operations such as planning, fundraising, and communications.

⁴ A limited number of guests from national organizations or cities developing NNIP capacity are invited to participate in the semiannual meetings.

Urban-NNIP staff also provides direct technical assistance to partner organizations and staff members facing transitions, leadership changes, and operational challenges.

Other activities disseminate information to a broader audience that is interested in community information systems and follows the work of NNIP and its partner members. These include maintaining and updating the NNIP website and an interactive e-mail listserv (the NNIP News, which has more than 600 subscribers), and organizing occasional conferences and webinars open to outside groups. In addition, Urban-NNIP staff and NNIP partners make frequent presentations about the network and its activities to government agencies and conferences of national and regional interest groups.

5. Leadership in building the field. The task of building capacity and strengthening practice in this emerging field is sizable and not something NNIP can do solely on its own. Rather, NNIP attempts to catalyze a broader effort by partnering with a number of other national organizations whose missions revolve around the use of indicators and the development of local capacity to use data. For example, NNIP leaders have always been active participants in the Community Indicators Consortium and now work with a variety of groups to advance the use of indicators in planning and evaluating community development efforts and social service programs.

Network Evolution, Staffing, and Funding

As the network has expanded, Urban-NNIP staff and the Executive Committee have worked to professionalize network activities and improve network planning and practices. In 2009, a formal membership application process was introduced, and in late 2011, a new website allowed partners to add content about their activities to share with the network or the public. Network leaders have responded to the diverse interests of the partners by incorporating open space and “unconference” formats into the meetings. In 2012–13, the network developed a strategy paper, discussed and approved by the partners, that outlined a more intentional information campaign to reach out to key national organizations and networks of local institutions. Over 2013–14, NNIP sharpened the logo and developed new communication materials. In 2014, Urban-NNIP staff instituted a policy of regular phone contact with the partners and began drafting a formal start-up guide intended to help NNIP more efficiently address the needs of potential member cities.

The NNIP network is currently staffed by several individuals at the Urban Institute. Kathryn L. S. Pettit serves as the director of NNIP and is responsible for the overall direction and strategy of network activities and connecting to national stakeholders. Leah Hendey, deputy director, supports the director and helps manage network activities. G. Thomas Kingsley, the founder of NNIP and director emeritus, continues to advise the NNIP leadership and partners. These three individuals sit on and staff the NNIP Executive Committee. Several research associates and assistants at the Urban Institute also support network activities by maintaining the NNIP website, conducting check-ins with partners, and staffing the semiannual partnership meetings.

On average, all Urban-NNIP staff combined spent the equivalent of one and a half full-time positions on NNIP network activities each year between 2004 and 2013. About two-thirds of this time was devoted to cross-site project work and about one-third was spent on general network activities.

On average, the Urban Institute had roughly \$200,000 available annually for general network operations between 2004 and 2013. This funding supported salary and consulting costs as well as the direct costs of holding the semiannual partnership meetings, maintaining the website, and paying stipends to the Executive Committee members. In addition, an average of just under \$300,000 was spent annually (primarily on labor costs) on the cross-site projects during this same period. In recent years, the Annie E. Casey Foundation and the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation have been NNIP's strongest supporters; in 2013 and 2014, they each provided \$200,000 annually in general support funding for network operations. Each has also provided additional funding for cross-site projects and activities in some years.

The NNIP Assessment: Information Sources and Sample Characteristics

This Roundtable assessment of NNIP is based on two principal sources of data: responses from an online survey of partner members in the NNIP network and in-depth telephone interviews with selected partners, Urban-NNIP staff, other Urban staff, NNIP funders, and colleagues from national organizations who are familiar with NNIP's work. All quantitative data in the remainder of this report are drawn from the responses to the online partner survey. The comments, views, and examples come from responses to the open-ended survey questions and the in-depth telephone interviews.

Online Partner Survey Sample

The online partner survey was sent to staff members familiar with NNIP in the organizations that belong to the NNIP network. A total of 115 surveys were sent to partner members and alumni in 36 cities.⁵ Respondents completed the survey during March and April 2014. A total of 74 responses were received, for a response rate of 64 percent.

Responses were received from at least one organization in every city that has an NNIP partner.⁶ In all but three of the cities where multiple organizations belong to the network, someone from each partner organization responded. Nine alumni also answered the survey. In a few cities, multiple staff members from the same organization sent in responses. The online survey protocol is provided in appendix B.

⁵ Individuals who contributed significantly to NNIP but left or retired from an NNIP partner organization can be nominated by the partner organization to join the NNIP alumni network. Alumni are given access to the "members only" portion of the NNIP website and invited to partner meetings. See <http://www.neighborhoodindicators.org/nnip-alumni-network>.

⁶ One partner city was not included in the survey sample because its NNIP organization was in the midst of a transition and the interim staff had not participated in NNIP activities.

As shown in table 2, most of the survey respondents have been active in their professional field for more than 10 years, but they have been active in NNIP for considerably less time. These characteristics suggest that junior staff members are likely to be underrepresented in the respondent sample.

Table 2. Respondents' Years of Experience (percent)

Years of experience	In this professional field	In current organization	In NNIP
Less than 1	1	5	3
1-3	8	18	28
4-6	15	19	26
6-10	18	23	28
More than 10	58	35	15

Note: N = 74.

Respondents are responsible for a range of activities in their organizations. (See table 3.) Most (86 percent) are involved in data analysis, and more than 70 percent have managerial responsibilities. Much smaller proportions are engaged in policy advocacy and community organizing.

In-Depth Telephone Interviews

Roundtable staff conducted telephone interviews with 26 persons suggested by Urban-NNIP staff. Interviewees included NNIP funders, selected partner members, colleagues from national organizations who are familiar with NNIP's work, NNIP-Urban staff, and other Urban Institute staff. A list of the persons interviewed and their organizational affiliations is shown in appendix A. The organizations of the partner members who were interviewed are generally representative of the types of organizations that make up the NNIP network in terms of their size, organizational type, and length of time in the network. The interviews typically lasted between 30 and 45 minutes and were conducted between May 6, 2014, and September 3, 2014.

Table 3. Organizational Responsibilities of Survey Respondents

Activity	Share of respondents (%)
Data analysis	86
Research management	73
Organizational management	72
Community outreach to nonprofits and government	70
GIS (geographic information system) mapping	64
Fundraising	54
Software/web programming	38
Policy advocacy	30
Neighborhood resident organizing	16

Note: N = 74.

Section One: Network Functioning

All observers agree that NNIP has been highly successful in building a network that functions as a community of practice to advance the development and use of data at the community level. This section discusses what partner members think about the benefits of membership in NNIP, their levels of participation, and their views on specific services and how they could be strengthened. Then it explores the role of the NNIP staff and how national partners assess the value of the network. The section concludes with a discussion of the ways that NNIP illustrates good practice in network building and management.

Benefits of Membership to Partners

Staff members of the local partner organizations are highly satisfied with the way the NNIP network functions and the benefits they derive from membership. They value the network for the support and affirmation they get from other members and as a source of information, shared expertise, and new ideas.

As shown in table 4, more than two-thirds of the partners who responded to the online survey rated the opportunities for peer support, knowledge sharing on topical issues, and knowledge sharing on methodology and technical issues as “very important” benefits of membership in the NNIP network (69 percent, 70 percent, and 67 percent, respectively). About one-half rated knowledge sharing on organizational strategy as “very important.”

Table 4. Benefits of Membership in NNIP

Benefit	Benefit Importance to Respondents (%)				
	None	Little	Moderate	Important	Very
Peer support	0	1	6	24	69
Knowledge sharing: methods, technical issues	0	0	7	26	67
Knowledge sharing: topical issues	0	0	10	20	70
Knowledge sharing: organizational strategy	0	3	13	30	54
Increased national visibility	1	1	22	39	36
Professional development	0	4	23	38	35
Increased local credibility	3	16	23	30	28

Note: N = 69.

As members in a peer network, partner staff members value having others to talk with who understand what they do, face common challenges, and are willing to share solutions. This support overcomes the sense—common to many—that they are working in isolation in their own localities. The following comments from local partners are typical of how they describe the benefits of participation in NNIP:

- “You don’t want to go this alone. It’s really hard work. You need the support of the network—when you are stuck, when you feel like giving up. It would be foolhardy [to do this] without the network.”
- “In NNIP I know that we were not the only ones trying to do this work—that there are solutions, others to talk to. We don’t need to explain what we are trying to do. Nobody outside understands what we are doing—what it means to be a local data intermediary.”
- “Urban-NNIP staff has consistently been a source of really targeted and practical information, a source of support [and] reassurance that I’m not crazy, a source of legitimacy and normalizing ... and a source for new ideas ... and cool tech tools that make people ooh and aah.”

