Comprehensive Neighborhood-Based Initiatives

Prudence Brown
University of Chicago

Abstract

A new generation of comprehensive community initiatives has been launched over the past decade to address the growing concentration, isolation, and persistence of poverty in urban America. While these initiatives may lead with a housing, economic development, or human service reform strategy, what they all share conceptually is an appreciation of the interdependence of physical, economic, and social development strategies and a desire to seek opportunities to create synergy among them. The characteristics of the initiatives are reviewed in this article, as are the challenges they create for evaluators and policymakers. Finally, there is a discussion of actions the Federal Government might take to ensure that the initiatives achieve the size and generate the amount of knowledge that will position them to contribute to the development of urban policy over the next decade.

The growing concentration, isolation, and persistence of poverty in urban America and the social and economic consequences for both the poor and the nonpoor have created a national mood of despair, fear, and urgency. Although there is a general consensus that the Nation needs new program and policy approaches in many areas—from welfare reform and housing vouchers to gun control and massive public works—there is great divergence in views about what the new approaches should be. Many urban problems seem so intractable and so deeply affected by large-scale forces such as the changing economy and racism that it is difficult to generate the confidence and political will necessary to mount and test new approaches. Yet we know that modest "tinkering around the edges" is unlikely to have measurable impact.

This is the context in which a new generation of 40 to 50 comprehensive local initiatives have been launched during the past decade. Largely supported by foundations, sometimes in partnership with State or local government, these initiatives may focus on housing, economic development, or human service reform but seek to implement their approaches within a broad, holistic understanding of community change. Some programs focus primarily on children and families yet acknowledge the need to rebuild the social and economic fabric of the community so that it can support family life. Others begin with a

community development framework but are wider in scope than housing production or economic revitalization. What all of these programs share conceptually is an appreciation of the interdependence of physical, economic, and social development strategies and a desire to create synergy among them.

The goal of this article is to review the experience of these initiatives and to explore key questions: On what development assumptions are the initiatives based, and what is the evidence in support of these assumptions? How can we accelerate the knowledge generated by the initiatives and translate that knowledge into policy options and recommendations? What are the appropriate arenas for Federal—as opposed to State and local—policy?

Characteristics of Comprehensive Neighborhood-Based Initiatives

Three case examples of ongoing comprehensive neighborhood-based initiatives are described in exhibit 1. Further details about these and other efforts may be found in several reviews of foundation-supported comprehensive initiatives published within the past few years (Eisen, 1992; Fishman and Phillips, 1993; Jenny, 1993; Rosewater, 1992). For the purposes of this article, the relevant sample will be defined by its focus on people *and* place through a holistic lens; that is, it contains geographically targeted initiatives that operate across systems.

This approach is distinguished from traditional multiservice or coordinated-services strategies in several important ways. First, the approach seeks to bridge the traditional separation among human services, community revitalization, and economic development. Second, it aims to move beyond simultaneous operation of parallel programs within a geographic area to more organic connections among programs that build on one another and add up to more than the sum of their parts. Third, it has evolved from a "doing for or to" orientation to a primary focus on community building, which involves enhancing neighborhood leadership and institutions and mobilizing broad participation in the revitalization effort. Naparstek (1993) defines a community-building strategy as one that "combines a focus on place with an emphasis on self-help, without rejecting macro policies that are people based strategies," such as national monetary and fiscal policies, regulating hiring practices, and tax and transfer payments.

The emergence of a variety of like-minded initiatives across the country is driven not so much by research or theory as by the appeal of the approach for many foundations. There has been an increasing recognition of the limited ability of narrowly defined, categorical strategies to change the lives of poor families and the distressed neighborhoods in which they live. Historically, new housing was built without much attention to the social problems facing its occupants. Social services were carried out in a vacuum, separate from neighborhood violence and physical decay. Children's services aimed to assist troubled children without paying attention to their home and school environments. Job training programs had no functional relationship to the local economic development strategy.

Each intervention was governed by a separate bureaucracy, funded from a separate budget source, and carried out by separate groups of experts. Few interventions viewed the neighborhood as a whole or attempted to coordinate—let alone create synergy

Exhibit 1

Illustrative Comprehensive Initiatives

Community Building in Partnership. Community Building in Partnership (CBP) is a partnership among Baltimore's distressed Sandtown-Winchester neighborhood, the city of Baltimore, and The Enterprise Foundation. CBP's vision is to "build a viable working community in which neighborhood residents are empowered to direct and sustain the physical, social and economic development of their community." Enterprise believes that local leaders and residents must assume ownership and operational responsibility for the neighborhood transformation process. It defines its role as building local leadership, organizing local and national practitioners to help with planning and program design, raising resources, and evaluating progress. Having completed an intensive phase of program design and strategic planning and developed a management/governance structure within the neighborhood to carry out plans that have been generated, CBP is working on implementation on a number of fronts, including family development, health care reform, commercial/retail development, education, employment, large-scale physical renewal, and community building.

