Impacts of the Sustainable Communities Initiative on Regional Collaboration, Equity, and Planning: Results of a Survey of Grantee Regions

Elizabeth Mattiuzzi
University of California, Berkeley

Abstract

This paper presents the results of a survey of lead agency representatives from the 74 grantee regions for the HUD Sustainable Communities Initiative Regional Planning Grant (SCI-RPG) from 2010-2011. Previous work suggests that different understandings of sustainability and equity existed across the country prior to the grant period, and that the impacts of SCI-RPG in these two areas occurred through indirect as well as direct means (Chapple and Mattiuzzi 2013; Frick et al. 2015). Conducted in July-August 2016 by Virginia Commonwealth University and UC Berkeley, the survey reached 76 percent of grantee regions (56 responses). The results provide insights into how a federal incentive grant for regional sustainability planning helped spur new relationships between regional actors and new approaches to engagement with the public. Respondents clarified how they incorporated social equity into planning processes through new approaches to planning, new data sources, and other means. The survey asked about the SCI-RPG planning process itself and its ongoing impact on regional plans after the completion of the grant period. Consortium leaders reported on how the grant impacted specific policy areas, such as fair housing, as well as its broad impact on capacity and continued investment in the region. Grantees reflected on how SCI-RPG impacted regional collaboration and governance, what the barriers and areas of opportunity are for implementing the regional plans developed under SCI-RPG, and how future grant programs can be improved. The paper uses these results to give a high-level analysis of what worked about SCI-RPG across the nation and what barriers remain to implementation.

Introduction

The livability of a metropolitan region does not fit neatly under one heading. Economic and environmental sustainability, inclusiveness, and affordability—these issues cut across policy silos and jurisdictional boundaries. Barriers to collaboration often arise, however, between the people, organizations, and government agencies that have the resources and the skills to improve livability in regions. The research presented in this article examined those barriers and how federal agencies and regional actors are addressing them.

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT), and U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) all have an impact on planning and the built environment in cities, suburbs, and rural areas. Historically, however, their structures have not always enabled these agencies to collaborate or foster cooperation among the communities, businesses, and the local agencies that are either responsible for implementing or are impacted by the resulting programs and policies.

In 2009, the Secretaries of HUD, DOT, and EPA jointly formed the Partnership for Sustainable Communities (PSC) to help create a more efficient and effective federal presence in regions. To find common ground between these agencies and to better serve the needs of metropolitan regions, HUD developed six livability principles that encompassed economic sustainability and growth; social equity and the inclusion of traditionally marginalized groups in governance and the economy; environmental sustainability; and the convergence of these three areas through investment in location-efficient land use, transportation, and housing development.

PSC spurred policy experiments such as the Sustainable Communities Initiative (SCI) at HUD. SCI consisted of two planning grants that supported the livability principles: the Community Challenge Planning grant, which targeted individual cities, and the Regional Planning Grant (SCI-RPG) program, which targeted regions. SCI-RPG was especially unique and exciting because it was the first modern instance of federal interest in comprehensive planning in metropolitan regions in the United States (Chapple, 2015).[1]

SCI-RPG awarded $165 million to 74 metropolitan regions across the United States for regional planning (Geevarghese and Tregoning, 2016). It also funded $10 million worth of capacity building and technical assistance by national nonprofits in regions.

In order to be truly regional in scope, the SCI-RPG required applicants to form a consortium that cut across sectors and geographic areas. To encourage city-suburb cooperation, each consortium had to include the region's principal city and jurisdictions representing at least one-half of the region's population. The SCI-RPG also required consortia to include a regional agency—such as a metropolitan planning organization (MPO), a council of governments (COG), a regional planning organization, or an economic development district—and a philanthropic, nonprofit, or university partner.[2]

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[1] A metropolitan region can be primarily urban or rural, usually includes multiple counties, and sometimes crosses state lines. It is often defined according to the area that a metropolitan planning organization (MPO) serves. Any area with more than 50,000 people must have an MPO to plan for federal transportation spending.

[2] A regional agency (such as an MPO, COG, regional development commission, or planning district) or a county led most consortia, although a university, nonprofit, or city led a few.

In addition to the required leadership organizations, many regional consortia also included partners from the business and nonprofit communities who could help strengthen regional collaboration. Of the 74 SCI-RPG regional consortia, 33 distributed subgrants to consortium members, such as community-based organizations, to help them and their members become more involved in regional planning.[3] These subgrants often helped build capacity among organizations and individuals who could bring diverse perspectives to the consortium but did not traditionally have the resources to participate in regional planning and governance.

The two main outputs that consortia developed through the grant process were a regional sustainability plan and a fair housing assessment. The design and focus of the regional sustainability plans varied by region, but each region had to analyze data on poverty and access to housing in their region for a Fair Housing and Equity Assessment (FHEA). The FHEA served as a trial run for the HUD Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing (AFFH) rule,[4] which went into effect in 2016.

SCI-RPG supported regional governance and helped break down silos between policy areas that touch urban and rural planning. The idea was that greater coordination of federal activities could increase the impact of federal dollars in regions. In other words, the left hand should know what the right hand is doing, which requires planning and communication. This has been called a "place-based" approach, which means focusing on the bottom-up, stated needs of regions. It involves shifting the role of federal agencies, which have traditionally focused on compliance, to serving regional interests in a way that makes sense on the ground, while still accomplishing federal goals.

This research examines the role of the SCI-RPG in promoting collaboration in regions to support sustainability and equity. Through a survey of grantee regions, it explores the impact of grant activities on partnerships and equity in regions. The results suggest that new partnerships and improved community engagement were key outcomes of the grant, as well as strengthened regional leadership. Challenges include sustaining the momentum of the consortia after the grant award and identifying funding for implementation. Grantee regions started with different levels of capacity; in general, they now have better shared definitions of equity and better data on housing and other disparities.

Methodology

This article presents results from an indepth survey of the lead organization of consortia in regions that received an SCI-RPG. The purpose of the survey was to learn how the regional sustainability planning process varied in different regions, examine what the prospects are for implementation of the regional plans, and gather feedback that could improve future programs. Research for this article also included interviews with 17 current and former federal officials with knowledge of SCI and PSC in the fall of 2016.

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[3] An additional three consortia paid member organizations to participate.

[4] "Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing." Final rule. 20 CFR Parts 5, 91, 92, 570, 574, 576, and 903. *Federal Register* 80 (136) July 16, 2015.

The survey examined how the SCI-RPG may have helped local, regional, and state officials and their partners improve cooperation in their region and increase public participation and social equity in their planning processes, policies, and outcomes. It asked consortium leaders about their experience forming and sustaining partnerships across sectors to develop and implement a regional plan; the strategies their organization used to engage underrepresented populations; and the impact their planning activities have had on social equity in the region.[5] Lead agencies from 56 out of 74 SCI-RPG consortia responded to the survey, for a 76-percent response rate.[6]

This survey is the first comprehensive look at all grantees during the 3-year grant period during which engagement, capacity building, and regional planning occurred. Past research explored how the SCI-RPG application process brought different players in regions together to grapple with the issues of equity and sustainability (Chapple and Mattiuzzi, 2013; Frick et al., 2015). Researchers have also studied grantees' approaches to applying sustainability planning and the federal livability principles in a local context (Gough, 2015), and how PSC has increased cross-agency cooperation at the federal level (Pendall et al., 2013).