Members feel the combination of support, personal connections, and information exchange makes NNIP both “unique” and superior to other networks:

- “I don’t think there are other formal networks that are this helpful. NNIP ranks number one.”
- “No other network offers the benefits NNIP does. The focus is on community engagement. Using information to improve communities. We are substantive, not flashy.”
- “Nothing substitutes for NNIP—there is no something else.”
- “The mix of technical, application, and community process is unique.”

A hallmark of partner relationships is their willingness to share ideas, to discuss methodology, and to work with fellow members. Members have a strong sense of loyalty and responsibility to the network and its members. Personal relationships are critical in developing these connections and building the trust and goodwill that is essential for sharing knowledge and working together on projects. “What makes [NNIP] special is the personal connections built up over the years. The friendliness needs to be maintained. If you get a call from a member, return it! You know that!” a local partner noted. One Urban-NNIP staff member described the network as a “friendship model.”

These ties are strengthened by communication among partner members between the annual NNIP meetings. The majority (90 percent) of network members who responded to the survey report that they are in one-on-one communication with other partners in other cities at least once or twice a year apart from the semiannual meetings and the listserv connections arranged by NNIP; 21 percent say they communicate with other partner members at least once a month. (See table 5.) Certain cities—for example, Cleveland, Pittsburgh, and Providence—seem to be emerging as small hubs with multiple points of connection to and interaction with partners in other cities.

Table 5. Frequency of Partner-to-Partner Contact

Frequency	Share of respondents (%)
Not at all	10
Once or twice a year	32
A few times a year	38
Once a month	10
Two or more times a month	11

Note: N = 72.

The partner-to-partner information exchange at the NNIP meetings and in conversations between meetings provides partners with new ideas, techniques, and tools; helps them solve problems; and increases their effectiveness:

- “Being exposed to so many different experts in the field, both general and deep, gives me resources to tap when I dive into a new area.”
- “The meeting exposes us to technology and tools, new approaches, and methodologies. Most significantly for a research community that is isolated, it allows folks to get out of silos and build community—a network of individuals to ask questions, get referrals, [and look for] guidance. Without NNIP, we have no other level of support and guidance and idea sharing.”

Membership in NNIP also helps partner members stay ahead of the curve. They benefit from the efforts NNIP staff members make to introduce them to emerging trends and from the connections to local partners who are “on the cutting edge of technology or data,” as one external partner put it.

- “NNIP [staff] has been incredibly thoughtful about the need to stay on cutting edge. They got into open data movement early and helped us to explore and get out in front. They see the trends coming. NNIP is keeping its eye out on my behalf. They pick up trends and buzz faster.”
- “NNIP was the first place I saw the open data discussion.”

Equally helpful is the fact that the NNIP network encompasses a diverse range of expertise. “You don’t have to be an expert on everything because somebody else in the network will know the topic,” a partner noted. “The partners are so diverse—service providers, researchers, technology experts—that the mix of professional backgrounds is a real plus to NNIP. The sum is greater than the parts,” another explained.

Specific examples of the kind of information sharing that occurs and how it enhances the partners’ local work are discussed in section two.

Overall Participation

A critical aspect of membership in NNIP is the expectation that NNIP partners will “contribute to the knowledge sharing and supportive network of the partnership.” The assessment developed some evidence about how much members participate and elicited partners’ views on what NNIP staff could do to encourage greater participation. Urban-NNIP staff estimate that about one-third of partner members are very active in the network, one-third are active, and one-third do not participate very much.

The process for selecting the survey sample targeted individuals who would be informed enough about NNIP activities to report on them; the majority of those who responded indicated that they had participated in most of the available activities. As shown in table 6, 96 percent of the responders to the online survey reported they had participated by attending an annual meeting and 89 percent by being a member of the NNIP listservs; 79 percent have communicated with other partners between meetings. Smaller percentages of respondents have participated by using the website, attending webinars or meetings remotely, and other activities. Less than one-half have participated in a cross-site project or served on the Executive Committee. (This is a measure of “ever participated” in an activity, not a measure of ongoing, regular participation.)

Table 6. Respondents’ Personal Participation in the NNIP Network

Type of activity	Participation rate (%)
Attending partner meetings in person	96
Being a member of NNIP listservs	89
Communicating with other partners between meetings	79
Entering something on or using the NNIP website	75
Attending webinars or partner meetings remotely	61
Participating in a cross-site project	40
Serving on the Executive Committee	24

Note: N = 72.

Many partner members think participation levels are sufficient and don’t think participation is a problem for the network. Local partners also believe that Urban-NNIP staff is already doing the right things to encourage high levels of participation. They note, for example, that staff ensure that individuals can participate in multiple and varied ways, provide numerous reminders, and offer a mix of sessions—some that require formal preparation and others that allow on-the-spot participation—as well as a mix of plenary and small group discussions at the semiannual meetings.

Some members did voice concerns, however:

- One area where many partners would like to see greater participation from partner members is updating website descriptions of their organizations and work.
- One respondent noted: “If there’s a flaw in the organization it’s that agendas are driven by a small group of either very active members or by more frequent personal contact with the DC staff. Committee appointments seem to be based on whether you’re around or know someone who is. NNIP needs to encourage broader participation.”
- A few suggested an Eastern bias or a Beltway bias sometimes exists in the network.
- An emerging issue is whether two levels of participation or different patterns of participation exist among senior managers and more junior staff. One respondent pointed out: “I feel we see the same folks over and over [at meetings]. An issue is whether there is sufficient depth of staff participation: my team interacts about 5 percent as much as I do ... Maybe we are only connecting to the top people—and they are too swamped. Maybe we need to push it down a bit.” Similarly, several executive directors said they were too busy to watch NNIP webinars, but their staff found them helpful. Holding two meetings a year is seen as a helpful way to enable more staff from a member organization to attend.
- Some interviewees, including Urban-NNIP staff, suggested that nonparticipation might be a signal that a partner is experiencing difficulties and staff should follow up with these organizations. In 2014, Urban-NNIP staff instituted a regular check-in with partner

organizations that can serve as an opportunity to encourage participation and identify problems.

Most partners recognize that the challenge is to encourage participation not to blame or shame. New members and smaller or less mature organizations, in particular, should be encouraged to feel they have things to contribute. Suggestions from local partners for how NNIP can encourage more participation, especially from a broader array of members, include the following:

- Send more reminders. Continue to remind members to update the website (and send them their password at the same time). This approach is seen not only as acceptable but also as necessary. Some members acknowledge they rely on Urban-NNIP staff to send reminders.
- Keep a scorecard on how partners participate, and remind them of their obligation. Point out the opportunity cost to the network of having members who don't participate in meetings, webinars, and website updates.
- Do targeted outreach to nonparticipants. Have people who are connected to them contact them; ask them to play a specific role; go to the unusual suspects when an opportunity to participate arises.
- Find ways to recognize a wider group of members. Offer some sort of award or recognition for activities such as the most innovative blog, a new leader award, recognition for long-standing service, or a technological innovator award. Consider giving three awards a year. Include less well-known members as recipients.
- Establish a mentoring system to pair new partner staff with members who have been in the network longer. This system might require some sort of training or setting criteria for the activities to be undertaken.
- Offer scholarships to allow financially struggling organizations to attend semiannual meetings or make visits to other partners.

Ratings and Recommendations on Specific Member Services

When asked to rate the importance of various NNIP activities, 92 percent of respondents to the online survey rated the meetings as “important” or “very important.” (See table 7.) The next most valued activity was the opportunity to learn from cross-site projects (87 percent rated this as “important” or “very important”), followed by connections to national networks and organizations (84 percent), tools and guides developed by NNIP (77 percent), one-on-one consultations with Urban-NNIP staff (75 percent), opportunities to participate in cross-site projects (72 percent), and the website as a place to learn about other members’ work (71 percent). Meetings, one-on-one consultations with NNIP staff, connections to other networks, and NNIP tools and guides are rated as “well” done or “very well” done by a large majority of respondents. These ratings underscore the value staff and partner members place on the exchange of knowledge within the network as well as the quality of the Urban-NNIP staff work.

The NNIP website, webinars, and Google group are other important communication tools within the NNIP network, providing additional opportunities for partners and Urban-NNIP staff to share knowledge and information. The webinars, Google group, and website as a showcase for one's own work were substantially less valued than other NNIP services and supports. These three activities were also rated as less well provided than other NNIP activities. Substantial proportions of members said they couldn't rate the webinars and the Google group, suggesting that they did not use them. No respondents wanted to see any current services eliminated, however.

