

# HUD's Sustainable Communities Initiative: An Emerging Model of Place-Based Federal Policy and Collaborative Capacity Building

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## Abstract

*The U.S. government generally operates under specialized policy and program silos, making it a challenge to holistically address complex policy issues across agencies and departments. With the launch of the Partnership for Sustainable Communities (PSC) in 2009, an interagency initiative involving the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), U.S. Department of Transportation, and U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the federal government sought to promote and infuse principles and practices of sustainable community development, through new levels of federal interagency collaboration and a portfolio of planning grants and capacity-building assistance for regional and local governments. HUD's Office of Sustainable Housing and Communities served as the hub for the interagency collaboration with its signature Sustainable Communities Initiative (SCI).*

*This article chronicles the development, evolution, and legacy of the SCI by focusing on three of its signature components: (1) the Regional Planning Grant program, (2) the Community Challenge Planning grant program, and (3) the network of Capacity Building Intermediary organizations that provided technical assistance. The most enduring legacy of PSC and SCI is the ensemble, coordination, and alignment of agency leadership, engaged staff, wide distribution of grant programs, and substantial investments in capacity-building interventions. This article uncovers the insights and lessons from this innovative approach for future federal and state government agencies, sustainability organizations, local government officials, and community and philanthropic leaders.*

## Methodology

This article blends participatory reflection, program document review, and semistructured background interviews of key Sustainable Communities Initiative (SCI) leaders and staff with basic principles of policy and program analysis. The authors' participatory reflections are based on direct and indirect involvement with SCI activities and personnel from 2010 to 2016. This case study incorporates many of their insights and reflections on Partnership for Sustainable Communities (PSC, or "the Partnership") and SCI activities and situates the effort within the broader context of urban sustainability policy and planning.

## The Sustainable Communities Initiative's Policy and Program Architecture—Its History, Evolution, and Policy Context

### The Partnership for Sustainable Communities

In June 2009, the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT), Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) announced the launch of a unique effort to facilitate cooperation and coordination across federal agencies to address issues related to sustainable community development. The formation of PSC was described by those involved as a response to the executive branch's call to invest in policy initiatives that relied on local solutions to create jobs and boost economic recovery (Marsh, 2014). The PSC encouraged each partner agency to align their policies, programs, and funding to address affordable housing, transportation, and environmental issues together, while advancing social equity—the core foundation for creating sustainable communities. This new level of federal interagency collaboration would help breakdown policy silos taking place among federal, state, and local agencies, thereby promoting a more efficient government that targets federal resources in response to local priorities (EPA, 2010).

Critical to its eventual success was the collegial relationships among PSC's leadership. Early engagements with then Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood, then HUD Secretary Shaun Donovan, and then EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson set the tone for collaboration across their agencies and among their staff. Under the Partnership's broad umbrella, each of the three principal federal departments and agencies (DOT, EPA, and HUD) designated one office to lead their respective sustainability program and policy activities. For EPA, it was the Smart Growth Program under John Frece; for HUD, it was the Office of Sustainable Housing and Communities (OSHC) directed by Shelly Poticha; and, for DOT, Beth Osborne led the "Livability Initiative" that was established in 1998 (Fischer, 2000; DOT, 2017). Frece, Poticha, and Osborne had existing relationships, having already operated within the same professional urban planning networks. These prior relationships and a common set of policy values helped them forge and infuse the Partnership's commitment to collaboration and coordination across the policies and programs of their respective departments and agencies.

Each department embraced the principles and used them to guide their decisions and program activities. The principles reinforced the executive branch's efforts to consider new policy and program approaches that would spawn economic recovery and community stability in response to the

country's then dire economic conditions. A more coordinated, collaborative federal government could better leverage its investments and align them more closely with local priorities (Marsh, 2014). A set of livability principles also illustrated the interdependence of affordable housing, neighborhood revitalization, transportation, and social equity. The principles were based on core characteristics of sustainable communities that HUD further refined in its fiscal year (FY) 2010 Notice of Funding Availability (NOFA). The 2010 NOFA called for a broad yet more particular meaning of sustainability (HUD, 2010a). As part of an interim assessment, Chapple and Mattiuzzi (2013) noted that a somewhat flexible definition of sustainability provided flexibility to localities on how they could implement and prioritize the principles, yet few of the grantees expressed or applied a particular interpretation of sustainability. This behavior illustrates that, as important as the term is to communities, it was and remains a complex and contested concept in the United States.