The survey responses point to lessons from the SCI-RPG for future programs and implementation efforts. Grantees described how they brought in a wide spectrum of voices in their planning process, what aspects of their plans they have been able to implement, where they have leveraged other sources of funding, and what the gaps and challenges are going forward. They also provided feedback on the program design.

Regional Sustainability Planning, Governance, and Implementation

Historically, regional planning has not been the norm in the United States. Progressive-era reformers sought to dilute the power of political machines that dominated state government by devolving planning powers to the local level (Weir, 2000). To counter the inefficiencies of fragmented planning decisions during rapid postwar growth, the federal government encouraged the formation of regional governing bodies in the 1950s and 1960s (Weir, 2000).

Federal grant funding for regional planning dates to 1965, when Congress expanded eligibility under Section 701 of the Housing Act of 1954 to include regional agencies (Meck, Retzlaff, and Schwab, 2003).[7] From 1968 to 1981, HUD was responsible for promoting metropolitan and rural planning through the Section 701 grants to regional planning agencies for activities such as coordinating housing and transportation needs (HUD, 2015).

The SCI-RPG experimented with creating an incentive for governance and planning for regional sustainability. Governance is formal or informal cooperation among different actors, such as

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[5] The survey asked closed-ended questions coupled with open-ended questions in order to elicit more detailed responses. Some of the open-ended responses fell into categories that our team coded, while other responses captured general feedback.

[6] The survey was conducted in the summer of 2016. Our team made multiple attempts to reach consortium leaders by email and phone (Dillman, Smyth, and Christian, 2008).

[7] Previously, only cities and counties could use federal funds for planning.

government, business, and philanthropy, without a requirement to do so (Ansell and Gash, 2008). Sustainability refers to the idea of promoting long-term economic growth in ways that are beneficial to the environment and people (Wheeler, 2000). Regional sustainability is the idea of reducing geographic disparities in metropolitan regions by increasing individual access to opportunity through increasing cooperation between different sectors and jurisdictions with a shared interest in a vibrant and resilient region (Chapple, 2015).

This research explores whether SCI-RPG helped regional leaders increase coordination on the interrelated issues of land use, housing, transportation, and economic development that contribute to sustainability. A lack of regional coordination often creates competition between jurisdictions, which can hurt the region as a whole in terms of infrastructure spending, inequality, and job creation (Dreier, Swanstrom, and Mollenkopf, 2000).

Our team sought to understand whether the SCI-RPG helped to advance social and economic equity as one component of regional sustainability. Equity is the idea of reducing institutionalized barriers to equal opportunity for people of different socioeconomic levels and racial and ethnic groups. These barriers often manifest in geographic patterns of investment and disinvestment in everything from schools and housing to transit, roads, and other basic infrastructure. Regions with lower levels of income inequality and racial segregation tend to experience greater economic growth (Benner and Pastor, 2015).

Building equitable regions involves both outcomes and processes, and it can involve investing in both places and people (Chapple, 2015). Outcome-based equity might include new or altered plans and policies and actual projects in the community. Procedural equity might include changes that regional agencies made to the processes they use to make plans or engage the public and consortium partners across different sectors. In terms of possible outcomes, place-based equity strategies involve investing in a specific geographic area within a region. This investment could include targeting low-income areas for job creation, or it could involve increasing housing accessibility by building or preserving affordable housing near jobs. People-based equity approaches include investing in individuals through education and workforce training to increase their earning potential or providing vouchers for housing or transportation (Sanchez and Schweitzer, 2008; Briggs, 2010).

As many SCI-RPG lead agencies were MPOs, many regions employed people- and place-based approaches to transportation mobility as a way to address equity. For example, people-based mobility could include helping individuals afford different transportation options. Place-based mobility strategies might include improving public transportation facilities and service in targeted areas.

The SCI-RPG tested the idea that a federal incentive for metropolitan cooperation and governance could encourage cities and suburbs and their different interests to find common ground on sustainability and equity. Identifying a common problem—and having a structure and a motivation for cooperation that is provided by a mandate or an incentive from a higher level of government— greatly facilitates bringing together actors with different interests to address regional disparities (Lester and Reckhow, 2012; Weir, Rongerude, and Ansell, 2009). However, past research suggests that prior to SCI-RPG, few cities engaged in planning activities that coordinated environmental, economic, and equity issues (Saha and Paterson, 2008).

Results

Impacts of the SCI-RPG on Relationships and Governance

The survey measured regional governance among SCI-RPG grantees in terms of the quantity, quality, substance, and endurance of the relationships that the associated planning process impacted or generated among players in different sectors in regions. Most survey respondents (96 percent), representing MPOs or other regional agencies, said that their organization's relationships with local governments improved as a result of the SCI planning process (exhibit 1).

Exhibit 1

Improvement of Relationships Due to SCI-RPG

Result of SCI-RPG Planning Process	Percent of Respondents
Small improvement (already strong)	33
Large improvement (already strong)	22
Large improvement (not strong previously)	22
Small improvement (not strong previously)	20
No improvement (already strong)	2
No improvement (not strong previously)	2

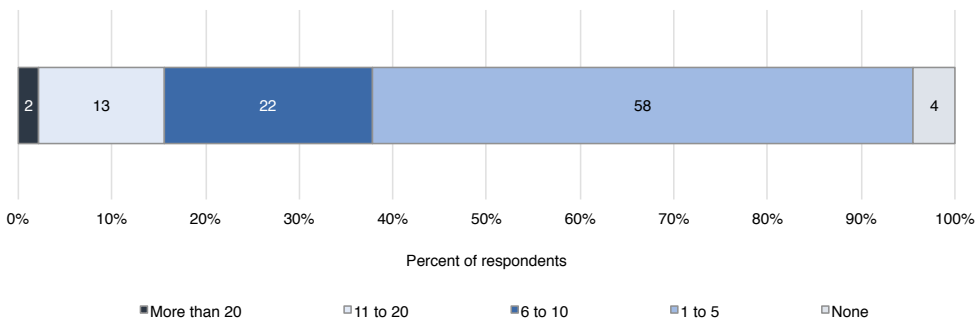*SCI-RPG = Sustainable Communities Initiative Regional Planning Grant.*
Note: N = 46.
Source: SCI-RPG recipient survey, Question 4: "To what extent have relationships (communication, partnerships, initiatives) with local governments (e.g., cities, counties and townships) in your region improved as a result of the SCI process?"

New Collaborations Arising Out of the SCI-RPG Process

Of respondents, 95 percent said that one or more new collaborations had arisen between organizations in their region with a specific focus on implementation (exhibit 2). A couple of comments indicated a negative impact on relationships, mostly due to players feeling left out of the process, such as officials from suburban county governments who were not part of the consortium.