Semiannual meeting. As noted, the NNIP semiannual meetings are the most highly valued and used activity. Fully 96 percent of the online survey respondents have attended partner meetings in person, and just over one-half said they regularly attended the meetings. (See table 6 and table 8.) Those who do not attend regularly report it is because another person from their organization attends or they lack travel funds or time. A total of 92 percent of respondents rated the meeting as "very important" (64 percent) or "important" (28 percent), as shown in table 7. Even higher numbers thought the meetings were "very well" done (82 percent) or "well" done (16 percent). These findings are consistent with the conference evaluations that attendees are asked to fill out at each meeting. Urban-NNIP staff and the NNIP Executive Committee use these internal evaluations to plan the next year's meetings.

Table 7. Ratings of NNIP Supports and Services

Activity	How Important (%)					How Well Provided ^a (%)				
	Not at all	Little	Moderate	Important	Very	Poorly	Ade- quately	Well	Very well	Cannot rate ^b
Partnership meetings	0	0	9	28	64	0	3	16	82	3
Learn from cross-site projects	1	1	10	48	39	5	20	50	25	18
Participate in cross-site projects	3	1	24	28	44	6	22	44	28	22
Consults with NNIP staff	0	6	19	46	29	0	5	25	69	15
NNIP tools and guides	2	2	20	42	35	0	11	43	46	19
Website to learn about others	0	4	25	43	28	3	27	41	29	9
Website to showcase my work	1	16	43	34	6	0	36	49	15	12
Webinars	0	9	40	43	8	6	28	38	26	32
Google group	3	5	39	41	12	0	22	43	35	28
Connections	1	0	14	49	35	2	18	48	31	7

a No respondent rated any service as very poorly provided, so this category is not shown in the table. The denominator in the “how well provided” calculation is the number of survey respondents who rated that particular service. This number ranged from 47 to 67 respondents, depending on the service.

b The denominator in the “cannot rate” calculation is the number of survey respondents who answered the question about each service; that number ranged from 67 to 69, depending on the specific service.

Table 8. Primary Reason Respondents Do Not Attend NNIP Meetings

Reason	Response rate (%)
I do regularly attend	51
Another person from my organization attends	18
No travel funds	21
Not enough time	10
Content not relevant	0

Note: N = 72.

A primary value of the meeting is that it allows the attendees to learn from their peers and other experts. “We have a small staff, and NNIP meetings allow us to stay up to date on new ideas and techniques. NNIP meetings curate/filter innovative approaches and allow us to learn about those approaches that are actually being put to productive use by peer organizations,” was a typical comment. In addition to the information exchange and opportunities to connect to other networks, meetings are valued for forging the personal ties and bonds that allow members to interact productively with each other. One partner likened the experience to “a combination of church and support group.”

Many describe the meetings as energizing as well as informative. “On the plane home, I had enough energy to fill three pages of ideas about other things I could be doing,” one noted. Another wrote, “Every NNIP meeting sends me back to my office with new ideas, new motivation, and a sense of forward motion. No, really. Totally.” The director of one organization notes that the meeting is a particularly effective way of initiating new staff about what data intermediaries do.

The challenge is maintaining enthusiasm and participation in network activities between meetings, Urban-NNIP staff noted. Numerous NNIP members volunteered how important it was to maintain two meetings per year; only one suggested that a single meeting was sufficient. One partner said she found the meetings so valuable that, “I’d pay to go myself if it wasn’t in my budget. And I’m a very cheap person.” Stressing the importance of the personal ties that develop at the meetings, another partner member observed, “If there’s very occasional attendance [at the meetings], it’s hard to see what the value is.” Another suggested that all partners should be informed—and acknowledge—that “participation in meetings is expected if not required at least annually.”

Despite enthusiastic endorsement of the meetings and the current meeting format and flow—with the mix of breakout and plenary sessions and “unconference” and Ignite sessions⁷—some partners expressed reservations, concerns, or cautions:

⁷ In the Ignite sessions, NNIP members give a five-minute overview of a project or technology to the full conference. PowerPoint presentations are set up with 15 slides that auto-advance every 20 seconds. Members volunteer in advance of the meeting to make an Ignite presentation. The NNIP Camp or “unconference” sessions

- One or two noted that the “quieter voices get drowned out” and suggested more small sessions are needed at the meeting.
- A common recommendation, especially if the network continues to grow, is to organize one of the two meetings per year around regional groups or specific themes or topics. However, many partners think that bringing together the rich mix of people working in research, data, and policy enhances the overall value of the meetings; they fear losing that if meetings are organized by topic or theme.
- Another concern is whether partners will feel free to be honest and open if the meeting is attended by too many “outsiders” or available to others through streaming or broadcast.
- As noted, some wondered whether NNIP is engaging staff sufficiently below the top level of the member organizations. Holding two meetings a year is seen as helpful to allowing different members of one organization attend.
- Several partners suggested limiting the number of people who could attend from any one organization as a way to keep the meeting size smaller.

Website. Although 71 percent of respondents think the NNIP website is an important or very important resource to learn about other partners’ work, only 40 percent value it that highly as a showcase for their own work. (Some note maintaining their local website is more important than updating the NNIP website.) Many members use the NNIP website to search for ideas when starting a new project or to see what people are doing in general or around a specific issue. They noted that the value of this resource depended heavily on partners’ willingness to update their entries. (As noted, this resource is one area where partner members would like to see greater participation from other partners.) NNIP funders and national partners also use the website to see what members in different localities are doing.

Urban-NNIP staff pointed out that the challenge of having partner members update the website with information about their own programs was heightened during the spring, summer, and fall of 2013 because of technical problems with the website. During this six-month period, the activity and publication links that directed users to a member’s website were not functioning, so Urban-NNIP staff did not encourage members to add content. The problem has now been fixed, and the website features a new design. Several partners who were interviewed volunteered that they liked the new design and the members-only section.

Webinars. Partners’ assessments of the NNIP webinars are equally mixed. As shown in table 7, only one-half (51 percent) rated webinars as an important or very important service. Two-thirds of those who rated them said they were well done or very well done. One partner thinks that other local groups offer more helpful webinars than NNIP. Just under one-third of survey respondents said they couldn’t rate the webinars. This suggests a substantial proportion of members does not use the webinars. Several directors noted that they didn’t have time to watch

feature discussions on topics suggested in advance or on the spot by members who then facilitate the sessions. A list of proposed discussions is posted at the meeting, and attendees can circulate freely among them.

the webinars but felt they were very useful for their staff. A number of respondents and interviewees expressed enthusiasm about a new webinar series, introduced in response to suggestions made at the spring 2014 St. Louis meeting. In these webinars, partners will talk about the work they are doing, along the lines of the Ignite session at the meetings. Members thought the series could provide an effective way of learning about each other's work and of maintaining enthusiasm between the semiannual meetings.

Suggestions to strengthen. A number of partners suggested that partner members could take on more responsibility for organizing the webinars as a way to relieve NNIP staff. However, some were concerned that partner members might not follow through or thought they might require remuneration.

Google group, social media, blogs. The NNIP Google group was rated as an “important” or “very important” activity by about half the local partners who responded to the survey; more than three-quarters of those who rated it thought it was well or very well provided. (See table 7.) Several members commented that the Google group provided a helpful way to share projects, exchange ideas, and post questions and answers. Others felt the Google group elicited more questions than answers from NNIP members. The openness and size of the group was another issue: a few thought it inhibiting to know that the responses would be read by such a large group; one suggested it would be helpful to have a way to take conversations offline.

Suggestions to strengthen. Many members want more and better ways of keeping abreast of what other members are doing between the in-person meetings. Numerous partner members strongly endorsed facilitating communication within the network by making more use of social media, especially Twitter, possibly Facebook, and GitHub. Others recommend having an NNIP blog. Another suggestion was to use an NNIP hashtag on Twitter to help brand NNIP. As of May 2014, NNIP had started tweeting, using the handle @NNIPHQ. Urban-NNIP staff tweet about new policy work (published by NNIP and other organizations) related to NNIP and promote the work of NNIP partners, often using the hashtag #NNIP. Staff members also tweet when they are attending conferences to promote NNIP.

Opportunities to learn from cross-site activities and make connections to national networks and organizations are highly valued aspects of membership, with 87 percent and 84 percent of respondents rating them as important or very important activities, as shown in table 7. Smaller proportions of respondents thought the opportunities to learn from or participate in cross-site projects were “well” or very well executed, however. Nevertheless, a number of partners noted that they were learning from other partners' work in these areas (such as integrated data systems, or IDS) even if they themselves were not part of the cross-site study. Several partners mentioned they would like to participate in cross-site work but had not had an opportunity. Several partners who had participated in cross-site projects noted that these efforts had opened up new opportunities for local work or new partnerships with local organizations. Others found that

cross-site projects provided opportunities to showcase their work at regional or national convenings.