PSC (2013) defines the livability principles as follows.

- **Provide more transportation choices.**  
Develop safe, reliable, and economical transportation choices to decrease household transportation costs, reduce our nation's dependence on foreign oil, improve air quality, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and promote public health.
- **Promote equitable, affordable housing.**  
Expand location- and energy-efficient housing choices for people of all ages, incomes, races, and ethnicities to increase mobility and lower the combined cost of housing and transportation.
- **Enhance economic competitiveness.**  
Improve economic competitiveness through reliable and timely access to employment centers, educational opportunities, services and other basic needs by workers, as well as expanded business access to markets.
- **Support existing communities.**  
Target federal funding toward existing communities—through strategies like transit-oriented, mixed-use development and land recycling—to increase community revitalization and the efficiency of public works investments and safeguard rural landscapes.
- **Coordinate and leverage federal policies and investment.**  
Align federal policies and funding to remove barriers to collaboration, leverage funding, and increase the accountability and effectiveness of all levels of government to plan for future growth, including making smart energy choices such as locally generated renewable energy.
- **Value communities and neighborhoods.**  
Enhance the unique characteristics of all communities by investing in healthy, safe, and walkable neighborhoods—rural, urban, or suburban.

Each office played important roles in this collaboration and administered a suite of programs and elements of the Partnership. HUD's OSHC, through its SCI, served as the Partnership's hub and coordinator. DOT integrated the signature Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery (TIGER) grants of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) into the partnership. Taking

a slightly different approach, EPA's Smart Growth Program recalibrated several of its technical assistance grant programs under the sustainable communities' policy brand (that is, Smart Growth Implementation Assistance, Greening America's Capitals, Building Blocks, Local Foods Local Places, and Livable Communities in Appalachia). Significantly, the EPA's Brownfields Area Wide Planning Program and its early pilot grants were also linked to the Partnership. Substantively, for DOT and EPA, this meant funding contributions. Later, through its collaborative Rural Working Group, the U.S. Department of Agriculture participated in Partnership activities and provided the rural perspective (PSC and USDA, 2011); it did not, however, launch or manage a special program or contribute financial resources to the SCI suite of programs.

### **SCI's Policy and Planning Context**

The SCI legacy emerged in the context of a longer history of sustainability planning and policy in the U.S. The U.S. Smart Growth movement of the 1990s set the stage for SCI and its livability principles (Goetz, 2005). Several U.S. cities were already considering and implementing a variety of urban sustainability plans, projects, and programs with support and guidance from dozens of national and professional associations, led in part by the Smart Growth Network, of which EPA was a prominent member. During this time, Smart Growth served as the U.S. brand of urban sustainability. In 1996, the Clinton administration convened a multisector advisory group called the President's Council on Sustainable Development, and in 1999, former Vice President Al Gore began his presidential aspirations with the administration's Livability Institute. During the George W. Bush administration, various federal programs, such as Smart Growth and Brownfields, continued but with little connection to or explicit mention of urban sustainability. At that point, local governments led urban sustainability in the United States, along with their network of associations, such as the U.S. Conference of Mayors and the American Planning Association, as well as environmental nongovernmental organizations, such as the Natural Resources Defense Council and Smart Growth America.

The election of Barack Obama served as a catalyst to the strategic policy convergence of sustainability, regional planning, and economic recovery. With the U.S. economy in a tailspin when President Obama took office in early 2009, Congress and the White House responded with American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), which appropriated billions of dollars in federal assistance and investments to stimulate the economy and foster its recovery. ARRA spawned numerous policy and program initiatives that leveraged federal environmental priorities, with climate change and renewable energy as vehicles for reviving the economy; thus, the convergence of these contemporary political and economic events generated the necessary political and policy momentum for an ambitious push on regional and urban sustainability that was manifested in HUD's SCI.