Neighborhood and Family Initiative. Neighborhood and Family Initiative (NFI) is a partnership between the Ford Foundation and community foundations in four cities: Detroit, Hartford, Memphis, and Milwaukee. NFI employs a comprehensive, neighborhood-focused approach to "revitalize and empower whole communities and the individuals and families who live in them." NFI is guided by two principles. The first views their targeted neighborhood from a holistic perspective and designs and implements strategies in a way that harnesses the interrelationships among social, physical, and economic development. The second establishes a governance structure called a collaborative, composed of neighborhood residents and stakeholders charged with planning, monitoring, and coordinating NFI's implementation. The Center for Community Change provides technical assistance to the sites and facilitates cross-site learning. The evaluation strategy has two levels: a national evaluation undertaken by the Chapin Hall Center for Children and local site evaluations developed by the collaboratives.

Comprehensive Community Revitalization Project. Comprehensive Community Revitalization Project (CCRP) supports six mature community development corporations (CDCs) in the South Bronx with direct grants, technical assistance, and training over a 3-year period to achieve the goal of "broad-based community planning, grassroots empowerment, economic development, and local service coordination and delivery." CDCs are working on two levels: first, they are focusing on "smaller catchment areas within their neighborhoods (generally where they have a large housing presence) where they will direct and facilitate a major coordinated service effort," and second, they are acting as catalysts, brokers, incubators, conveners, and organizers, seeking to "bring critically needed services and initiatives" to the neighborhoods. The Surdna Foundation took the lead in developing CCRP but has been joined by seven other foundations with a total commitment of $5 million. CDCs completed the neighborhood planning process in 1992 and are now in full-scale implementation. Activities range from self-esteem training and assessment of the supply and quality of child care to primary health care and supermarket development. OMG, Inc., of Philadelphia is conducting an evaluation of CCRP.

Source: Brown and Richman (1993)

among—the various development strategies. In contrast, comprehensive neighborhood-based initiatives recognize that people are part of a community and try to find strategic points of entry into this interrelated framework to leverage change on many different levels.

Another appeal of the comprehensive approach is a more philosophical one, namely a recognition of the role of individual and collective responsibility in changing neighborhood life. Despite differences, most comprehensive initiatives are designed to promote participation by residents and other stakeholders in the process of identifying problems and prioritizing goals, and then of designing and implementing strategies to address the problems. John Gardner (1991) asserts that community breakdown often causes people to lose the conviction that they can improve the quality of their lives through their own efforts. They experience a "loss of meaning, a sense of powerlessness" that leads to a "diminution of individual responsibility and commitment." One appeal of a comprehensive initiative is that it can strengthen the community voice and mobilize the talents and energy of a diverse set of constituencies around a common task. Such an approach fosters the democratic values of individual and community potential; indeed, democracy does not work unless all people have a voice.

A third reason why foundations are attracted to geographically targeted comprehensive initiatives is their potential to demonstrate that change is possible in persistently poor urban neighborhoods. To generate the political will, creativity, and resources that are needed to bring about sustained revitalization on a significant scale, there must be credible evidence that it can be done. Focusing on a limited geographic area, however distressed, avoids the problems of scale that a citywide effort must confront. Also, if a neighborhood can be defined as the intersection of place and associational networks, then part of the initiative's strategy is to inject a dynamic of change into the climate of the neighborhood. The most direct way to do this is associational network by network or neighborhood by neighborhood. The role of hope, both inside and outside the neighborhood, is critical to individual and collective transformation; the more that hope can be fueled by evidence, the better.

Although comprehensive initiatives vary considerably in structure and strategy, to varying degrees they all address the following aspects of community life:

- Economic opportunity and security: for example, job training and development; neighborhood-based financial institutions, such as credit unions, development banks, and revolving loan funds; income security programs; and commercial revitalization and development.
- Adequate physical development and infrastructure, including housing, transportation, and public amenities and services.
- Safety and security, such as community policing, land-use zoning, and crime prevention.
- Well-functioning institutions and services, including schools, social and health services, libraries, sports leagues, and recreation.
- Social capital: promoting a rich social fabric and a strong community voice.