Other benefits of membership: increased local credibility, national visibility, and opportunities for professional development. Survey respondents were more mixed in assessing the value of membership in NNIP as a way to increase local credibility and national visibility and to provide opportunities for professional development or advancement than as a source of knowledge sharing and peer support. (See table 4.) In interviews and open-ended questions, several noted that NNIP had been more helpful in raising their national profile than in increasing their local credibility. What impresses local groups, including local government, is not the NNIP name but knowing that the local partner is part of a national network with 35 other cities. A substantial portion of partner members felt that NNIP benefited their work by increasing their national visibility through opportunities to present their work at meetings or just by attending meetings, participating in cross-site projects, and making connections to other national networks. At the national level, being connected with NNIP “gives a stamp of approval,” one partner commented.

Role of Urban-NNIP Staff and Products

The Urban-NNIP staff plays an essential role in guiding the NNIP network, keeping it operating smoothly, and facilitating its growth over time. Staff members forge connections between partners and between partners and external networks and experts; serve as conduits of information; distill lessons, examples, and guidance for partners and the field in general; provide technical assistance and advice; and develop and manage cross-site projects. In the early years of the network, they played a critical role in helping partner members smooth out differences and find enough commonality to work together.

Urban-NNIP staff is seen as immensely responsive to partners’ requests for information and assistance: answering phone calls and e-mails quickly, having the information that people are seeking, and knowing who in the network is doing what and what outside organizations could be helpful to individual partners. An NNIP funder pointed out, “NNIP is the exemplar of a data-driven organization. When they get feedback, they implement it. They engage in continuous improvement and are responsive and flexible.” “Kathy has the pulse of the partnership and knows the national landscape too ... She is also helpful in thinking through local political issues and how to navigate them,” is a representative comment. However, one partner suggested that the network might be better served by having staff members with more experience in managing networks.

Partners note that the Urban-NNIP staff is also very knowledgeable about the data sets that network members work with and keeps the network abreast of new ideas and emerging trends. Partners and funders find staff members equally helpful in providing in-depth technical assistance and advice. Several respondents noted that the technical assistance Urban-NNIP staff provides is more helpful than that of many intermediary organizations because it is tailored to

specific circumstances and staff members are not promoting their own products. The topics identified by online survey respondents as areas in which they were most interested in receiving additional technical assistance in the future are shown in table 9. Responding to partner interest in receiving technical assistance on business models, Urban-NNIP scheduled a special session featuring a facilitated workshop on business planning at the fall 2014 NNIP meeting.

Table 9. Topics for Additional Technical Assistance from NNIP

Topic	Share of respondents requesting (%)
Business models	46
Effective data partnerships with private sector	36
Analysis methods	33
Visualization tools	29
Database design and management	17
Organizational planning	13
Community outreach	12
Web development	7
Neighborhood organizing	1

Tools and guides developed by NNIP are considered both “important” and well executed, although 19 percent of survey respondents said they couldn’t rate them (table 7). Although a few thought they are too research-y or white paper-ish, most partners find these materials pragmatic and helpful. A number of respondents value the guides and tools as synthesis pieces that partners would not be able to develop on their own. Several interviewees and respondents mentioned the guides on developing memoranda of understanding and using Home Mortgage Disclosure Act, or HMDA, data as particularly useful.

Relationship between NNIP and the Urban Institute. Although a few partner members think that Urban is too research oriented to be an ideal home for NNIP, most partner members and national organization colleagues think having NNIP housed in Urban is an asset. The Urban Institute is better known nationwide than NNIP and has a reputation for nonpartisanship and high standards of research, methodology, and analysis. Being associated with such an organization enhances NNIP’s standing and the credibility of NNIP products. It also adds to the credibility of local NNIP members, at least in the eyes of local funders. A downside exists, however: as discussed in section two, the connection between NNIP and Urban adds to the challenge of branding NNIP’s work and its contribution to the national-level discussion. In contrast, some argue that NNIP’s influence could be improved if Urban’s policy centers did more to disseminate NNIP’s learnings and products.

Activities Partners Could Take Over from NNIP Staff

An ongoing issue for NNIP is whether the Urban-NNIP staff is stretched too thin, since neither the director nor the deputy director works full time on NNIP. Asked whether partner members in the NNIP network might undertake activities to relieve some of the demands on Urban-NNIP staff time, partner members suggested that partners could do the following:

- Take on more responsibility for organizing webinars.
- Mentor or shepherd new NNIP members. Current members could be particularly helpful in advising new members about how to develop a neighborhood information system.
- Vet new technology or tools that people want to sell to the network or that could be useful to the network.
- Develop a speakers bureau so others besides Urban-NNIP staff could present at meetings, speak on behalf of NNIP, and connect with organizations joining NNIP in new cities. This effort would require some training, and the speakers should be longer-standing partners or members of the Executive Committee, it was suggested.

Some concerns were expressed about whether partner staff would require remuneration if they were to take on any of these responsibilities and whether partners would be able to follow through, given the many demands on their time.

Views of National Partners and Funders

National partners and funders are impressed by what NNIP has accomplished as a peer network that supports its membership, contributes to the marketplace of information, and builds the capacity of local organizations and practitioners. “NNIP has totally nailed what it means to be a community of practice. It pays attention to what members want to achieve, how to set an agenda, how facilitate the shaping of the agenda. There’s creativity in what people present and how—that brings real value.... It’s also trying to advance [the work] on the ground—[developing] best practices on data sharing, open data, for example.... trying to push the envelope with local government is also a hallmark of the partners and partnership. These aspects definitely stand out as hugely successful.”

Another national partner who has worked with NNIP says that it is one of the “strongest models” of a network he’s seen, and he urges others to replicate what NNIP does.

NNIP funders are equally enthusiastic about the value of the network as a community of practice. One pointed out, “NNIP’s success speaks for itself. Its value is demonstrated by the fact that [it attracts] new members, there’s continuing demand, people keep coming. It’s full of creative members.” Noting that NNIP is “an important crosscutting piece of core infrastructure for the field,” she views her support as “a small investment relative to the return.” Another funder remarked, “If I did one good thing, it was [investing in] NNIP. It’s a very good example of

investment in infrastructure, which is important to do.” One funder also noted that NNIP should be a model of a peer network for the IDS movement as it develops.

Observations on Network Management

NNIP exhibits many of the strengths of a well-functioning network as network theorists define them.⁸ Although Urban-NNIP staff members say they have not consciously applied network theory in developing the NNIP network, they clearly use practices that are recommended as sound network-building approaches. These practices contribute to NNIP’s effectiveness and help explain its openness to new ideas and its ability to be adaptive and resilient over time.

For example, NNIP remains open to new ideas by taking in new members, creating connections to other networks, and maintaining diversity among its core membership. NNIP is strengthened because it is able to maintain a diverse membership that includes data technologists, researchers, and service providers. Staff and partners alike help weave together these various connections. Networks that become closed and insular become too rigid and do not survive over the long term.

Relationship building is an essential component of creating productive networks. NNIP’s focus on building personal ties and relationships fosters the trust and mutual accountability that make it possible for members to exchange information, share knowledge, and work together. Over time, NNIP members connect more directly with each other rather than having all the connections go through the central hub of Urban-NNIP staff. The points of connections, modes of connection, and number of interactions among NNIP members all seem to be increasing. Having multiple avenues for participation also strengthens the network.

This activity creates a denser web of connections, which facilitates and accelerates information exchange and makes the network more resilient and robust. If one mode or pathway of connection fails, others are available. In addition, network members can drop out without damaging the entire fabric of the network. NNIP has survived the loss of several partners in different cities in recent years without diminishing its overall effectiveness.

The development and maintenance of the network is a shared responsibility among Urban-NNIP staff, the elected NNIP Executive Committee, and all partner members. Planning is not top down and hierarchical but open and facilitative. The network is guided and managed but not controlled. NNIP is open to—and actively seeks—input from network members, who are expected to contribute to and participate in network activities. This configuration enables it to be adaptive, responsive, and flexible—to respond appropriately as contexts change, opportunities arise, and problems are encountered. NNIP is open to new possibilities and able to respond to feedback from its members as well as to emerging and unpredictable developments.

⁸ See, for example, Valdis Krebs and June Holley, *Building Smart Communities through Network Weaving* (Athens, OH: Appalachian Center for Economic Networks, 2006), and “A Network Way of Working: A Compilation of Considerations about Effectiveness in Networks,” in *Nonprofit Quarterly* 19, no. 11 (2013): 1–9.

NNIP's commitment to democratizing data is seen as another critical component of its network strength by its members, its funders, and the external partners who work with it. One observer noted, "NNIP's ability to marry values and philosophy to a technical agenda is rare." Another commented, "NNIP's philosophical coherence is impressive."