The SCI sought to address two contemporary policy and planning challenges—sustainability and regional planning. Furthermore, the SCI program specifically included equity as a framework or lens through which all the projects should be planned, implemented, and judged. Equitable economic development, land use planning, participatory consortia, transit options, and just environmental outcomes were all to be connected to each other and, more importantly, connected to affordable housing.

Over the years, scholars, policymakers, and communities have studied and experimented with different models of metropolitan governance and regional planning with limited success (Barbour

and Teitz, 2006; Berke and Conroy, 2000; Chapple and Mattiuzzi, 2013; Innes and Rongerude, 2013; Wheeler, 2002). Experts note three waves of regional planning in the U.S.: (1) the early 20th century, when the planning power rested with central cities and extended outward; (2) the 1960s and 1970s, when federal and state policies pushed regional planning and collaboration down; and (3) the 1990s through the present, when regional planning evolved from cross-sector coalitions and multi-jurisdiction efforts (HUD, 2015a). One of the challenges is the inherent mismatch in the United States between the regional scale of pressing problems, such as transportation and environmental quality, with the forms of government and governance (Foster, 2011). Another challenge is the power of and fragmentation across U.S. municipal governments and special purpose districts when it comes to land development, housing, and economic development policies. Outside of the traditional advisory roles of regional councils of government and metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs) with respect to transportation investments, only a handful of communities, such as Indianapolis, Indiana; Louisville, Kentucky; Minneapolis, Minnesota; and Portland, Oregon, have much experience with regional governance or enacting and running regional governments (Foster and Barnes, 2012). Traditionally, regional governments have little power or authority to compel local governments and other actors in their region to follow their plans and analysis (HUD, 2015b). Within different urban policy and academic circles, organizations and institutions, such as the MacArthur Foundation's Building Resilient Regions, National Association of Regional Councils, Brookings Institution's Metropolitan Policy Program, and the University of Southern California's (USC's) Program for Environmental and Regional Equity (PERE), have launched initiatives to examine the economic power of metropolitan regions and promote cross-sector regional partnerships and collaborations. Currently, in the United States, however, regional planning remains a weak link in the intergovernmental landscape (HUD, 2015a).

New federal initiatives and their associated offices often must overcome strong political opposition at various levels of government, as was true for OSHC and its SCI. For much of its existence, the SCI functioned within a national and regional political climate often opposed to sustainability. One longstanding OSHC staffer noted that, although program evaluation was par for the course to document effectiveness, it was difficult to implement an innovative program and simultaneously and continually justify its value to Congress in the face of limited staffing and support and strong partisan opposition (HUD Staff Interviews, 2016–2017). The executive branch and senior department officials sought congressional authorization and budget approval of OSHC and its grant programs several times but could never muster enough political support. When the Republicans took control of the House during the November 2010 mid-term elections, they sent the Senate several budgets that proposed restrictions on funding OSHC and their grant programs. Some of the opposition spilled over to other related PSC and SCI initiatives.

A driving force for this opposition in certain regions of the country was the emergence of the Tea Party and other political coalitions, which ran media campaigns that characterized the sustainability grants and programs as part of an organized United Nations plot (referred to as "Agenda 21") to undermine U.S. citizens' property rights and other perceived freedoms. An additional factor fueling anti-Agenda 21 sentiments was the coalitions' concern about accepting predetermined, sustainability-based policies with little local input in the process (Berry and Portney, 2016; Flint, 2011; Trapenberg Frick, Weinzimmer, and Waddell, 2015). As such, several grantee activities and public planning

meetings were disrupted by Tea Party-aligned coalitions following tactics outlined on a variety of Tea Party-supportive web sites.<sup>1</sup> These disruptions sent a chilling effect throughout PSC and SCI, making it difficult to expand and garner state and local support.