Comprehensive, in this case, does not mean that all five spheres of activity must be addressed at the same time, nor does it mean that simultaneous but independent initiatives necessarily add up to a comprehensive approach. Rather, a comprehensive lens assures

attention to the interrelationships among areas as a way to understand the neighborhood's needs and strengths and to shape development strategies that are most likely to have a synergistic impact over time. Attention to the interdependencies among the five areas is also intended to help define strategic define of entry and actions that have the ability to catalyze and contribute to improvements in more than one area.

Even from a comprehensive perspective, the point of entry (such as housing, school reform, or job creation) may matter less than whether the strategy catalyzes or creates the conditions under which other interventions will be successful. Many of the current comprehensive initiatives are struggling with this challenge. There are simply not enough resources to fund all of the activities that are needed. As a result, program designers and managers attempt to create efficiencies by having each activity serve more than one function. Chaskin (1992) describes one example of such an approach:

> . . . in a neighborhood in which unemployment is high and individuals lack vocational training, . . . a project might link a housing renovation project to a local job training and employment initiative. Such an effort could be further linked to neighborhood house ownership (e.g., through sweat-equity provisions [that] support current residents' opportunity to buy) and to the provision of services (e.g., a day care center could be opened in a renovated building). This integrated approach would train and employ neighborhood residents, support the creation of a small business enterprise, and provide easy access to a needed service.

Another example of a holistic approach comes from the Shorebank Corporation in Chicago, which operates as:

> . . . [a] bank that invests in the local community; an institute that provides grants and loans to renovate affordable housing and to provide education and training; a nonprofit neighborhood fund that backs minority owned businesses; and a real estate corporation that develops property for low- and middle-income residents. (Social Science Research Council, 1993.)

A particularly interesting feature of Shorebank's new Austin, Texas, initiative, which is an integrated strategy of labor force and business development, is its creation of another nonprofit arm devoted to family support and personal development. Such an approach helps to create the conditions under which the business development strategy can succeed.

Creating such efficiencies and selecting strategies that catalyze other activities is an intellectually and practically challenging task. There are few working models of such approaches, in part because so many of the funds available to comprehensive programs are in the form of specialized, categorical grants. Thus the local programs must be responsible for turning the funds into an integrated, holistic approach, despite multiple and often inconsistent regulations and reporting requirements, as well as barriers to collaboration across professional domains and among various neighborhood organizations and constituencies. It is not surprising, therefore, that nearly all of the 40–50 comprehensive initiatives currently underway rely on flexible foundation support—many almost exclusively, at least in the startup phases.

One of the questions facing policymakers is the appropriate role of local government in these initiatives. Some programs, such as Baltimore's CBP, have become partners with local government—in this case, the mayor's office. Such an approach has obvious advantages in terms

of attracting resources, influencing policy, and building the capacity of local government to work with its neighborhoods. There may also be disadvantages, depending on the stability, commitment, and effectiveness of local government. Other initiatives have had a much more distant relationship with government, perhaps as little as including a city representative in a neighborhood collaborative. The strategy often used in such situations is to build a strong, representative neighborhood governance entity that can attract local resources and negotiate with local government from a position of strength. In both cases, the long-term vision of such initiatives requires new relationships between neighborhoods and city hall, often in conjunction with the State, because few funding and regulatory barriers to an integrated approach are locally driven.

No matter how well organized, individual neighborhoods are not well positioned to have a comparative advantage as the sole or primary engine for large-scale bureaucratic change. Rather, by creating alternative local governance mechanisms that have broad-based community support, neighborhood-based initiatives aim to demonstrate the possibilities of a holistic, integrated approach and to work collaboratively with city and State governments, which, in turn, can work at the Federal level to produce resources and policies that support an integrated approach. It is too early to tell how effective current initiatives will be in leveraging such change, but it is clear that we need to know much more about the limits of—and successful strategies for—policy impact when the primary point of entry is at the neighborhood level.

In addition to common substantive elements, initiatives often share a general set of strategies for planning and implementing their agendas. Of course, there are some significant differences, but most could be characterized by the following broad approach to community change. The initiative begins with the establishment of a diverse board of community members, sometimes supplemented by strategically connected advisors—people who develop a common vision for the neighborhood and a plan of action to carry it out. In prioritizing its strategies, the plan attempts to balance a number of sometimes competing functions that include:

- Responding to community priorities and opportunities.
- Producing concrete and visible results that can become the basis for long-term change.
- Expanding the networks in which the initiative becomes embedded.
- Developing new constituencies, capacities, and leaders.
- Building the organizational infrastructure of the community.
- Brokering the needs of the community with previously untapped resources and opportunities.
- Contributing to the overall momentum of the initiative, building the case that change is possible and within the community's control.