Section Two: NNIP Success in Strengthening Local Capacity, Informing Policy, and Building National Support

NNIP staff identified three major goals and asked the Aspen Roundtable to assess how effectively the network was meeting them during the period 2002–13:

- Strengthening local capacity to use data for decisionmaking
- Informing local and national policy
- Building national support for community information systems

This section explores these themes. Local partners and national partners alike think all three goals are important. The overall conclusion is that NNIP helps to advance all three goals, and it has made progress in all three areas. Nevertheless, it could increase its effectiveness if it did more to document local successes and was more strategic about branding, messaging, and communicating about NNIP's work.

Goal 1: Strengthening Local Capacity to Use Data for Decisionmaking

Strengthening local capacity to use data for decisionmaking is a key goal of the NNIP network. This capacity encompasses a range of functions, including policy development, program planning, advocacy, and community engagement. As discussed in section one, local NNIP partners think that the knowledge sharing that occurs within the network is a key benefit of participation in NNIP. Partners strongly believe that the information and advice they get from other partners, the technical assistance provided by NNIP staff, and the connections to other networks all enhance their ability to provide and use data locally. These resources save partners time; give them better tools, methodologies, and techniques to work with; and help them overcome technical problems, as the following comments suggest:

- "I started a new project on the relationships between neighborhood people and crime and encountered a technical problem that people at the local university couldn't help solve. I called two partners who had done work in this area and had the answer in two minutes. This saved me time. I knew it would be methodologically sound and I could have faith in it. This was huge to me. It would not have happened without face-to-face [relationship building]."

- “It’s very important to be able to talk with others who do similar things. They can give you simple ideas that can save you weeks or months of work. It doesn’t involve a lot of time and effort and is a good return on investment. Sharing ideas keeps you from reinventing the wheel.”
- “NNIP connected me with another partner organization that was doing similar work. They were able to provide us with code for a website application that saved us months of Web development work and helped us make our data much more accessible to the community.”
- “In the context of our NNIP membership and participation, we have been able to obtain a signed data-sharing MOU [memorandum of understanding] with our principal municipal government. This has greatly reduced the difficulty of obtaining critically important administrative and municipal data resources for our work.”
- “What we learn from other partners improves our effectiveness, which in a very backhanded way improves our influence.”
- “I am certain we would be infinitely less effective if we were not part of the NNIP network.”
- “Lots of promising practices identified at NNIP and tried locally have improved [our] processes, products, and outcomes.”

The information exchange takes multiple forms, including general advice and guidance on a range of topics and themes; shared products such as computer code, website tools, templates, MOUs, and other documents; collaborative work in NNIP’s cross-site projects and other efforts (14 NNIP partners are involved in the Open Indicators Consortium and WEAVE, its data visualizing platform; partners report using other partners’ data request logs and schematics; two partners are considering doing a joint publication on health assessments); subcontracting work to another partner (one partner hired another to develop its community profiles).

Specific areas where capacity has been developed fall into four general categories:

Improving technology, methodology, and analysis. Examples range from GIS mapping techniques, parcel-mapping tools and techniques, database management, developing a web platform, and developing a user-request log, to guidance on measuring the effects of local disasters. Contacts with other organizations have enhanced the analyses that NNIP partners provide and the usefulness of their tools. One noted, for example, that NNIP facilitated connections to the Kirwan Institute for Study of Race and Ethnicity and the nonprofit Social Compact that provided “extremely valuable content around housing policy and data analysis.”

Expanding community engagement. Several partners mentioned they enhanced their ability to engage community members and groups in using data after learning what other partners were doing. For example, early discussions at NNIP meetings on changes in the US decennial census led one partner to rethink the way staff members presented data to local groups to stimulate more community engagement. Another learned census mapping techniques from a partner and then

showed local community groups how to use them, thereby empowering the local groups to find their own information. NNIP members also developed more effective ways to engage volunteers in property-mapping efforts after learning what other partners were doing. However, one partner noted that her organization still has a long way to go on developing effective engagement strategies and helping the community use data.

Strengthening organizational planning and business models. Help from Urban-NNIP staff and other partners on business models and strategic planning has been extremely valuable for organizations and cities where the NNIP partner has undergone major organizational or institutional challenges. A funder noted, for example, that Urban-NNIP staff was “invaluable” in helping one city where the community data capacity collapsed. “They came in and helped us understand what was needed: the technical base, whether it would be better to start anew or build on something, what was missing in the local landscape. They provided the national context and recommendations to move forward.” A local partner valued similar assistance from NNIP staff and other local partners when it needed to change its institutional home. Another noted that information provided by other partners about the cost of developing and maintaining a data system had helped make a convincing case to local funders about the financial support needed.

Broadening and strengthening partnerships and platforms with other local organizations. Having access to MOUs, templates, and other documents that NNIP partners use has enhanced NNIP members’ ability to work with a broader array of local organizations and with specific types of organizations, such as local and state school systems and municipal and county governments. Learning about IDS has been especially valuable in recent years, even for NNIP partners that are not part of the cross-site project on this topic.

National partners and funders also attest to the success of the network in building local data capacity. Colleagues in national organizations note the following:

- “It seems that [network members] do a great job of coming together, sharing, learning from each other. That definitely helps build local capacity.”
- “The real value in having a network is to share knowledge. Having the partnership allows local intermediaries to advance their work more quickly. Local places struggle to know how to do this effectively. They build out their work, do it better, get partners to get access to data.”

As discussed, NNIP funders are pleased that their investments in NNIP have helped build an infrastructure for the field. They emphasize the importance of having data intermediaries in multiple cities and of developing enduring capacity that is not tied to a specific initiative or a specific funding stream. They also point out the difficulty of building data capacity for specific initiatives from scratch in locations where preexisting capacity is lacking.

Goal 2: Informing Local and National Policy

Informing local and national policy with lessons from local experience is a significant challenge. The NNIP staff has tried to document the network's influence by developing anecdotal case studies (stories), more in-depth case studies, and full reports on cross-site projects. However, a number of observers (including staff members, funders, national partners, and NNIP partners) note that documenting the connection between having data and using it to affect actual policy is very difficult.

Nevertheless, national partners, funders, and staff members point to success from the cross-site projects on particular topics. Most think that the cross-site projects on foreclosure and reentry, and to a lesser extent welfare reform, affected policy in specific locations and helped “change the [policy] conversation” about the topic when it attracted national media attention. (NNIP work on early childhood education was perhaps less influential because others were already working in that area, one external partner noted.) Two examples of influence that were cited are the following:

- ***Prisoner reentry***: “The NNIP partner in Providence developed data on prisoner reentry that allowed it to show which communities the incarcerated came from and returned to. Another organization used these data to help communities prepare for reentry and advocate for state policy changes that would allow the formerly incarcerated to vote (thereby removing a felony restriction that blocked civic participation for a disproportionate share of prisoners).”
- ***Welfare recipients' access to jobs***: An early cross-site project examined where welfare recipients live compared to where jobs were located. “Having roughly comparable studies with new data from different metropolitan contexts made a significant contribution to policy conversation at the time. Cleveland found that jobs were out of reach for most welfare recipients—but this was not true across all the sites. The national policy conversation changed after all the studies were available.”

In addition, Cleveland, Oakland, and Pittsburgh were mentioned as cities where the NNIP partner's work gets attention in the national press and staff members are asked to speak across the country; the NNIP partners in these cities are seen as influential in affecting the national conversation.

Nevertheless, a number of interviewees (including funders, national partners, and Urban-NNIP staff) expressed disappointment that greater or clearer evidence of policy effects is not available. One source also noted some unevenness in the quality of the evidence across the stories that have been collected. For example, a conclusion that “we all understood better” is less compelling than evidence that a change in a zoning law reduced the number of liquor stores.

Observers note several things that contribute to the difficulty of making a stronger case for NNIP influence:

- Partners do not always give priority to documenting their policy influence, and the evidence can be hard to reconstruct.
- Working in a decentralized environment makes achieving national-level influence difficult; generalizing across locations and keeping the details in mind present difficulties.
- The policy issues that groups are tackling—foreclosure, for example—can be too massive for local organizations to affect, however well done their work may be.
- NNIP experience might be affecting practice in some federally supported initiatives, but the input may not be recognized as coming from NNIP.