## **HUD's Regional and Community Challenge Planning Grant Programs: Catalyzing Metropolitan, Urban, and Rural Sustainability**

Although the PSC and the SCI offer many innovative and intriguing lessons about federal place-based policy, HUD's Sustainable Communities Initiative Regional Planning Grant (SCI-RPG) program and Sustainable Communities Initiative Community Challenge Planning (SCI-CCP) grant program stand out as the key initiatives, due to their scale and scope. From 2010 to 2012, HUD awarded a total of \$250 million in competitive grants to 143 regions and communities to explore the planning dimensions of metropolitan and urban sustainability. HUD invested an additional \$10 million in grantee technical assistance and capacity building. Within the context of federal housing and environmental policy, it is difficult to find a more comprehensive investment in urban and regional sustainability planning.<sup>2</sup>

SCI housed three interrelated programs:<sup>3</sup>

- SCI-RPG provided grants to consortiums of regional agencies to design, develop, and implement regional sustainability plans.
- SCI-CCP offered grants for smaller-scale sustainability projects with state and local governments, U.S. territories, tribes, transit agencies, port authorities, planning organizations, sub-state or local government agencies, and multistate or jurisdictional consortia eligible to apply.
- The Capacity Building Intermediaries (CBI) program developed a network of sustainability technical assistance experts to support the grantees.

SCI's suite of programs relied on coordination across the programs, integration of the livability principles across all elements of the initiative, and close alignment with PSC partner programs.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, [http://ccta.camp8.org/Resources/Documents/Agenda\\_21\\_in\\_Calaveras\\_Count\\_Booklet\\_draft\\_15.pdf](http://ccta.camp8.org/Resources/Documents/Agenda_21_in_Calaveras_Count_Booklet_draft_15.pdf) and <http://priscillaking.blogspot.com/2013/03/tea-party-confronts-morgan-griffith.html>. HUD responded to these events by offering support through Peer Exchanges and expert panels during the Annual Grantee Convenings under subjects such as "Responding to the Critics: Sustainable Communities Messaging" and "Best Practices for Managing Public Meetings."

<sup>2</sup> Over the years, HUD and EPA have launched a handful of programs and initiatives with a specific focus on urban planning, but many programs lasted only a few years. In 1954, HUD's Section 701 provided grants to urban and rural areas to develop comprehensive plans. The Urban Development Action Grant program focused on the jobs and economic development projects in helping revitalize distressed cities as part of the Carter administration's national urban policy. EPA's Section 202 Clean Water Act planning provisions called for the development of local and regional water quality management plans, but Congress did not fund the agency to implement this planning program. A good comparison with SCI is with EPA's Brownfields program, especially its Showcase Communities Initiatives in the 1990s, however, most of those grants were for projects and programs and not for planning. The Brownfields Area Wide planning program, in some ways, was born from and eventually connected with the PSC. Our comment and comparison here does not include DOT's longstanding transportation planning investments through Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) and its successors.

<sup>3</sup> With the shift in name and in leadership from OSHC to the Office of Economic Resilience (OER) in 2014, the revised OER administered a series of specialized grants around resilience and a national resilience competition using remaining resources from federal assistance for Hurricane Sandy.

In May 2013, the Harvard Institute for Government Innovation acknowledged these pioneering efforts by awarding SCI with a place on its list of top 25 most innovative government programs for 2013 (Kolawole, 2013).

### **Grant Programs' Goals and Structure**

PSC's livability principles were embedded in HUD's SCI NOFA for the SCI-RPG and SCI-CCP grants. The NOFA called for applications that could improve access to economic opportunities and affordable housing, increase transportation options, and lower transportation costs while protecting the environment. Applications for the SCI-RPG grants could not exceed \$5 million, and the SCI-CCP grants were limited to \$3 million. The NOFA further stressed important policy and planning goals, such as multijurisdictional and cross-sector partnerships, regional collaboration, public engagements, and elevating social justice. The principles would serve as the foundation for other federal place-based policy initiatives during this time.

Furthermore, to encourage grantees to link various planning strategies with efforts to expand equitable affordable housing options, HUD used the program to pilot new regulatory guidance that would be officially launched in 2015.<sup>4</sup> The Fair Housing and Equity Assessment (FHEA) and the Regional Assessment of Impediments (RAIs) pilot would become the Assessment of Fair Housing under the Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing (AFFH) rule. This required a new method of analysis, especially new for SCI-RPG grantees, who may have never been required to consider access to affordable housing on a regional scale. They were asked to examine the distribution of affordable housing by race or ethnicity and income levels within their region, assess the impediments to accessing affordable housing, and develop an action plan to address those impediments (Zapata and Bates, 2016). These new frameworks meant that grantees had to include subjurisdictions in their consortia in discussions to address the fact that affordable and subsidized housing was unevenly distributed and often concentrated in census tracts HUD defined as racially and ethnically concentrated areas of poverty or R/ECAPs.