In summary, these initiatives aim to build relationships, leadership, and institutional capacities, all of which are necessary ingredients in a comprehensive revitalization project. The assumption is that such efforts require a level of collaborative enterprise that is intensive, extensive, and continuous in the face of powerful countervailing forces that can easily undermine community-building efforts. In a distressed neighborhood, the social infrastructure and resource base are so depleted and the area is often so isolated from the

larger society that there is little sense of a common interest among residents, little ability to obtain the community's fair share of resources, and little capacity to use whatever resources it does receive. Consequently, there needs to be a way to draw on the resources, ideas, and political will of people outside the community as well as those within it. But the historical failure of many efforts initiated from outside the community highlights the need for a legitimate and committed community voice. Thus a board or development group comprising both internal and external constituencies appears most likely to engender community ownership and access to important resources.

In comprehensive community-based development initiatives, there is often an inherent tension between process and product. On one hand, projects that are expected to produce a tangible outcome before they establish an inclusive and participatory community dynamic may produce new housing or fill a gap in social services but are unlikely to generate the community ownership that becomes the driving force for lasting change. On the other hand, many project initiators get stuck in the process of community building: They establish a rich social network and a long-term vision but are unable to identify and implement specific strategies to achieve midrange goals toward that vision. Both extremes lead to demoralization and reinforce the notion that the community is beyond hope.

Another dynamic that tends to undermine community change efforts is the view that nothing matters except macroeconomic forces that are beyond the control of the project. Those people who subscribe to this perspective often come to this view because the activities in which they have been engaged seem insignificant in relation to the intensity and scope of the problems. Without a stronger labor market and a more diversified economy, what are the realistic expectations for change?

One response to this question argues that civic culture and social organization are precursors to successful economic development. Therefore, a policymaker's most significant contribution is an initiative that builds the internal capacity of a community and its linkages with the world outside. In this way the community will be better positioned to attract resources, use them well, and take advantage of larger economic forces, if and when the economy offers such opportunities. Putnam (1993) makes this point by advocating that "in any comprehensive strategy for improving the plight of America's communities, rebuilding social capital is as important as investing in human and physical capital. . . . Investments in jobs and education, for example, will be more effective if they are coupled with reinvigoration of community associations." Drawing on examples from an experiment in regional government in Italy, Putnam finds that the best predictor of economic development, as well as effective government, is a strong tradition of civic engagement. Thus he argues that community development must focus attention on "religious organizations and choral societies and Little Leagues that may seem to have little to do with politics or economics."

Such a view is echoed in Henderson's writing (1993) about a "turnaround" community that is defined by both "arresting objective indicators of decline . . . and revitalizing the economic, human, physical, institutional, and civic infrastructure through the development of projects and programs orchestrated by the grassroots, business, government, and nonprofit sectors." Building civic engagement and capacity occurs through a process of working together to develop a common vision for the community and a strategic plan for accomplishing it. "Turnaround is initially a transformation in the spirit and psychology of the community" that provides the energy and drive for community mobilization, institution building, and change as evidenced by "new and rehabilitated housing, revitalized schools, new businesses, committed churches, and a lively civitas."

Although described in different ways, comprehensive initiatives aim to "strengthen the social fabric" of the community or, in sociological terms, to build social capital. Social capital refers to characteristics of the social organization of a community—such as networks, norms, and trust—that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit. While recent research supports the importance of social capital for a well-functioning neighborhood, there is almost no knowledge about the way to increase this potential asset in a distressed neighborhood. However, promising programs are likely to create:

- Opportunities for increasing overall social interaction and communication that help develop, transmit, and reinforce shared community values and norms. Here the possibilities are broad and depend on the particular culture and needs of the community. Examples include afterschool networks and clubs, babysitting cooperatives, "friendly visiting" patrols for the house-bound, celebration of community histories and rituals that recognize exemplary community figures, voter registration drives, community forums, and cleanup campaigns. These are all mechanisms for decreasing family isolation and alienation and for building a sense of shared purpose and identity.
- Opportunities for intergenerational relationships. Many initiatives subscribe to the importance of children having opportunities to interact with a range of adults, both in formal organizations such as schools and churches and in informal settings such as sports teams, choral groups, and community improvement efforts. Adults, individually and collectively, can serve as mentors, models, and sources of informal social control and socialization. A network of caring adults who share a sense of community commitment and responsibility can help even marginal families rear children successfully.
- Opportunities for residents to work with community-based organizations to address significant social problems in the community. Such approaches can solve unrelated problems and help to reknit the web of social and institutional networks that support families. Examples include initiatives that foster communitywide planning, outreach, and organization on issues such as drugs, youth services, housing, and schools, as well as cooperative ventures between neighborhoods and the police to mount anti-crime programs. The goal of such activities is to turn neighborhood residents into community stakeholders and, in doing so, to increase both formal and informal participation in neighborhood institutions (Social Science Research Council, 1993).