Strengthening NNIP’s policy influence in the future will require stronger communications and branding efforts, it was generally agreed. Suggestions from local partners, national partners, and funders clustered around several key points:

- Develop better stories and case studies and more effective communication by using journalists to research and tell the stories, draw out the connection between engagement and advocacy, and reach a more mainstream audience. Tell the story so people can see how data are part of the process that leads to policy changes. Develop newspaper articles and longer case studies. Capitalize on the interest in data-driven journalism and data-driven news; consider connecting with the MIT Media Lab or the National Institute for Computer-Assisted Reporting. Explore the potential for online journalism, including outlets like *The Atlantic’s* CityLab.
- Be more opportunistic and timely about developing evidence and stories that resonate with topics of national interest.
- Encourage local partner members to develop better connections with local government and local elected officials. One national observer suggested that if the local partners were university based, they tended to be a bit cloistered; if they were community based, they were very grassroots. As a result, this source said, many local officials were not well informed about NNIP and what it does locally.
- Continue to leverage other networks to help tell the story. For example, a Federal Reserve meeting in Baltimore in 2012 featured a number of NNIP partners and their work on property systems.
- Leverage Urban’s policy centers to be conduits of information on specific policy issues. One observer believes NNIP’s policy influence on reentry and foreclosure was owed in part to the connection to the Urban policy centers, which called attention to the cross-site findings at the federal and state levels.
- Consider whether NNIP can do more to build awareness at the national level about specific policy issues based on its cross-site learnings and local lessons. One national partner thinks NNIP has not paid much attention to this area and noted, “NNIP never struck me as having a federal policy agenda and point of view—or attending to unfolding issues.”

- Explore the possibility of having partners band together and apply for projects, work as a group with, or form a subgroup within networks of organizations working on place-based initiatives such as Promise Neighborhoods.
- Make more efforts to brand NNIP and the partners’ work to raise the network’s profile and increase awareness of what it does.
- Prepare a one-page summary that explains what a data intermediary does. This information would be helpful to local partners and national partners alike.

Several national partners think NNIP does not get the recognition it deserves. One observed, “A surprising number of folks don’t know NNIP. I proselytize for them and the local partners.” Others wonder how engaged NNIP or NNIP partners are in networks like Promise Neighborhoods, the Promise Neighborhoods Institute, and Choice Neighborhoods. One queried, “How much does NNIP want to be engaged? Does NNIP feel it needs to be recognized as engaged?”

Some member partners also want NNIP staff and partners to do more to brand and market themselves as a network. One urged, “The network is so decentralized, partners are often not seen as connected to NNIP. Outsiders don’t see the network. We need to brand ourselves more. It’s really a marketing issue.” Tweeting and using an NNIP hashtag were suggested as ways to help with a branding effort.

The issue of branding NNIP is complicated by the relationship between NNIP and the Urban Institute. Urban-NNIP staff note, for example, that Promise Neighborhood sites use guides that are based on NNIP work but are not necessarily seen as NNIP products. In addition, Promise Neighborhoods use MOUs for administrative data sharing that were developed by the Grand Rapids NNIP partner, but the source is not always recognized. Similarly, based on the experiences of NNIP partner members, Urban-NNIP staff alerted the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) staff to the challenges of getting some of the data indicators that Choice Neighborhoods planned to collect at the neighborhood level.

Not all the national observers think that branding is a problem for NNIP, however. One credited NNIP with creating the field of local data systems: “The fact that people recognize there is a field of practice and recognize each other is entirely due to NNIP and what it’s done over the past 20 years. People recognize the NNIP name even if don’t know much about it. The NNIP experience reinforces notions of how to scale up: have a language, practice, concepts, vocabulary, recognized institutions—they offer all this.” And a local partner emphasized that NNIP should be raising the profile of neighborhood data systems rather than the profile of the NNIP network—admittedly a difficult challenge.

Goal 3: Building National Support for Community Information Systems

Local and national partners believe strongly in the value of NNIP’s work to build national support for community information systems. As shown in table 10, a total of 97 percent of

survey responders who rate NNIP’s efforts in this area rate them as very useful (73 percent) or useful (24 percent). Fifty-nine percent find that the connections NNIP provides to specific groups are sometimes useful; 21 percent find that they are often useful.

Table 10. Usefulness of Efforts to Create National Support for Community Information Systems

Overall usefulness	Response rate (%)^a
None	0
Little	2
Moderate	2
Useful	24
Very useful	73
<i>N</i> = 63	
Usefulness of facilitated connections	
Never	9
Seldom	12
Sometimes	59
Often	21
<i>N</i> = 68	

^a The response rate on the overall usefulness of NNIP efforts to create national support for community information systems is calculated on the 63 respondents that rated the usefulness. Another 5 respondents who answered the question said they were unable to rate the usefulness. Numbers do not sum to 100 percent because of rounding.

National partners see efforts to build national support for community information systems as “very important,” “enormously important,” “critically important,” or “essential” for NNIP and the field. Interviewees believe the time is opportune to make this effort, given the current administration’s interest in place-based efforts and evidence-based decisionmaking and the continued appeal of “collective impact” in the philanthropic and nonprofit sectors. A federal employee who works on federal place-based initiatives pointed out, “The most consistently weak area [in local plans] is local capacity to track, manage, share, and use data effectively. There is huge unfilled need there.”

Most observers (including those who work in the federal government) agree that NNIP is well positioned to make the case about the importance of local data and building local data capacity because of the breadth and depth of the network’s experience and knowledge of local data systems and issues:

- “NNIP demonstrates the success of these kinds of efforts and shows practical ways to integrate and align data and demonstrate its utility. This helps to make the case for national support for community data.”
- “NNIP has terrific knowledge of variation, nuance, and richness regarding data that are accessible, what’s not, what are barriers, what is the application of the data—and what can be done with it locally: they can bring all this into the national conversation. They are

uniquely positioned for this; they have deep knowledge and history over time on the relationships needed and how to build the data.”

- “What NNIP offers is their expertise and fluency with what it means to build [local data] capacity—the concrete knowledge and experience on the ground. That’s a critically important resource.”
- “You can’t substitute for practitioner voice ... NNIP is useful also because it has different models, different types of institutions doing the work, and different experiences—it’s not one size fits all. These commonalities as well as principles and variables, transactional experiences make it more useful for policy at different levels.”

Nevertheless, many who were interviewed—including federal agency staff, White House officials, national partners, Urban staff, and at least one local NNIP partner—think NNIP could do significantly more to advance this work. One observer stressed, “NNIP should make sure its profile is as high in philanthropy and policy as it already is in the world of data.”

A number of interviewees urge NNIP to consider expanding its efforts and to be more strategic about communicating, messaging, and branding. They think NNIP could be more visible and influential in the field if it engaged in a larger conversation about the use of data and the importance of empowering communities with data and evidence. It’s also important for NNIP to talk about being on the cutting edge of technology and the kinds of solutions that are emerging in individual sites.

Interviewees identified four areas where NNIP could do more to increase national support for community information systems (dependent, of course, on raising new funding to support this work).

- First, NNIP could send a more powerful message about the importance of local data systems to federal agencies and federal government and be more strategic about its interactions with these officials. A national partner and a local partner suggested that NNIP should identify levers in federal budgets or funding areas where federal departments could say they would advance or privilege those who have local data capacity or say they won’t fund an initiative that doesn’t require it.
- Second, NNIP could advocate to preserve data at the federal level and advise HUD and other federal agencies about the data the federal government makes available, weighing in on how existing data should be expanded and what new indicators should be collected federally and used locally. One federal employee urged: “NNIP needs to plug in powerfully ... [to] speak up and bring evidence about what NNIP has learned about what and which data [are needed] and in what form to present it ... NNIP should be comfortable saying how it’s helpful or not based on [its] experience.”
- Third, NNIP should connect to a broader group of national partners, including other networks with members that are doing place-based work and using data locally.

- Fourth, NNIP could be more strategic about targeting funders and building support for community data systems in the philanthropic world.

To implement these suggestions and strengthen NNIPs' influence at the national level, interviewees recommended that NNIP staff do three things: develop a better communications and messaging strategy; develop capacity by working with an individual or organization that is more experienced in this line of work; and connect to a broader range of people at the national level, within and outside the federal government.

Strengthen Communication Messages and Capacity

On these topics, advice from Urban staff, national observers, and local NNIP partners was quite consistent, as these comments suggest:

- “Communications is a big piece of what’s missing.... NNIP needs a partner or advocate, not a consultant, but a hand-holding partner to help them figure out how to do a strategic bump up: plan, articulate, sell it.”
- “NNIP could amplify the work. [This would require] investment in a communications platform: brand development, more regular communications that draw from the experience of the partners—to advance and develop of the field.... They could do this easily with additional capacity and a communications side and strategy. It would complement the community of practice. But ... they need a partner to help in this, someone who feels more comfortable doing this.”
- “We need a crystal clear communication prepared by NNIP that focuses on the value of the work, not the importance of the network. NNIP is the only group that is about community change, data driven community change. The message should be something like: ‘Strengthen neighborhoods with neighborhood indicators’ or ‘Strengthen neighborhoods with data driven action.’” To make the case, NNIP needs “sound bites” backed up by “stellar examples of how [using local data] has impacted or saved money.” This requires “a smart communications person or leadership that is good at communicating; NNIP staff may need a brief consultation with someone with branding information and experience about how to get attention.”
- Several interviewees see the work that Dennis Culhane and the Actionable Intelligence for Social Policy group are doing to develop support for IDS at the state and local levels as a possible model to emulate. This work has created a buzz and generated interest at the second level of federal bureaucracy. They stress that NNIP needs to get equal attention to a message about community information systems. Nevertheless, NNIP’s communication efforts need to be balanced with its efforts to maintain the partnership as a network that develops and supports strong personal connections among its members.
- An alternative strategy, an Urban staff member suggested, would be to get a handful of smart, influential journalists or social media bloggers to write about the value this kind of data could have for policy.