SCI funded two rounds of SCI-RPG grants in federal FY 2010 and 2011. HUD received 363 applications seeking \$674 million in regional sustainability assistance but could only award \$165.1 million to the regional grantees. Coalitions of regional councils, MPOs, local governments, and universities applied for one of two grant categories. Category 1 grants supported regional planning for sustainable development where such plans did not exist. Category 2 grants supported the implementation of existing regional sustainability plans. In 2010, 45 regional grantees were awarded \$98 million, and in 2011, 29 regional grantees were awarded \$70 million (exhibit 1).

The SCI-CCP grants were designed to support planning activities led by individual jurisdictions with additional public sector and nonprofit partners to address barriers to affordability, economic well-being, and sustainability (HUD and DOT, 2010). SCI announced \$28 million in grants in 2010, awarded to 42 communities, 14 of which had combined SCI-CCP and DOT TIGER II funds. An additional \$30 million was awarded to 27 communities under SCI-CCP in 2011. Similar to the regional grant program, the demand greatly exceeded available funds, as the NOFAs elicited close to 900 applications for 2010 and 2011, with a requested application total of \$1.708 billion (exhibit 1).

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

**Exhibit 1**

**SCI-RPG and SCI-CCP Grant Program Funding**

	FY 2010		FY 2011		Total	
	n	Amount (\$ millions)	n	Amount (\$ millions)	n	Amount (\$ millions)
SCI-RPG applicants/requests	223	450	140	—	363	674
SCI-RPG grantees/awards	45	98	29	67.1	74	168
Category 1	28	—	25	—	53	—
Category 2	17	—	4	—	21	—
SCI-CCP applicants/requests	627	1,200	252	500	879	1,708
SCI-CCP grantees/awards	42	28	—	30	—	58
CCP	28	—	27	—	55	—
CCP/TIGER II	14	—	—	—	14	—

SCI-RPG = Sustainable Communities Initiative Regional Planning Grant. SCI-CCP = Sustainable Communities Initiative Community Challenge Planning. TIGER II = Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery.  
 Sources: <https://portal.hud.gov/hudportal/documents/huddoc?id=2011RegAwardPSSApplicants.pdf>;  
<https://portal.hud.gov/hudportal/documents/huddoc?id=OSHCY10RegAppllist.pdf>;  
<https://portal.hud.gov/hudportal/documents/huddoc?id=2011ChalAwardPSSApplicants.pdf>;  
<https://portal.hud.gov/hudportal/documents/huddoc?id=listComChalapplic.pdf>;  
<https://www.sustainablecommunities.gov/sites/sustainablecommunities.gov/files/docs/partnership-accomplishments-report-2014-reduced-size.pdf>; <https://portal.hud.gov/hudportal/documents/huddoc?id=FY11RegNOFAWebcast1.pdf>

SCI-CCP grants were smaller in scale and scope than SCI-RPG grants. The goal in 2010 was to help communities revise and expand existing plans (land use, redevelopment, corridor, neighborhood, and so on) and codes (zoning, building, and so on) to better link housing and transportation projects with planning efforts on a local level. To facilitate that, HUD and DOT merged the 2010 application process for both HUD and DOT TIGER II planning programs into one site to reduce redundancy and facilitate a joint funding process. Requirements were similar to SCI-RPG in that they highlighted the livability principles, increased the transportation and affordable housing choices, supported economic development, and were community focused. In addition, community engagement was a key feature for these awards (HUD and DOT, 2010). To ensure that rural areas also received attention, the 2010 NOFA required that \$140 million of the TIGER funds, including the TIGER II grant, would be awarded to areas that were not in a Census-defined Urban Area. Targeting HUD SCI-CCP funds for rural areas was not mentioned until the 2011 SCI-CCP NOFA, which set aside at least \$3 million for areas with populations under 50,000 (HUD, 2011b).