Evaluation of Comprehensive Neighborhood-Based Initiatives

Because the territory is new, the investments often high, and the consequences of success or failure profound, evaluating comprehensive neighborhood-based initiatives presents daunting methodological and political challenges. Traditional evaluation methods are rarely designed to capture the breadth and complexity of factors operating at a neighborhood level, let alone to relate cause and effect to the dynamics of system change over time. Even the traditional language of evaluation does not seem to do justice to the new relationships being forged between the evaluator and the various constituencies that have a stake in learning from the initiative.

Adding further complexity to the evaluation enterprise is the increased focus on community participation and new governance arrangements that have led to debate about who should design, implement, and oversee evaluations and who should have access to the findings. Yet

these challenges occur at a time when there appears to be some optimism that comprehensive initiatives are on the right track and when there is a sense of urgency about the idea that to achieve much-needed policy impact it is important to try to aggregate the learning that is taking place around the country.

In the summer of 1993, the Ford Foundation sponsored a meeting to evaluate comprehensive neighborhood-based initiatives. Twenty-five participants representing 17 initiatives attended the meeting, which focused on the following topics:

Overall Evaluation Design

Goals and strategy. What are the primary questions that the evaluation is designed to address, and what relative weights are given to qualitative and quantitative strategies, to process and outcome analysis, and to primary and secondary data use? How are the data managed, analyzed, and integrated into a coherent whole?

Model demonstration versus development. Many comprehensive initiatives, rather than demonstrating a specific model, are engaged in an iterative process of testing and reshaping strategies based on experience and guided by general principles and goals. As goals and strategies evolve, how does the evaluator sustain a learning strategy that has both continuity and flexibility?

Time dimension. Improving the quality of life in distressed neighborhoods is clearly a long-term process. What are the implications for designing and funding evaluations and for identifying short- and medium-term proxies for change? How do evaluators address the problem of mobility in and out of the neighborhood over time?

Cost and level of effort. Given limited resources, what constitutes reasonable cost (both fiscal and human) for an evaluation? What can we expect to learn at various levels of investment? What strategies can make evaluations affordable and not overly intrusive or demanding of time?

Evaluators' Role

Formative feedback. What roles, if any, do the evaluators play in providing formative feedback to the initiative? Who is the recipient of this feedback, and how is it presented? Do evaluators coach or advise those planning and implementing the initiative? How do evaluators maintain enough distance to be credible, and on what sources of external validation do they rely?

Multiple clients/audiences. Often evaluators have multiple clients or audiences for their work, such as funders; those who design, implement, govern, and/or participate in the initiative; other neighborhood residents and stakeholders; and the larger policy and research communities. What challenges do these constituencies present for evaluators, and how do they prioritize or balance potentially conflicting interests? What can funding organizations and program designers do to assure easy implementation and high quality?

Cultural sensitivity. The character and form of neighborhood change are deeply linked to the culture(s) of the residents. How have evaluators considered the problem of cultural bias and developed approaches to reduce or account for it? Often neighborhood change depends on a transfer of power from majority to minority communities, or from professionals/service providers to citizens/residents. What implications do these factors have for how and by whom the evaluation is performed?

Specific Design Questions

Assessing change. How do evaluators consider the challenges posed by creating a baseline, selecting change measures, and assessing change? Given the multitude of other forces affecting a neighborhood and its residents, how does the design address the issue of attribution—that is, establishing a relationship between changes that occur and the initiative? In a saturation model, are there any comparison strategies that make sense?

Documentation process. Many initiatives include extensive collaboration and community planning processes. What strategies make sense for documenting and analyzing these relationships and processes as they develop over time and as they contribute to specific outcomes?

Multiple site evaluations. With the increasing devolution of authority to the local community and the resulting diversity of local approaches and adaptations, how can multiple site evaluations be specific enough to capture the particular local dynamics and outcomes while still generating data that can be aggregated across sites and will yield generalizable results?

Making key concepts operational. Many comprehensive initiatives include concepts that have yet to be fully implemented and measured. What has been the experience to date with concepts such as empowerment, collaboration, participation, and neighborhood bases?