Exhibit 2

Number of New Collaborations Focused on Plan Implementation

Percent of respondents

■More than 20 □11 to 20 ■6 to 10 ■1 to 5 □None

Note: N = 45.
Source: Sustainable Communities Initiative Regional Planning Grant recipient survey, question 7: "Approximately how many new collaborations focused on regional plan implementation has your organization established as a result of relationships you made through the SCI Program?"

Types of New Collaborations Developed Through the SCI-RPG Process

A goal of regional governance is to encourage local municipalities to work more closely with regional agencies and also to provide a structure for them to communicate and cooperate more closely with one another (Mattiuzzi, 2016). Respondents listed and commented on the types of new partnerships local governments formed during the process of developing the regional sustainability plan.[8]

Often a regional agency, such as an MPO, will only interact with a local jurisdiction's planning department, although the work of other departments might touch on urban form and sustainability. One west coast survey respondent said that the SCI-RPG gave their organization an opportunity to interact with a greater variety of city departments: "…in the past, relationships were with other planning staff, now they are with transportation, emergency services, housing, parks, and health staff." This suggests that the SCI-RPG helped break down issue silos between different scales of government that could lead to more effective regional spending and planning.

The improvement went both ways—in addition to regional agencies broadening their interaction with city staff, the SCI-RPG helped increase the engagement of cities with regional agencies. A midwestern respondent said, "The relevance that we have demonstrated, thanks to the HUD grant, helped us to make the case that our regional organization does provide value locally," and a regional agency in the South reported increasing its membership from roughly one-half to nearly all local jurisdictions after SCI-RPG.

SCI-RPG helped deepen local engagement in regional planning beyond applying for funding to collaborating on different issues. One west coast respondent said, "We have new relationships specifically focused on equitable infill development improving health in our disadvantaged communities." Others noted that their new collaborations focused on economic development, environmental quality, housing, transportation, and neighborhood revitalization. One northeastern respondent noted that several municipalities in their region had coordinated the timing of the update of their local comprehensive plan with the SCI-RPG planning process. Coordination of local and regional planning horizons is key to achieving regional goals (Mattiuzzi, 2016).

In addition to the mix of required consortium members, many survey respondents said that their organization had begun new partnerships with other health, economic development, and private sector organizations (exhibit 3). Few formed new relationships with state agencies, although these may already have been in place. Although a few consortia included state government, they were not required partners.

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[8] Question 5: "Please provide an example that illustrates a change in your relationship with local governments in your region."

Exhibit 3

Types of Organizations With Which Consortium Leads Formed New Partnerships

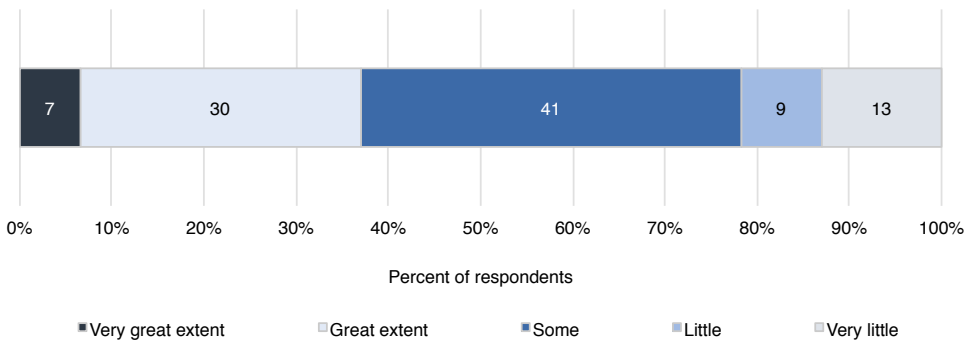| Partner Type	Rate of New Partnerships (%)
University	54
Local government	43
Single-issue interest groups	41
Affordable housing developer	36
Private sector	36
Hospital/health organization	34
Community foundation	32
Community development corporation	29
Workforce development organization	29
State/regional government	4

Note: N = 56.
Source: Sustainable Communities Initiative (SCI) Regional Planning Grant recipient survey, question 6: "With which of the following organizations have you formed new partnerships as a result of the SCI process? Check all that apply."

Post-Grant Impacts of SCI-RPG

The persistence of relationships beyond the grant period suggests that consortium partners and other organizations had more than token involvement in regional planning and implementation. Nearly four-fifths (78 percent) of respondents said that the relationships that their organization had forged during the SCI-RPG planning process had continued beyond the grant period to a medium or large degree (exhibit 4).[9]

Exhibit 4

Degree to Which Relationships Persisted After SCI Process

| 7 | 30 | 41 | 9 | 13 |

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

Percent of respondents

■ Very great extent   □ Great extent   ■ Some   ■ Little   □ Very little

SCI = Sustainable Communities Initiative.
Note: N = 46.
Source: SCI Regional Planning Grant recipient survey, question 9: "To what extent has your relationship (communication, partnerships, initiatives) with SCI consortium members persisted after the completion of the SCI planning process?"

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[9] This estimate includes the three highest rankings: "Some," "Great extent," and "Very great extent," out of five possible choices.

Some regions have incorporated partnership activities into business as usual. A typical example of an ongoing consortium activity was a regional agency continuing to offering funding and leadership for place-based sustainability planning. One northeastern respondent described their organization's implementation efforts as "…continuing our communication functions, capacity building, outreach and stakeholder convening functions." A west coast respondent said, "We have a new standing committee comprised of the former consortium members that meets quarterly to continue collaboration, information sharing, and work on implementation of issues related to equitable TOD [transit-oriented development]."

Respondents characterized both new and continuing relationships as being focused primarily on economic development and grant applications.[10] A few respondents said that they had formed new partnerships during the SCI-RPG process specifically for the purpose of preparing their FHEA, which was a condition of the SCI-RPG and helped prepare regions to meet HUD's new AFFH rule. Said one northeastern respondent, "We…anticipate that the regional FHEA will provide a basis for HUD grantee compliance with the AFFH rule."

Economic development was a key theme of new and persistent partnerships. For example, in one southern region, a "small town revitalization roundtable" now meets quarterly. In a northeastern region, new partnerships focused on "integrating workforce development with economic development."

Some new economic development-focused partnerships specifically broke down policy silos. Federal officials interviewed said that one goal of PSC was to break down barriers between how different sources of federal funding impact regions, particularly in terms of planning coordination. One regional survey respondent in the Northeast said that public workshops with agricultural and private sector participants, held as part of their SCI-RPG planning process, resulted in changes to their new Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS). Having a CEDS makes their region eligible for funding and technical assistance from the U.S. Economic Development Administration (EDA). Although EDA was not officially part of PSC, they work on regional economic development, a theme that is included in PSC's livability principles and is integral to regional sustainability.