**Scope of Grantee Plans and Projects**

SCI pushed the boundaries of urban and regional sustainability in the United States by funding a wide range of communities, each with different levels of experience with and approaches about sustainability.<sup>5</sup> Among the regional grantees, more experienced metropolitan organizations—such as Boston, Massachusetts, and Chicago, Illinois—could focus their grant activities by helping their local jurisdictions revise and infuse sustainability principles and actions into local comprehensive land use plans and building and zoning codes. Part of this natural experiment also supported sustainability efforts in regions suffering from decades of economic decline, as well as the boom and bust metros of the Sun Belt. Northeast Ohio’s consortium of more than six counties and five

<sup>5</sup> Given limitations of time and space, we could not explore in depth the number of examples from the 143 grantees selected.

local governments, four MPOs, three housing authorities, several civic organizations, and Cleveland State University, perhaps one of the more ambitious regional grantees, sought to facilitate regional dialogues and introduce sustainability through the lens of economic resilience (NEOSCC, n.d.). FY 2010 regional grantee New River Valley Regional commission, in southwest Virginia, was one of several grantees testing sustainability planning in rural communities. As part of the FY 2010 SCI-RPG cohort, the Thunder Valley Community Development Corporation and the Oglala Sioux Tribe consortium adapted the concepts of sustainability in their plan for better coordination across agencies working with the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. In accordance with the NOFA's emphasis for collaboration across sectors and across jurisdictions, several of the regional grantees included large multicounty and some multistate coalitions, such as the South Florida Regional Planning Council (claiming more than 125 agency partners) and Centralina Council of Governments (coordinating across North and South Carolina). Universities and state governments were also prominent leads and partners in several applications, either serving to coordinate across partners or providing institutional or fiscal capacity with which to manage the grant (exhibit 2).

For the SCI-CCP grantees, the applications and awards varied from municipality wide efforts down to development sites. Communities updated, revised, and developed master plans, land use development codes, zoning ordinances, corridor plans, mobility and transportation plans, small district revitalization plans, transit-oriented development projects, affordable housing strategies, and the development of funding mechanisms for implementation (HUD, 2010b). Although the SCI-CCP focus was certainly on single jurisdictions, as opposed to the SCI-RPG program, some grantees brought together multijurisdictional projects on focused topics, such as the South Suburban Mayors and Managers Association's rail corridor redevelopment plan focused on job growth along the freight rail network and housing along existing transit. Even as the SCI-CCP grantees worked on local projects, such as site-based development projects, they needed support from a wide variety of jurisdictions, city, county, state, and regional planning organizations (HUD, 2010b). Most importantly, these efforts represent emerging models for leveraging resources needed to address current and future challenges, such as changing demographics, climate change, and growing regional inequities (Tregoning, 2015).

## Exhibit 2

### SCI Grantee Organizational Type

Organizational Type	SCI-CCP	SCI-RPG
City or city agency	49	4
COG/regional organization	3	33
County or county agency	6	6
MPO	6	24
State or state agency	2	1
Tribe	2	—
University	—	3

*COG = council of governments. MPO = metropolitan planning organization. SCI = Sustainable Communities Initiative. SCI-RPG = SCI Regional Planning Grant. SCI-CCP = SCI Community Challenge Planning.*

## Program Management and Implementation

OSHC administered the SCI-RPG and SCI-CCP grant programs under the initial leadership of Director Shelly Poticha, a longstanding leader of new urbanism and smart growth. During the

first 2 to 3 years of OSHC, Poticha and her deputy director Mariia Zimmerman simultaneously launched the SCI grant program. Support staff included a blend of those with longstanding federal service with HUD and EPA, and junior staff that included Presidential Management Fellows. Innovative program design, flexibility in management and oversight, elevation of equity and justice throughout, and modifications to traditional evaluation and assessment were key features of the program.