Broaden Federal and National Connections

Interviewees had specific suggestions about the groups that NNIP should connect with to expand its national reach.

Federal agencies. At the federal level, NNIP is already well connected to HUD but should develop more connections with the Department of Health and Human Services, the Department of Education, public health officials, possibly the Office of Management and Budget, the chief information officer at the White House, and equivalent positions in the federal agencies. NNIP should connect with any department or initiative that is geographically targeted, a funder urged.

National networks with local members doing place-based work, professional associations, and trade groups. Several interviewees (mostly national partners) raised questions about the degree to which NNIP is connected to the range of federally funded place-based initiatives such as Promise Neighborhoods and Choice Neighborhoods and the infrastructure that supports them. Numerous national partners urged NNIP to connect with the collective impact movement through FSG, the StriveTogether Cradle to Career Network, and the United Way: NNIP should talk with these organizations about where data fit in place-based collaboratives and the work that NNIP partners do locally. One interviewee suggested NNIP ally with FSG in an explicit way or do a joint project with it.

In addition, NNIP should reach out to other networks such as Enterprise Community Partners and NeighborWorks America that work locally. Putting blog posts on national partner websites could be a way to leverage these relationships and keep the national spotlight on the importance of local data. Other professional associations and trade groups to consider include the US Conference of Mayors, the International City/County Management Association, the American Planning Association, and the Urban Affairs Association.

Be More Strategic about Connecting to Funders

Some national observers suggested that NNIP could be more strategic about soliciting support from the philanthropic sector. One said NNIP staff should identify funders whose own vision and mission could be advanced by a more effective, more powerful NNIP. NNIP should craft a strategy for targeting each foundation (deciding, for example, whether to invite the foundation staff to attend a NNIP meeting, to bring local people to the foundation, or to enlist the foundation as a participant in a project). Then it should make a case to each foundation about how NNIP can help advance that funder's agenda. Another funder suggested that NNIP should keep its finger on the pulse of wherever philanthropy was going—the emerging flavor of the month—and show how NNIP was connected to that issue. A national partner suggested that NNIP staff should develop ties with the Council on Foundations.

Section Three: Challenges, Tensions, Opportunities

Almost 20 years after its founding, NNIP seems poised at a crossroads. In the judgment of all sources for this study, NNIP has developed and maintains an impressive peer network of local data intermediaries that builds local capacity and helps advance the field. At the same time, most of the national partners and external observers, as well as some local partners, think NNIP could have more impact on local and national policy and be even more successful in building national support for community information systems if it developed a stronger program to do so, including a more strategic branding and communication policy. Taking on this heightened role would have important implications for NNIP's work and raises important questions for the network.

NNIP has developed a winning formula for keeping NNIP members connected, energizing them through the partnership meetings, connecting them to other networks and experts, providing opportunities for information exchange, and keeping them up to date on topical subjects and on the cutting edge of technological and methodological issues. In many cases, NNIP membership also gives members visibility and credibility with local and national organizations. The network-building formula might be tweaked and strengthened by implementing some of the recommendations noted in this assessment, but it does not need overhauling or rethinking. It works very well. Maintaining the current standard and level of services—and strengthening them along the lines noted—should remain a priority for NNIP.

A key issue for the network going forward is whether and how to amplify and expand its marketing and communication efforts. If NNIP chooses to make that a priority, a major tension will be how to balance that work with strengthening the peer network and maintaining its usefulness for partner members. Several issues—funding and resources; network growth; and opportunities for outreach, branding, and messaging—deserve attention.

Funding and resources. Moving forward, particularly if NNIP is to take on a major communication effort to advance its goals to inform local and national policy and build national support for community information systems, NNIP will need to increase its funding and even expand and diversify its funding base. As discussed earlier, NNIP runs a very lean organization. NNIP funding supports the equivalent of one and a half full-time positions. As a result, staff is stretched thin with the current workload. Unless new resources are available, it would be difficult if not impossible for staff members to take on a larger or more aggressive communication role or cover the cost of working with a communication specialist without cutting back on the work they currently do to maintain and strengthen the network.

Opportunities for branding and messaging. The individuals interviewed for this assessment identified a number of potential targets for a stronger and more strategic communication policy, including federal-level staff, a variety of professional associations, and networks of organizations working on place-based initiatives. Several opportunities seem particularly promising as starting

points. The current cross-site project on IDS and the work NNIP staff and local partners have been doing around open data seem to offer opportunities to develop new partnerships, reach a broader audience, send a strong message about the importance and power of local data systems, and disseminate lessons about creating local information systems on the ground and using them to inform policy and program decisionmaking. Both topics seem to offer possibilities for a stronger communication effort to grow out of and support emerging work.

NNIP could also benefit from connecting to a broader array of community-change initiatives and networks, including those that fall under the collective impact umbrella, so it can more readily be identified as a source of knowledge and experience on developing and using local data systems to inform policy and practice. For example, NNIP's lessons would be extremely useful to current and emerging generations of place-based initiatives. Prioritizing an outreach strategy to a broader array of organizations involved in place-based work could be an important step in developing a more effective communication strategy for NNIP.

Another approach to consider is whether opportunities exist to make NNIP a stronger voice within Urban and to have Urban be clearer about the ways NNIP informs the work of its policy centers.

Network growth. Another challenge is network growth. Urban-NNIP expects that NNIP will add one to two new member cities a year. Planned growth is desirable for a number of reasons: Expanding NNIP's membership expands the infrastructure of community information systems and helps to make the case about the importance of NNIP's work. New members bring new blood and new ideas into the network. As one local partner pointed out, growth also increases the likelihood that more members will be working on similar things.

But growth also raises challenges and concerns. A major challenge is ensuring that as the network grows it continues to foster the personal connections that have been so important to its development and functioning. NNIP members do not think that the anticipated pace of growth will be too much for the network to absorb, but they urge staff to preserve the intimacy of the network by continuing to mix large and small sessions and offer opportunities for spontaneous sessions at the semiannual meetings. Some members recommend organizing regional or topical meetings once a year to replace one of the two full-partnership meetings.

Taking a different perspective on growth, NNIP's national partners and one of its funders suggest that the Urban-NNIP staff could be less opportunistic and more strategic about adding cities to the network. They recommend that NNIP aim to bring in key cities—such as the largest or most important metropolitan areas—as a way to increase the network's influence and standing, strengthen its impact on policy, and make a statement about the importance of the network. Local partners and national partners urge NNIP not to relax its standards on membership and especially to maintain its focus on members who are committed to NNIP's mission of democratizing data. Nevertheless, a few local partners expressed concern that some of

the newer NNIP members may not be as committed to social justice as the partners that joined the network earlier.

Additional challenges may emerge if more partner members withdraw from the partnership because of financial difficulties or shifting local priorities. A loss of longer-term partners and an influx of new ones—particularly if a number of organizations are added to the network within a short span of time—has potential to upset the balance between longer-term and newer members and to change the relationships and interactions within the network. A number of partners already feel a cohort effect or divide exists between those who joined the network earlier and those who came later. Partners recommended a number of strategies to better integrate new members and more junior staff into the network; NNIP should seriously consider implementing them. NNIP should also consider whether it can implement recommendations urging staff members to be more strategic and less opportunistic about reaching out to and choosing new partner members and to bring in localities that can raise the capacity, importance, or profile of the network. However, a more strategic approach to growth could put further strain on limited resources; any discussion of this topic should consider the cost implications of a more aggressive or targeted outreach policy.

Urban-NNIP staff and the NNIP Executive Committee plan to use this assessment to develop activities and strategies for 2015–17 and have scheduled a session to discuss the report findings and recommendations at the fall 2014 NNIP meeting. As noted, the staff has already taken steps to implement some of the suggested improvements in NNIP’s website, webinars, and use of social media and is offering a special session on business planning at the fall meeting. All of these actions are further indications of NNIP’s responsiveness to its membership and commitment to continuous improvement. Moving forward, the staff should also have follow-up discussions with NNIP’s national partners and consider establishing an advisory committee, composed of selected national partners and possibly funders and Urban staff, to help think through the potential challenges and benefits of taking on an expanded role to enhance NNIP’s policy impact and efforts to build the field.