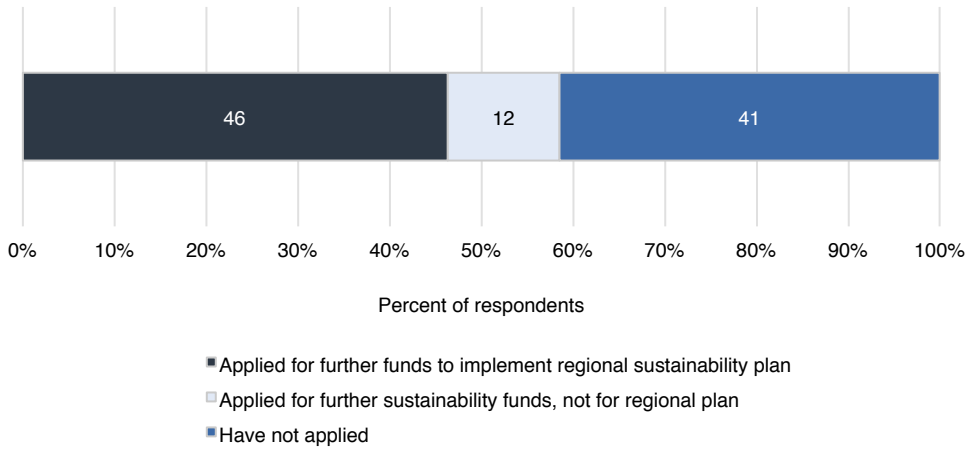### Regions Pursuing Further Sustainability Funding

Grantmaking and writing grant applications were frequently mentioned as outcomes of SCI-RPG-generated relationships. Of respondents, 46 percent said their organization had applied for further funds specifically to implement their regional sustainability plans, and another 12 percent had applied for other sustainability grants (exhibit 5).

Several respondents said that grantmaking had occurred within the region in support of implementing their regional sustainability plan. The source of the funding was either the lead agency or partner agencies from the consortium, including philanthropic organizations and community foundations. SCI-RPG helped align priorities and build trust between different organizations in a way that encouraged philanthropies and others to fund projects that they might not have otherwise.

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[10] Question 8: "Please provide an example of a new collaboration" and Question 9a: "If possible, please provide an example of a continuing relationship."

Exhibit 5

Degree to Which Regions Are Pursuing Further Sustainability Funding

46	12	41

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

Percent of respondents

■ Applied for further funds to implement regional sustainability plan
□ Applied for further sustainability funds, not for regional plan
■ Have not applied

Note: N = 41.
Source: Sustainable Communities Initiative Regional Planning Grant recipient survey, question 24: "Has your organization applied for additional funds for sustainable development implementation?"

A number of respondents noted that they continue to collaborate with partners on grantwriting. For example, one respondent said that they were working with their consortium partners to apply for grants to "implement a regional watershed protection program." Another cited ongoing relationships with a city's mayor, staff, and law enforcement involving grant-writing and other implementation efforts.

Equity Impacts of the SCI-RPG

Survey responses revealed different approaches to equity. For outcome-based equity, the responses were split between implementation projects that focused on place-based and people-based strategies. In terms of procedural equity, the responses reflected a changing approach to community engagement by regional agencies in the planning process through the SCI-RPG. Transportation mobility and housing accessibility were also frequent themes.

Equity Outcomes of the SCI-RPG

Respondents were asked to identify the effect of the equity impacts of SCI-RPG funding. They reported that the greatest impact had been the incorporation of equity into existing policies and programs, rather than the creation of new ones (exhibit 6). This could be a positive sign for incorporating equity into business-as-usual, rather than siloing it. However, it could also suggest a reluctance to address equity issues head-on. "Awareness of social equity" ranked highly as an impact, suggesting a possible increase in shared definitions of equity, or at least an increase in conversations about equity in regions where these discussions may have been rare or nonexistent at the time that the region applied for their SCI-RPG.

Exhibit 6

SCI Impact on Equity in Planning in Grantee Regions
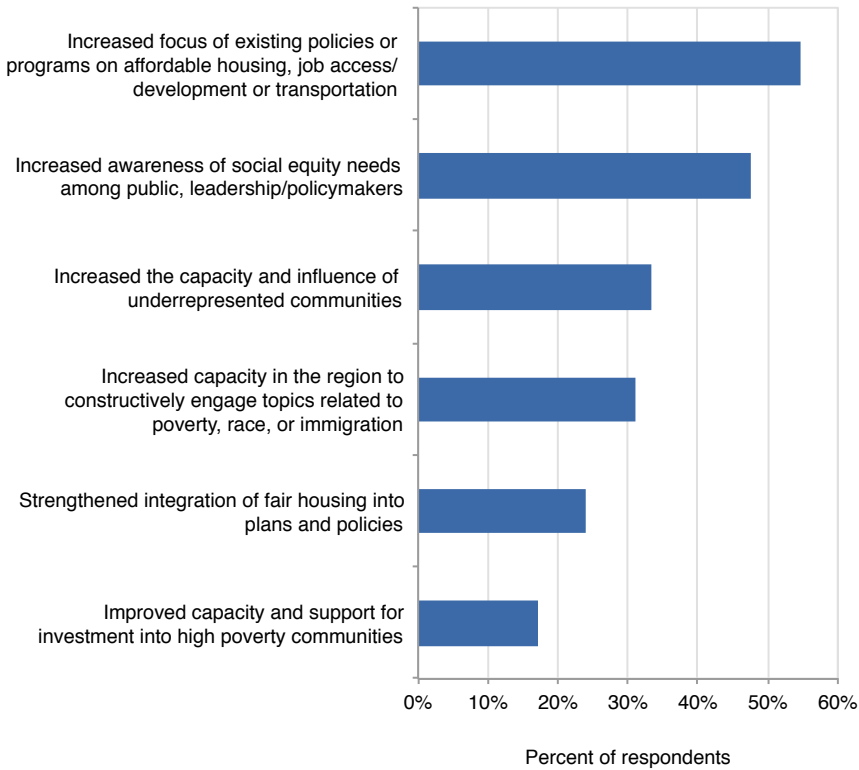
SCI = Sustainable Communities Initiative.
Note: N = 42.
Source: SCI Regional Planning Grant recipient survey, question 16: "How, if at all, did the SCI planning process strengthen analysis and integration of social equity concerns in the planning process?"; the bar chart shows the combined top three (3, 4, and 5) responses out of five: "Completely" (5), "Very much" (4), "Moderately" (3), "Slightly" (2), "Not at all" (1)

Respondents described in detail how they incorporated equity into their regional sustainability plan.[11] Several respondents commented on equity and transportation mobility. For example, one southern respondent said, "We focused a lot of our discussion on the transportation needs of workers and their struggles to use transit to get to jobs outside the City. Our state transit agency is currently redesigning our bus system and has adopted many of our talking and data points." In one northeastern region, a respondent said, "The MPO has adopted/retooled several programs to improve access to work opportunities through transportation policy and investment." A few respondents said that measuring access to opportunity had become a standard part of the way their MPO prepares its regional transportation plan as a result of SCI-RPG.

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[11] Question 17: "Please share an example of successful integration of social equity into your region's process or plan."