1. Collaborative grant program design. The SCI grant programs were part of an emerging federal place-based policy model that were completely different from longstanding, traditional HUD program grants such as the Community Development Block Grant program. SCI grants were competitive, not formula grant awards. Successful applicants were expected to spend serious time and resources to recruit their partners and develop their collaborative approach. Because HUD was introducing a focus on sustainable communities connected to affordable housing at the time (2010), SCI leaders vetted their preliminary grant framework through early stakeholder meetings and issued an Advanced Notice of Funding Availability with requests for comment prior to releasing the NOFA. They integrated many of the ideas and insights from these meetings and conversations into the final NOFA (Marsh, 2014). In addition, one of SCI's more unique practices was to vet the grant applications with representatives from DOT and EPA. Based on these preliminary practices, joint agency review of grants did continue as part of the later resilience grant competition.<sup>6</sup> Even as recently as 2016, federal agency staff continue their collaborations by informally sharing and discussing cross-program awards and projects (HUD Staff Interviews, 2016–2017).
2. Grants management and oversight. Within federal contracting practice, the SCI grants were cooperative agreements that gave the sponsor more influence on the direction and activities of the project compared with a contract where the sponsor has less input in project implementation. Cooperative agreements establish more of an informal partnership between the department and the grantee. From a grants management perspective, a cooperative agreement often means more site visits, more time, and more engagement for HUD staff. Staff experience within the department was one project manager (government technical representative [GTR]) for every five to six grants. After the grant programs were in process, HUD's Grants Office observed that OSHC had a much lower ratio of staff GTRs to grants than other HUD offices, with some OSHC GTRs managing on average 15 to 16 grants each and several GTRs managing more than 29 grants (HUD Staff Focus Group, December 2016 and HUD SCI Grantee Information Table 2017). GTRs were responsible for ensuring the SCI-RPG and SCI-CCP grantees followed the standard HUD grant program and reporting requirements, while also providing strategic guidance on the substantive issues around each of the grantee's sustainability planning activities—the real heart of SCI's programs.

OSHC designated a sustainability officer in each of HUD's 10 regional offices to engage with the grantees. Some of these regional sustainability officers fully embraced their roles and offered critical local insights and guidance to the OSHC staff and the grantees. The regional offices

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<sup>6</sup> <https://portal.hud.gov/hudportal/documents/huddoc?id=NDRCFactSheetFINAL.pdf>; <https://www.hudexchange.info/programs/cdbg-dr/resilient-recovery/>.

did not get separate funding for these OSHC responsibilities, so the sustainability officers had to manage this assignment alongside their primary regional duties. Thus, their capacity and commitment varied widely.

3. Program evaluation and assessment. HUD's traditional grant administration practices and procedures to track and measure program and grantee results did not fit well for SCI's suite of grant programs. HUD's grant infrastructure typically tracks short term, concrete outputs from traditional formula grant programs. The outputs from the SCI grants were primarily planning products, such as a regional plans, revised codes, and charrettes. These outputs influenced long-term changes to the built environment. Collectively, these outputs were projected to generate certain socioeconomic and environmental outcomes that improve the livability of a community. Because plans may be carried out during the course of decades, the outcomes of planning actions and processes are inherently difficult to identify, track, and measure over time. Recognizing these challenges, OSHC staff attempted to tailor HUD's standard reporting forms, but without enough time to obtain Paperwork Reduction Act approval, grantees were forced to use standard HUD grant reporting forms. Due to the resulting data gap, it was difficult to quantify the direct socioeconomic benefits of the sustainability plans across the entire program. Thus, HUD relied on case studies to demonstrate outcomes.

## **Capacity-Building and Technical Assistance Activities**

The FY 2011 CBI NOFA declared that the program would provide technical assistance as well as build a “national coalition and leadership network of the Sustainable Communities Grantees” (HUD, 2011a: 2). This program represented a shift from traditional technical assistance delivered by one provider, or assistance that covered only one narrow area of expertise or focused solely on successful compliance, to a program that touched on a very broad range of topics with a long-term goal of building capacity of the grantee and changing institutional practices. The delivery of federally funded capacity building at this scale, using such a complex but coordinated network of providers to reach all SCI grantee communities along with all the other eligible PSC grantee communities, was a new and bold proposition.