The Ford Foundation meeting stimulated a number of interesting discussions, but it also underlined the importance of developing new evaluation technologies and approaches that can document process and assess change, thereby contributing to the field's ability to accumulate knowledge across programs and over time. The Aspen Institute's Roundtable on Comprehensive Initiatives for Children and Families has recently published a volume that pursues the "lack of fit" between prevailing evaluation practices and the need to learn from and judge the effectiveness of comprehensive community initiatives (Connell et al., 1995).

Creating a better fit must be a cooperative effort among evaluators and those designing and funding evaluations from various fields (community development and human services, in particular), disciplines, government agencies, and foundations. Without this range of perspective and knowledge, evaluation strategies are not likely to capture the complexity of the interaction among physical, economic, and social development factors.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This article has attempted to describe the current state of development of comprehensive neighborhood-based initiatives around the country. Most of the initiatives have emerged during the past several years. Many do not yet have substantial evaluations in place, and those that do have little more than descriptive findings about startup and initial implementation. However, as a group they represent a remarkable confluence of ideas, local enterprise and commitment to addressing some of the most challenging problems facing urban America.

Viewing these efforts in light of our experience with the era of the Great Society is both encouraging and discouraging. A great deal has been learned since then about such initiatives as financing and building affordable housing, welfare reform and work programs,

use of the tax system to subsidize low-wage work and provide incentives for economic investment, and high-quality child care and social services. The availability of resources and political will aside, much is known about ways to improve the quality of life for many urban poor. The discouraging counterpoint is that 30 years later we are confronted with a significant number of neighborhoods that are so economically and socially depleted that simply constructing new housing or adding more Head Start programs is unlikely to have a substantial payoff. Not even effective programs with proven track records will flourish in neighborhoods whose social fabric and institutional infrastructure have been overwhelmed by social disorder and decline (Skogan, 1990). This situation suggests that any successful effort must invest in building the social capital and community capacity necessary to guide and support social change.

Such a conclusion presents policymakers with significant dilemmas. Essentially, building social capital and promoting community capacity and participation require intensive community organizing, an activity that is rarely incorporated or funded in publicly or privately supported social programs. Community organizing encompasses a wide range of strategies to bring people together, to talk, plan, and take action in the service of a common interest. However, the results of community organizing are often considered “soft” and difficult to measure, and they require sustained investment and may create an uncomfortable challenge to the status quo, both within the neighborhood and between the neighborhood and local government. Thus funders are understandably wary, even if they appreciate the fact that such organizing is necessary to create the conditions under which previously tested interventions could make a difference. Such wariness is even more understandable in the case of Federal initiatives, which are difficult to structure for maximum response to local conditions and opportunities.

The question is, then: What can the Federal Government do to exploit these naturally occurring experiments so that they can achieve enough scale and generate enough knowledge to contribute to the development of urban policy during the next decade and beyond? The recommendations that follow are grouped under two general headings: partnerships and knowledge and policy development.

Partnerships

To achieve a sufficient scale, efforts to revitalize poor urban neighborhoods require a variety of partnerships among the following: public and private sectors; Federal, State, and local governments; domains such as housing, economic development, education, and human services; leaders representing various professional disciplines and institutions; individuals from various inner-city and suburban racial and ethnic groups; and grassroots groups and business community “movers and shakers.” The exact forms and compositions of these partnerships will differ according to local circumstances, but the concept appears promising enough (even though it is impressionistic rather than data-driven) to warrant a move from the initial experience of 40–50 emerging initiatives to the level of more systematic testing in a wider range of locations.

The philanthropic community—sometimes in collaboration with local and/or Federal governments—has substantial experience in mounting and evaluating demonstrations aimed at improving the quality of life for low-income families and distressed neighborhoods. With their particular interest in support for innovation, foundations can work with government to: strengthen and expand current initiatives; create new initiatives that link

economic development, family-income supports, and preventive services; and evaluate the costs and benefits of various approaches. Government and foundations can also work together to overcome barriers and develop policies and regulations that foster a hospitable environment for testing comprehensive strategies (Grantmakers for Children, Youth and Families, 1992).

One concrete example of such a partnership could be a demonstration project funded jointly by the Federal Government and a local community foundation. Community foundations, which are public philanthropies that aim to improve the quality of life of a particular city or metropolitan region—for example, the Cleveland Foundation, the Chicago Community Trust, and the Philadelphia Foundation—represent the fastest-growing sector of philanthropy, distributing about $650 million annually. Although they vary in quality and performance, effective community foundations would be appealing local partners for a variety of reasons. First, community foundations have permanent capital devoted in perpetuity to community needs and interests. Second, their boards of directors usually include results-oriented community leaders from a variety of sectors. Third, their program staffs, if they are effective, know the issues and the players, appreciate the subtleties of the local political scene, respond to various segments of the community with appropriate cultural sensitivity, and catalyze community problem solving and mobilization. Finally, a community foundation has the fiscal and management capacity to serve as a local intermediary to pool and distribute funds from multiple sources.