Housing accessibility was also a goal of regional sustainability plans. One midwestern respondent said, "Our local housing authority has pursued an effort to de-concentrate public housing and locate housing in areas that offer more opportunity."

In some regions, SCI-RPG and the FHEA supported data collection that shed light on equity issues that had not previously been made visible at the regional level, if at all. In one northeastern region, it gave planners a new conceptualization of the lack of transportation and housing choices in their region and impacted their final plan. As one respondent said,

> Transportation and housing location is a big problem in our region. The affordable housing is pushed out to surrounding towns (from the main job centers), so that's where a lot of the lower-income folks wind up. [The] lack of private and public transportation is a real problem. We were shocked to learn how many people have no transportation, which means very little access to jobs if they're living outside the main job centers…The [HUD Housing and Transportation] H & T portal…really opened [regional leaders'] eyes to how much people, if they even have access to transportation, are spending on it.[12] We also are severely lacking affordable housing near jobs, [and awareness of] that was supported by our Housing Needs Analysis. Lack of housing was discussed at length and strongly considered in the final plan.

This region focused on transportation mobility ("how do people get to jobs?") and housing accessibility (building housing near jobs). However, in many regions, real estate near existing job centers is expensive, which could potentially limit how great an impact public investment in new housing could have in those areas (Chapple, 2015).

Place-based approaches to equity focused primarily on affordable housing and public safety. One regional agency in the Midwest said, "Our process for selecting local projects [through SCI-RPG] considered community need, with lower-income communities more likely to receive assistance. We have also included social equity as a major theme in our new long-range plan (currently under development)." Another midwestern respondent said that their organization "conducted a Housing Seminar that provided resources and information to local elected officials and staff to better understand how to implement affordable housing options in their communities." Investing in low-income communities calls for thoughtful approaches to making sure benefits accrue locally without causing displacement (Zuk and Chapple, 2016).

Education and workforce development were the main people-based equity strategies cited. For example, one respondent said that, through the regional sustainability planning process, they had "Increased [the] focus on education and workforce skills, housing, transportation and affordable housing and livable wages" in their region. Another MPO was working to "reduce [the] educational achievement gap" in their region. A third respondent said that their regional planning process resulted in an "expansion of early-childhood education in low opportunity areas with [a] Pay for Success initiative."

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[12] The HUD Location Affordability Portal has a calculator for determining the combined cost of housing and transportation for a given household location at locationaffordability.info.

Procedural Equity in the SCI-RPG Planning Process

SCI-RPG specifically required grantees to fund public engagement throughout the planning. In a sample of applicants to SCI-RPG, only one-third of regional consortia had plans to build local capacity for participation (Chapple and Mattiuzzi, 2013). However, larger shares of consortia represented in this survey reported improving engagement (exhibit 7). Lead agencies reported finding new ways to reach underrepresented stakeholders (61 percent of respondents), increasing the quality of participation at public meetings (57 percent), and expanding the diversity of participants (61 percent) and topics covered at those meetings (50 percent).

Exhibit 7

Impacts of Engagement Strategies During SCI Process
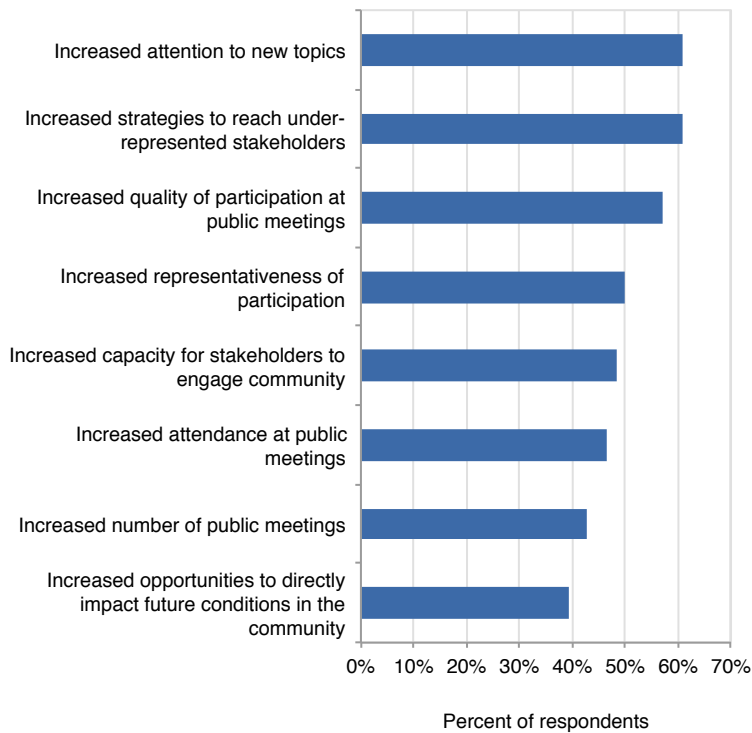
SCI = Sustainable Communities Initiative.
Note: N = 56.
Source: SCI Regional Planning Grant recipient survey, question 13: "Which were the most significant impacts of the community engagement strategies that you employed during the SCI planning process? (Check all that apply)."

Increasing Planning Participation by Underrepresented Groups Through SCI-RPG

Participants described various strategies for increasing engagement by underrepresented communities in regional sustainability planning (exhibit 8). A common theme was working with partners that already had a level of familiarity with communities. Of respondents, 45 percent said that they provided funding for a surrogate contact, such as a faith organization, a food bank, or another community group to do engagement work.

A common engagement strategy was "going to them," that is, attending regularly scheduled meetings held by community groups or holding meetings in a community setting that was more convenient or less intimidating for community members than an MPO hearing room might be (29 percent of respondents). Examples of making regional agency meetings more accessible (21 percent of respondents) included holding meetings in the evenings when more people would likely be able to attend, providing translation services, and providing food. Finally, several planners reported direct marketing or direct contact efforts that increased participation, including a mail survey (16 percent of respondents).

Some evidence indicates that these participation and outreach efforts are having an equity impact after SCI-RPG. One southern respondent representing a COG said that their organization is in "…one of the more extremely racially divided communities in the region. Because of the neutrality that the COG provided in community discussions [on regional sustainability planning] a charter review committee has been established to rewrite the city charter to provide for greater diversity within the city government." In this case, the requirements of the grant gave the COG a mandate to lead on an issue that may not have been discussed previously.