Appendix A. List of People Interviewed

NNIP Partner Members

Claudia Coulton
Center for Urban Poverty and Community Development, Case Western Reserve University
Cleveland, OH

Bob Gradeck
Pittsburgh Neighborhood and Community Information System
Pittsburgh, PA

Seema Iyer
Baltimore Neighborhood Indicators Alliance–Jacob France Institute
Baltimore, MD

Sharon Kandris
The Polis Center, Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis
Indianapolis, IN

Laura McKieran
Community Information Now (CI:Now)
San Antonio, TX

Susan Millea
Children’s Optimal Health
Austin, TX

Lisa Pittman
The Children’s Trust
Miami, FL

Erica Raleigh
Data Driven Detroit
Detroit, MI

Steve Spiker
Urban Strategies Council
Oakland, CA

Josh Wheeling
CamConnect
Camden, NJ

National Partners

Naomi Cytron
Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco

Salin Geevarghese
Office of Sustainable Housing and Communities
US Department of Housing

Alisha Green
Sunlight Foundation

Chris Kingsley
Data Quality Campaign

Jack Madans
Code for America

Luke Tate
White House Domestic Policy Council

Sarah Treuhaft
PolicyLink

Chris Walker
Local Initiatives Support Corporation

Emily Shaw
Sunlight Foundation

NNIP Funders

Cindy Guy
The Annie E. Casey Foundation

Alaina Harkness
John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation

Urban-NNIP Staff

Leah Hendey
Deputy Director

Kathryn Pettit
Director

Tom Kingsley
Senior Fellow and Director Emeritus

Urban Institute Staff

Erika Poethig
Institute Fellow and Director of Urban Policy Initiatives

Margery Turner
Senior Vice President for Program Planning and Management

Appendix B. NNIP Partners Online Survey

Introduction and Background

This survey is being conducted by the Aspen Institute Roundtable on Community Change under contract with the Urban Institute and is supported by the MacArthur Foundation. The purpose of this study is to assess the performance of NNIP over the period from 2002 to 2013 in furthering the development and use of neighborhood-level information systems. The NNIP Executive Committee and Urban Institute–NNIP (UI-NNIP) staff will use the findings to shape network plans for 2015- 2020.

Overall, the assessment will shed light on how well NNIP is performing on its stated goals to:

- Strengthen local capacity to use data for a range of purposes, including policy, program planning, advocacy, and community engagement;
- Inform local and national policy based on lessons from local experience; and
- Build national support for community information systems.

The purpose of this online survey in particular is to elicit NNIP partner member's views about the value of the network, the benefits accrued to date, and ideas about where improvements can be made.

Your answers will be linked to the characteristics of your organization for purposes of summary analysis, but they will not be shared with the UI-NNIP staff or NNIP funders and will not be attributed to you in any summary report without permission.

The survey should take about 20 minutes to complete, depending on how long it takes you to answer the open-ended questions. Starred questions are required.

***1. How many years of professional experience in neighborhood indicators, public policy, or other related work do you have?**

- Less than 1
- 1–3
- 4–6
- 6–10
- More than 10

***2. How many years have you worked at your organization?**

- Less than 1
- 1–3
- 4–6
- 6–10
- More than 10

***3. What types of work have you been responsible for during your time at your organization? (Check all that apply.)**

- Organizational management
- Fundraising
- Research management
- Data analysis
- Community outreach (nonprofits/govt)
- Policy advocacy
- Neighborhood resident organizing
- Software/web programming

- GIS mapping
- Other (please specify)

Participation in the Network

***4. How many years have you personally been involved in the NNIP network?**

- Less than 1
- 1–3
- 4–6
- 6–10
- More than 10

***5. How have you personally participated in the NNIP network? (Check all that apply.)**

- Member of NNIP listservs
- Entering something on or using the NNIP website
- Attending webinars or partner meetings remotely
- Attending partner meetings in person
- Communicating with other partners between meetings
- Participating in a cross-site project
- Serving on the Executive Committee
- None of the above
- Other (please specify)

***6. Other than NNIP partner meetings or calls organized by UI-NNIP staff, how often on average do you communicate one-on-one with individuals from other NNIP partner organizations outside of your city?**

- Not at all
- Once or twice a year
- A few times a year
- Once a month
- Two or more times in a month

***7. If you do not attend partner meetings regularly, please list the primary reason:**

- Not enough time
- No travel funds
- Another person from my organization attends
- Content is not relevant enough to my local work
- I do regularly attend meetings
- Other (please specify)

8. An expectation for NNIP partners is that they “contribute to the knowledge sharing and supportive network of the partnership.” Please suggest ways that UI-NNIP staff could encourage more participation of individual staff members in the network.

[open-ended response]

9. Please share any other comments about partner participation in the network.

[open-ended response]

Value of NNIP Supports and Services to Partners

The primary goal of NNIP is to strengthen local capacity to use neighborhood-level data for policymaking, program planning, advocacy, and community engagement.

Examples include:

- Policy Development: estimating impacts of potential city policies like inclusionary zoning or analyzing suspension patterns to inform school policies
- Program Development: supporting a Promise Neighborhoods team or assisting an Affordable Housing Coalition to identify target neighborhoods
- Advocacy and Community Engagement: highlighting a community issue to call for new investments or helping a neighborhood group plan their agenda

***10. On a scale of 1 to 5, how helpful has NNIP membership been to your efforts to build the capacity of local and community leaders to use data for the following purposes? [1 = Not at all helpful; 5 = Very helpful]**

- Policy development
- Program planning
- Advocacy and community engagement

***11. On a scale of 1 to 5, how highly do you rate the value of the following types of supports and services provided by NNIP membership to build that capacity? Please rate how important it is [1 = Unimportant; 5 = Very important] and how well NNIP provides this service [1 = Very poorly; 5 = Very well; X = Cannot rate].**

- Partnership meetings
- Webinars
- NNIP partner Google group
- One-on-one consultations with UI-NNIP staff (by e-mail or phone)
- Tools and guides developed by NNIP
- Website as a showcase for my work
- Website as a place to learn about other partners' work
- Opportunities to participate in cross-site activities on special topics
- Opportunities to learn from cross-site projects (whether or not you are participating)
- Connections to national networks and organizations

***12. Please check the top TWO areas that would be most useful for NNIP to develop additional technical assistance and supports.**

- Organizational planning
- Business models
- Effective data partnerships with private sector
- Database design and management
- Analysis methods
- Community outreach
- Neighborhood organizing
- Web development
- Visualization tools
- No opinion
- Other (please specify)

13. Are there new activities to serve the partners that NNIP should take on?

[open-ended response]

14. Are there activities to serve the partners that should be discontinued?

[open-ended response]

15. Please share any other comments about NNIP's services to partner organizations.

[open-ended response]

Other Benefits of Membership

***16. On a scale of 1–5, how highly do you value the following as benefits of membership in NNIP?**

[1 = Unimportant; 5 = Very important]

- Opportunities for peer support
- Increased local credibility Increased national visibility
- Opportunities for professional development or advancement
- Knowledge sharing on topical issues
- Knowledge sharing on methodology and technical issues
- Knowledge sharing on organizational strategy

17. Please share any specific examples of ways in which NNIP has improved your organization's effectiveness or influence locally.

[open-ended response]

18. Please share any other comments about benefits of NNIP membership.

[open-ended response]

Efforts to Build National Support for Community Information Systems

Another goal of NNIP is to build national support for community information systems in order to support local capacity in data development and use. To do so, UI-NNIP staff participate in activities with federal agencies, national funders, and other national organizations and networks. Examples include HUD, LISC, the Community Indicators Consortium, the Federal Reserve, Sunlight Foundation, and the Data Quality Campaign.

***19. On a scale of 1 to 5, how useful do you think these efforts are for the network?**

- 1 Not at all useful
- 2 A little useful
- 3 Moderately useful
- 4 Useful
- 5 Very useful
- X Cannot rate

***20. How often has NNIP facilitated connections to national organizations or networks that were helpful to you?**

- Never
- Seldom
- Sometimes

- Often

21. Which specific relationships, if any, are most important to your work? (Please specify.)

[open-ended response]

22. Please list any other organizations or networks that you think NNIP should be connecting with.

[open-ended response]

23. Please share any other comments about NNIP's efforts to build national support for local data capacity.

[open-ended response]

Future Directions for NNIP and Final Comments

As the NNIP Executive Committee and UI-NNIP staff plan for the next five years, please share any advice on the issues below.

24. Over the period 2002-2013, NNIP grew from a network of 6 organizations to a network of 39 active organizations. The partnership has committed to growing by one or two partners each year.

Do you have suggestions on how NNIP services, structure, or communication should change to maintain the most positive characteristics of a smaller network as it grows?

[open-ended response]

25. What other issues should NNIP think about as it plans for the next five years?

[open-ended response]

26. If you have any other comments related to this assessment of the NNIP Network that you would like to share, please include them here:

[open-ended response]