Working in partnership with community foundations would enable the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)—ideally in collaboration with other Federal Government agencies—to stimulate significant local activity and engagement in low-income neighborhood issues, to leverage funds from both the public and private sectors, and to create a critical mass of like-minded efforts from which to aggregate knowledge and inform future urban policy development. Each community foundation that participates in such a collaboration would catalyze a public-private partnership whose ideas and strategies would be developed locally within broad Federal guidelines for the use of funds. Having a local partner with flexible funding makes it possible to "fill in the funding cracks" that HUD would be unlikely to support on its own (such as some predevelopment organizing), and the partner could act as a local source of support and monitoring. The initiative could also have the secondary consequence of positioning community foundations to be much stronger sources of support for local neighborhood development.

Community foundations are not the only potential local partners, although Federal Government agencies such as the National Endowment for the Arts and national foundations such as the Charles Stuart Mott, Ford, and Rockefeller Foundations have found them useful vehicles for helping to carry out their agendas. Other strategies for implementing demonstration projects could include inviting consortia of local nonprofit organizations such as CDCs and settlement houses—perhaps in collaboration with local government—to apply for Federal funds that would require a local match. With this approach there would need to be a very clear set of criteria for the consortia's relationship to target neighborhoods, because experience has shown that Federal funds often stimulate a host of applicants who claim to speak for the community.

The Federal Government is far removed from local neighborhood life, but its policies clearly have significant consequences for neighborhoods. As Keyes (1992) notes, the "proper blend between federal initiatives and local responses" is a challenging one. "If the federal government is disorganized, lacking in will, or too prescriptive and controlling, it

can kill local efforts. Conversely, when the local players lack technical competence and political commitment of their own there is an equal likelihood of disappointing results." One role that local foundations or other partners can play is to increase the possibility that this relationship is a productive one.

Knowledge and Policy Development

In 1991 the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the Institute for Research on Poverty sponsored a conference on evaluating comprehensive family service programs (Institute for Research on Poverty, 1992). One conference participant, Thomas Corbett, discussed the natural life cycle of new programs: Programs are launched with great fanfare and exaggerated claims in order to sell them; the pace and scope of implementation conform more to political cycles than to the hard work of program development; outcomes are unclear or overly complex, and thus difficult to make operational and to measure; and the investment in program evaluation is insufficient, considering the complexity of underlying theoretical models (or lack of them) and the fiscal and human costs at stake. Given this life cycle, it is all too easy for excitement to evolve into disenchantment and ultimately to despair. Some would say that this scenario occurred in the wake of the 1960s, when the political imperatives that demanded a solution to the problems seemed to overwhelm the patience and integrity required for good long-range policy/program development and testing.

We may be on the optimistic side of the cycle at this time, at least in terms of serious efforts to address the problems. Hence many "naturally occurring experiments" are being launched. But this optimism makes it all the more important to maximize what we can learn from the experiments and to attempt to accumulate knowledge in the scientific tradition.

Evaluators, more than anyone, know how difficult it is to collect accurate data, because of the practical constraints of time and resources and the limited knowledge on which to build. Funding agencies and organizations issue Requests for Proposals asking evaluators to determine whether the interventions they are funding are functional, but it is often hard for evaluators to determine what the intervention is, let alone whether it is working. Often the intervention is under development and changes over time; is subject to local adaptations that make it look different in different sites; and is too ambitious to measure in 3 to 5 years—usually the maximum time allotted. Each initiative has its own approach, and there is little attempt to place it in a larger conceptual framework so that comparisons can be made across sites and programs and the knowledge can be aggregated. William Prosser (1992) refers to this situation as letting 1,000 flowers bloom without knowing what kind of seed or fertilizer was used or the type of soil tilled. Thus we may be in significant danger of moving through this cycle without learning much or being able to provide credible evidence of strategies that improve the lives of families and neighborhoods—not because they do not exist, but because we cannot document them credibly. We then become vulnerable to another cycle of despair and public apathy because "nothing works."

There is a need for substantial Federal investment in research and evaluation in the area of comprehensive initiatives. As discussed earlier, such an investment would aim to stimulate the development of new evaluation technologies;[1] place particular emphasis on the mechanics of implementation; and require a commitment to tracking initiatives over time. Without a federally driven organizing structure with funds for evaluation, many initiatives will not be adequately evaluated, and much potential knowledge will be lost.