Exhibit 8

Strategies for Increasing Participation by Underrepresented Groups in Regional Sustainability Planning
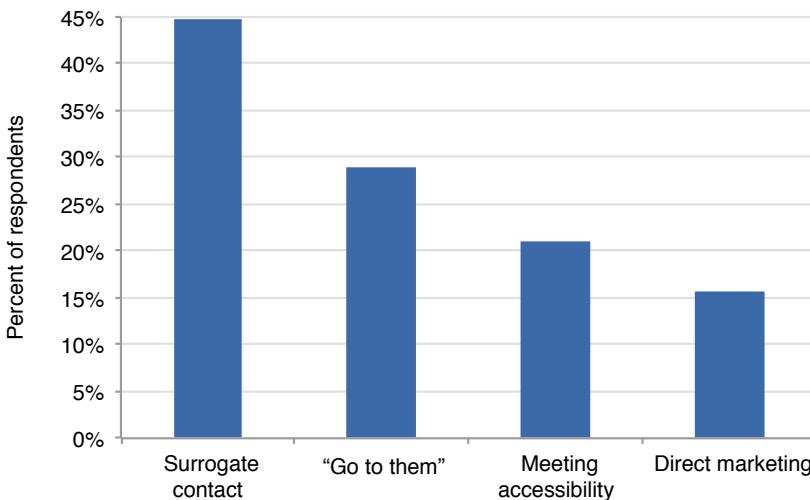

Note: N = 38.
Source: Sustainable Communities Initiative (SCI) Regional Planning Grant recipient survey, question 15: "What Strategies did you find most effective at specifically increasing participation of underrepresented populations in the SCI planning process?"; the study team coded the responses into the four categories shown in the exhibit

Implementation of the Regional Sustainability Plans

Most respondents reported that their regional sustainability plan had led to changes in policies, programs, and capital or philanthropic investment in their region (exhibit 9). The concrete ways in which the regional sustainability plan had been implemented were varied, but comments centered mainly on land use, economic development, and the ways in which regions were leveraging other sources of funding for implementation.[13]

Exhibit 9

Impact of the SCI-RPG Since the End of the Grant Period
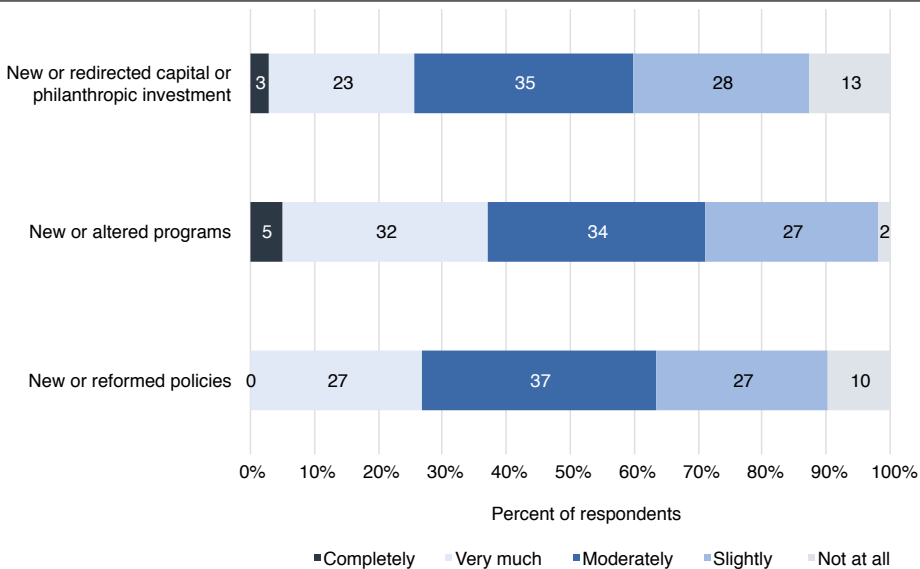
SCI-RPG = Sustainable Communities Initiative Regional Planning Grant.
Note: N = 41.
Source: SCI-RPG recipient survey, question 19: "Since the end of the SCI Grant, to what degree has the regional planning for sustainable development impacted policy, programming, or investments?"

What Does Implementation of Regional Sustainability Plans Look Like?

Notable examples of policies, programs, or investments that have been implemented from the regional plans developed through SCI-RPG include TOD, affordable housing, and workforce development. A west coast regional agency that said they were adopting their regional sustainability plan in the fall of 2017 is "reviewing various staff proposals for increasing the production and preservation of affordable housing near transit, [to] mitigate displacement risk for low-income households and small businesses, create mixed-income communities, and grow middle-wage jobs."

One respondent said the regional plan was translating into local development: "We worked on a number of TOD station area plans that municipalities have passed, updated zoning ordinances, and now are seeing new mixed-income, mixed-use development projects being built." A

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[13] Question 20: "Please share a notable example of a policy, program or investment outlined in your regional plan for sustainable development that was implemented."

northeastern region developed a "community based housing strategy." Working on "clearing dilapidated properties in residential areas" was a priority for regional plan implementation in a southern region.

Although place-based housing strategies were more frequently mentioned, policies to increase the ability of individuals to access housing in high-opportunity areas also came out of SCI-RPG. One respondent said that as part of implementing their regional sustainability plan, their regional agency has "…just undertaken a HUD funded pilot program to develop a regional project-based voucher program. All the housing authorities in the region are involved."

Regional plan implementation has also involved carrying out economic development strategies. One northeastern region is now undertaking workforce development and training for the "renewable energy economy." A midwestern respondent reported, "The regional economic development council has launched new programs related to promoting the region, workforce development, rural economic development, and startup ecosystems." A southern respondent said that their regional plan's recommendation to create a new municipal broadband service had been implemented.

Leveraging Funds for Implementation

A handful of respondents reported that implementation of their regional sustainability plan involved leveraging other sources of federal, state, private sector, and philanthropic funding. One respondent in a western state attributed their subsequent DOT Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery (TIGER) grant award to their regional sustainability planning efforts, stating that their regional plan implementation efforts included "active transportation [and] coordinated countywide planning, leading to the latest TIGER award." Although it is not possible to draw a causal connection between SCI-RPG and other grants that regions have received, one study provides some context for this statement, showing a greater increase in TIGER grants awarded in SCI-RPG regions than non- SCI-RPG regions, before and after the grant. The SCI-RPG regions that applied for DOT TIGER funds after SCI-RPG doubled their application success rate, compared with a 38-percent increase among non- SCI-RPG regions, comparing the 2009-to-2010 application cycle with the 2014-to-2015 application cycle (Montojo, Ross, and St-Louis, 2016: 2–3). Of the 30 SCI-RPG regions that were TIGER recipients in the 2014-to-2015 cycle, 10 had not previously applied for a TIGER grant (Montojo, Ross, and St-Louis, 2016), suggesting that SCI-RPG may have helped increase their capacity for or interest in applying for other funding sources.[14]

SCI-RPG recipients worked to coordinate between their regional sustainability plans and other potential funding sources for economic development. One northeastern respondent noted that "Some policies in the plan were incorporated into our CEDS, this provides access to EDA matching funds for planning implementation." Regions also leveraged private sector funds for economic development. One western respondent said that their implementation efforts involved "the creation of a regional economic development corporation that [administers] a small business local [capital] pool and is working to advance the [economic development] ED initiatives identified in [their regional plan]."

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[14] Out of the 74 SCI-RPG grantee regions, 30 applied and received a TIGER grant in the 2014-to-2015 cycle, 30 applied unsuccessfully, and 14 did not apply.

Philanthropic involvement in regional plan implementation varied across regions. However, one midwestern survey respondent said, "A number of local philanthropic groups have revised their funding guidelines to support efforts that are consistent with the region's long-range plan." In regions where the regional sustainability planning process had strong philanthropic involvement, plan implementation and local funding goals now have a natural alignment. At the national level, a group of funders is supporting implementation in six regions in 2017.[15]

Barriers to Equity and Implementation

Barriers to Equity in Regional Sustainability Planning

Respondents described different barriers to incorporating equity into their regional plans.[16] These barriers may also impact implementation and future regional sustainability planning. When asked about implementing regional equity goals, many respondents said that political authority over relevant policies still rests at the local level, or that they lacked local data. A typical comment across regions, one southern respondent noted, "Local zoning approval and traditional local politics are still barriers to the development of affordable housing in high opportunity communities." On the regional level, some grantees found it challenging to bring in new voices to a complex process like updating their regional transportation plan.

Respondents often stated that the SCI regional planning process started conversations about inequality and race. Some conversations were new, some conversations were productive, and some conversations exposed existing divisions in regions. One midwestern respondent said,

> Topics related to poverty and race remain very difficult to discuss in the region, and the local housing authority's effort to locate public housing in areas that offer more opportunity has generated strong resistance. This planning process introduced new concepts (such as access to opportunity) to the region, but I don't think a single planning process can change how we address issues like this. A long-term, intentional, willing effort is needed.

Respondents said that it was difficult to discuss and educate the public about equity and affordable housing, although the SCI process gave them a forum and a reason for doing so.

Coming to a common definition of equity was a frequent challenge. One southern respondent said, "Defining what is meant by social equity was a barrier, as it can become a very politicized discussion which sidetracks the conversations." A northeastern respondent said that, even after their SCI planning process, "there's still a lack of understanding of what social equity is and how it can actually empower a locale." Future support for regional planning efforts could help prepare planners to have these difficult conversations and to see them as part of the process and part of their job. Future regional planning grants or programs could include helping planners build on conversations about equity that occurred through the SCI and translate them into actions that can be taken on the local level.

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[15] See http://www.sparcchub.org.

[16] Question 18: "Please share an example of a barrier to integration of social equity into your region's process or plan."

Perceptions about resource scarcity and potential loss of local control arose during discussions of equity through the SCI-RPG process. One respondent from a west coast region reported, "Many local jurisdictions…have been wary of what are perceived as new affordable housing requirements. This was particularly acute in the latter part of the recovery from the great recession." Parochialism can be difficult to overcome, and regional consortium members had to try to make the case for jobs, housing, and transportation "not simply being local or single town issues," as one southern respondent put it.

Even when regional sustainability plans incorporated shared understandings of equity, regional leaders did not always have the resources to put them into action. One respondent from the South said that a barrier to equity was the "lack of funding to facilitate a regional structure to fund implementation of strategies to address fair housing impediments." Others cited a lack of available data to support arguments for equity. For example, according to a west coast respondent, "Our inability to forecast future low income populations hampers our ability to communicate the need for more affordable housing with our policy makers." Although, overall, SCI-RPG improved capacity for data collection, additional funding would help municipalities and regional agencies better understand and address racial, class, and geographic disparities in access to housing, transportation, and jobs.

Barriers to Implementing Regional Sustainability Plans

General barriers to implementation fell into a few categories (exhibit 10). The most common obstacle that respondents reported (63 percent) was related to insufficient funding for implementation:

Exhibit 10

Challenges for Implementing Sustainability Plans
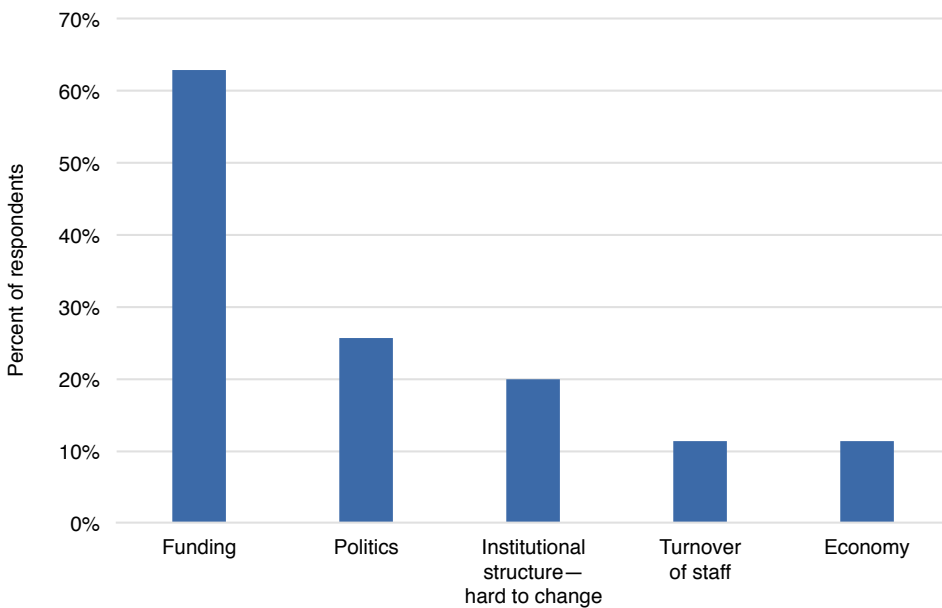
N = 35.
Source: Sustainable Communities Initiative Regional Planning Grant recipient survey, question 23: "What do you see as the continuing challenges to implementation of your regional plan for sustainable development?"

whether for staff, capital projects, or building capacity at partner organizations. The second most common response was related to bureaucratic inertia (31 percent). Respondents discussed the difficulty of propelling change within existing institutions, or conversely, the loss of institutional memory and stalling of momentum for implementing their regional plan when staff turns over. One interviewee said that the "brain drain," or loss of staff, after a capacity-building exercise like SCI-RPG is particularly acute for small or rural regions.

Politics came up frequently as an obstacle to implementation (26 percent), and the economy was also a concern (11 percent). Most of the respondents who cited political barriers referred to competing local priorities in their region, whereas a few referenced general opposition to regional sustainability planning. Political obstacles also include lack of buy-in from players that were not directly involved in the SCI planning process. One respondent said, "We never had strong buy-in from elected officials or upper-level local government management. This was always an effort spearheaded by mid-level planners, who had difficulty selling the message upward." One post-SCI challenge for regions wishing to continue regional sustainability efforts will be to encourage deeper involvement from nongovernment players, something that regional and national foundations can potentially encourage.

Although only a small percentage of regions reported general opposition to regional sustainability planning as a major barrier in their SCI-RPG process, it was a serious factor in a few regions. In a small number of regions, activists seeking to disrupt the SCI-RPG planning process stymied prospects for implementation. One survey respondent reported that,

> In a community with very few resources that it can task for implementation, no one will take on the challenge to pursue SCI-related goals when it means that the project auto-matically comes with the added burden of a motivated anti-planning constituency that is going to fight against it no matter what…Just partnering with the Federal government on the SCI efforts has resulted in a new anti-planning faction in the community that opposes everything related to planning regardless of intent or origin. From that vantage point, SCI was a net loss to our community.