Despite significant differences, many comprehensive initiatives share a number of guiding principles, policy concerns, and evaluation challenges. These opportunities for cross-site learning need to be exploited.

Other ways in which federally supported evaluation activities could accelerate development of the field include convening working groups of evaluators from various initiatives, testing similar evaluation measures and approaches across a subset of initiatives, and supporting model evaluations for initiatives that appear to have the potential to yield valuable information. A number of large national foundations have a significant interest in evaluating comprehensive neighborhood-based initiatives and/or promoting the development of new evaluation technologies. Collaborating or cofunding with HUD might be of great interest to them.

Another interesting approach being supported initially by national foundations is the HandsNet Comprehensive Strategies Forum. HandsNet is a national nonprofit information and communications network connecting a broad range of about 6,000 organizations. Members include national research centers, community-based service providers, local and State government agencies, foundations, public policy advocates, legal services programs, and grassroots health, hunger, homeless, housing, and community and economic development coalitions. The network is an interactive forum for the exchange of information and resources in a timely and efficient manner. Through improved communications, HandsNet helps to create new opportunities for cooperation, innovation, and action in combatting poverty. The network offers daily summaries of relevant articles from major newspapers and wire services, public policy alerts and analysis, poverty statistics, notices of legal and administrative actions, abstracts of key studies and reports, descriptions of model programs, *Federal Register* notices, and electronic mail.

One of the new forums on HandsNet is the recently established Comprehensive Strategies Forum, managed by the Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago, which aims to provide a mechanism for sharing information and learning about and strengthening community-focused efforts to improve the lives of children and families through comprehensive initiatives. HUD could collaborate with an organization such as HandsNet in a number of ways, including enabling its grantees—or a particular subset of grantees involved in a multisite initiative such as the Empowerment Zones—to join the system, thereby facilitating cross-site learning and providing a means of communicating among Washington and local sites.[2] HUD might fund a group of evaluators or technical assistance providers working on comprehensive initiatives to become part of the network, or it could establish a private forum for housing authorities that are experimenting with innovative organization or management strategies. This role of building a multilevel capacity for knowledge development and information networking could be an appropriate joint function of national foundations and the Federal Government.

In sum, the burgeoning of comprehensive neighborhood-based initiatives around the country offers the Federal Government a number of opportunities to strengthen, expand, and learn from the experience of local creativity and initiative in revitalizing distressed neighborhoods. While many of these initiatives offer promise, they cannot begin to address the problem on a national scale, nor can they substitute for changes that are better accomplished through citywide and regional strategies or even through national policies and programs. Problems of residential and economic segregation, weak and unstable labor markets, and urban/suburban inequality must be addressed more broadly than at the neighborhood level, even if that is where they play out in day-to-day life. But strong, revitalized neighborhoods are the building blocks for larger social change and can provide beacons of learning and hope in the face of the tremendous challenges facing urban

America. The Federal Government can foster collective responsibility and effective action by providing incentives for States and localities to experiment and innovate, forming partnerships with national and local philanthropies, and maximizing the learning that is generated by these experiments and partnerships.

Author

Prudence Brown is associate director of the Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago, a policy research center devoted to improving the lives of children and families and the communities in which they live. Her expertise covers issues of family and neighborhood development, urban policy, and strategic grantmaking, and she has been involved with comprehensive community initiatives. She received her doctorate in psychology and social work from the University of Michigan, a master's in social work from Michigan, and an undergraduate degree from the University of Chicago.

Notes

1. Thomas Corbett (1992) suggests that we need more synthetic cross-site evaluations, process analyses and qualitative work, and attention to the development of common marker variables. "In the long run, however, we may have to think of a whole new way of doing business. The old form of discrete, impact-focused evaluations, awarded to firms on a competitive basis, may be counterproductive. Longer time lines, less obsession with 'what works,' and a more collaborative evaluation industry may be needed. The days of the short sprint—one-shot summative evaluations—may be ending. A new paradigm, where the marathon constitutes the more appropriate metaphor, may be emerging."

2. A number of foundations are supporting such networks. For example, the Annie E. Casey Foundation has added all of its policy research and advocacy KidsCount sites to HandsNet; the Ford Foundation has supported a rural poverty network of practitioners, researchers, and policy analysts; and the Rockefeller Foundation-inspired National Community Building Network, a group of community-based initiatives working on urban neighborhood revitalization, is considering using HandsNet for networking purposes.

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