However, in other regions, strong voices against regional planning prompted dialogue that strengthened the planning process. Indeed, a few regions that prioritized grassroots participation had a success-ful regional planning process that included oppositional perspectives. These regions prioritized open-ness and local experience in developing the framing of their regional sustainability plans in a way that strengthened them in the long run against claims that they promoted one-size-fits-all planning. They arrived at the same place as the HUD livability principles while making their plan locally relevant.

Feedback for Future Regional Sustainability Programs

The main criticism that respondents expressed about the SCI-RPG program concerned funding for implementation, and the main positive feedback they had was for the consistent support they received from HUD staff. Many respondents felt that the peer learning events—held as part of SCI-RPG—to meet and learn from their counterparts in other regions were highly valuable. Respondents commented on the need for more support in the areas of connecting different

funding sources, building and retaining capacity in their region, and support tailored to rural areas. Grantees experienced well-coordinated efforts between federal agencies and some instances for improvement in this area.

Many respondents reported a need for dedicated funding for implementation of the regional plans or suggested that HUD tie other funding sources to implementation. One respondent said that not having implementation funds "…makes it very difficult for communities and actually sets folks up for failure if they don't have the resources to be able to work to secure their own funding." Another suggested, "Even if it required a match, HUD could have tied future funding for other programs to the continuation of the effort." A third respondent said, "A move away from the formula allocations by jurisdiction size on HUD's formula funding would provide us flexibility to encourage our members to pool funding for better outcomes."

SCI-RPG was part of a growing trend at HUD to incorporate peer learning into grant programs. This trend typically involves organizing events where grantees can interact, supported by national non-profits that help organize the events and bring experts to speak on topics relevant to the grantees. The opportunity to share ideas across regions was a highlight of the program for many grantees, although one respondent called for more funding for peer learning so that HUD can "increase the effective sharing opportunities to learn from other regions with similar issues or great ideas."

Grantees had positive and constructive feedback about the capacity-building initiatives that were part of SCI-RPG. One midwestern respondent said, "Through [the] PolicyLink Regional Equity Profile we highlighted disparities and economic impact." Another respondent called for more local input and coordination on the content of capacity building being provided by HUD-funded consultants to local organizations in future grant programs.

Retaining capacity within their regions was an issue for grantees. One respondent said that a future program could place a greater emphasis on requiring more capacity to be built locally, such as through "a long-term sustainability plan…required…early in the process…[and] an endowment for a full-time regional planner" to ensure that knowledge built through the grant was retained. In some regions, the point person on the grant at the regional agency left for another region after the grant period ended, sometimes for lack of continued funding for their position. Several regions that are successfully pursuing implementation have found funding for an ongoing dedicated regional sustainability role from a consortium member such as a foundation, community foundation, or chamber of commerce.

One possible area for greater support by HUD to regional agencies would be on communicating the connection between different sources of funding. One respondent called for "Better communication on the PSS [Preferred Sustainability Status]-eligible grants.[17] I would have liked to have sent out email blasts to my board and other contacts every time a grant was available that we had extra points [on]. It would have helped show the value of the program to our leadership."

Rural grantees wanted more specific guidance, particularly on FHEA and AFFH, but also on planning and economic development generally. One federal official interviewed said that, although

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[17] PSS is a certification of consistency with SCI-RPG goals, "which provides two (2) preference points on select HUD discretionary grant program applications for entities within the project geography… PSS Communities may also write letters of support for other government agency discretionary grant programs (primarily at EPA, DOT, USDA [U.S. Department of Agriculture], and EDA) to strengthen their applications" (HUD-OER, 2016).

economically distressed regions, particularly ones that are primarily rural, attract federal funding that is designed to address these issues, they sometimes lack the capacity to manage and spend this funding. Furthermore, the various federal agencies providing rural development funding historically have not always coordinated well with each other. SCI-RPG was a step in the direction of coordinated regional planning. Typically, federal funding to regions for community development, such as funding from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, does not come with any planning requirements or support for planning. As a result, even large funding sources can have very different or even unintended spatial impacts in different regions.

Many grantees experienced well-coordinated efforts between different federal agencies in their region as part of SCI-RPG, although some noted room for improvement in this area. One western respondent said, "If the program had been run out of the regional or state offices, rather than out of HUD headquarters, the entire process would have been smoother. More importantly, the ability of the SCI program to comprehend, adapt to, and support local needs and conditions would have been tremendously improved." As one southern respondent suggested, "The most beneficial part of the grant was the cooperation of multiple federal agencies, [and] I would encourage HUD to build upon these relationships. While the coordination at the national level was exceptional, I believe that our grant could have benefitted by better collaboration of these federal agencies at the local level (this is not to say there was none, only that looking back it could have been better and helped build relationships at the local level as well)."

A few comments focused on bureaucratic hurdles, such as the difficulty of carrying out SCI-RPG's requirement to incorporate scenario planning, and the difficulty of using the reporting tool provided by HUD. As one respondent said, "Many of our subgrantees were not familiar with federal contracting standards, so there was a big learning curve for many. The reporting/logic model was not helpful and very time consuming."

A Future for Equitable and Sustainable Regions?

SCI-RPG sought to increase collaboration among regional agencies, communities, and their partners, in order to improve sustainability for people, the economy, and the environment. SCI-RPG gave regional leaders the opportunity to break down some of their existing silos and develop new relationships. Many regional agencies expanded their leadership role in a way that has continued beyond the grant period, but have found some difficulty maintaining the momentum of the grant process with limited resources for implementation.

SCI-RPG gave regional agencies a unique opportunity to reach out to jurisdictions and organizations with which they might not have previously had a direct reason to collaborate. The survey results suggested that the regional agencies that participated in the SCI-RPG program developed new relationships, that these relationships have often lasted beyond the grant period, and that in many cases, the consortium partners are working on implementation. Relationships improved between regional agencies and local jurisdictions, and new relationships formed across sectors that were focused on implementation. After the end of the grant process, many regional agencies have continued working with these partners and sought funding to continue their work.

SCI-RPG helped regional agencies break down issue siloes that contribute to sustainability and equity. Consortium leaders reported in the survey that SCI-RPG helped increase the focus of existing policies and programs on equity issues, such as affordable housing, job access, and transportation mobility across their region. SCI-RPG helped regional agencies and their partners see these issues as interrelated and work on them collaboratively. The grant also helped regional agencies gather and use data in new ways, and it prompted them to diversify their strategies for reaching the public.

The SCI-RPG consortia made progress on regional sustainability planning, but support is needed for implementation. Some regions have found ongoing funding, but for many regions, implementation funding remains an obstacle. Additionally, regional leaders are now more aware of impediments to fair housing, but many lack the resources to address them. Tying future federal funding sources to sustainability would help regional agencies meet the expectations they have generated and maintain the trust they have built with communities and partner organizations through the SCI-RPG process.

Acknowledgments

Author

Elizabeth Mattiuzzi is a postdoctoral researcher at the Center for Community Innovation at the University of California, Berkeley.

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