## **Overview and Implementation Process**

The CBI program had two funding phases. Under Phase One, launched in August of 2011, HUD selected eight technical assistance and capacity-building organizations through a competitive grant process to assist grantee communities in fulfilling grant obligations and to address gaps in knowledge and capacity under seven subject areas (HUD, 2011a). The subject areas included—

- Implementation strategies for economic development and local and regional planning.
- Advancement of social equity.
- Sustainability practices for tribes, small towns, and rural places.
- Establishment of a national learning community or network.
- Targeted assistance with scenario planning.
- Incorporation of water infrastructure planning and investments.
- Planning in slow economies.

The lead entities chosen to provide the assistance were—

- The Institute for Sustainable Communities (ISC), tasked with creating the national Sustainability Learning Network (SLN) and provide leadership training.
- The University of Louisville, which focused on assisting with integrating water infrastructure planning and investments into the grantees' planning efforts.
- Envision Utah, which assisted grantees with scenario planning.
- Reconnecting America, which assisted with implementation strategies for economic development focusing on transportation issues.
- PolicyLink and Place Matters, which incorporated a social equity lens in all aspects of the program.
- National Association of Development Organizations, along with the Minnesota Housing Partnership (MHP), which focused on the needs of tribes, small towns, and rural places.

Substantively, each capacity-building organization had different expertise and unique approaches to technical assistance. Several were nonprofit policy think tanks with deep ties to various federal agencies. Some had deep experience with sustainable community development efforts in international contexts, whereas others excelled in U.S. national, state, regional, local, and neighborhood contexts. In addition, each CBI issued subawards to additional organizations that provided substantive assistance expanding grantee access to around 33 technical assistance providers.

Funding for Phase One of the capacity-building aspect of the initiative came from HUD (\$5 million) and EPA (\$650,000), with in-kind support from DOT in the form of meeting space for the annual grantee convenings. Phase Two, launched in 2013, collapsed the technical assistance funding into one award of \$4.5 million to the ISC, which led the consortium comprised of the previous capacity builders. Phase Two expanded topic areas of assistance offered to the grantee communities with a heavy focus on implementation strategies. This phase reflected the desire of the agencies that the grantees' plans should not remain sitting on shelves (HUD, 2013). Because of this focus on implementation HUD GTRs assigned to CBI oversight would only oversee one CBI tasked with coordinating the CBI network of providers.

Under both phases of the capacity-building grants, eligible communities included HUD SCI-RPG and SCI-CCP grantees, communities with grants from the EPA Brownfields Area Wide Planning grant program, and the EPA Sustainable Community Technical Assistance programs: Greening America's Capitals, Building Blocks, Local Foods Local Places, and Appalachian Livable Communities. This very broad eligibility reflected the financial collaboration between HUD and EPA as well as an opportunity to further dismantle federal departmental policy silos (HUD, 2011a).

### **Capacity and Policy Diffusion**

The language in the original CBI program NOFA highlighted the agency's desire to build grantee capacity and commitment to sustainability planning by developing a "national coalition and leadership network of the Sustainable Communities Grantees" (HUD, 2011a). The capacity-building program was broadly defined and flexible because the grantees had uneven experience with even basic planning—much less, sustainable community planning that addressed all the key components required by HUD. Several aspects of the capacity-building grant program—financial, procedural or structural—and substantive content are worth highlighting for future federal or state programs that provide support for regional and local planning.

## **Financial**

Financially, the extent of support in terms of funding and breadth of content was unprecedented in HUD as well as any other federal agencies. CBI budget and work plans were flexible enough to enable unique interactions with grantees and to respond to grantee needs as they arose. Usually capacity-building and technical assistance funding is very limited and defined by the funder rather than the grantee. In this situation, many efforts were made to allow for enough flexibility in the CBI budgets to meet unique community need. This shift meant that portions of the budgets for technical assistance spread across technical assistance categories based on the needs expressed by the grantees. The scale of outreach and eligibility to receive technical assistance, participate in capacity-building training, or both was enormous. All SCI grantee communities (69 SCI-CCP grantees and 74 SCI-RPG grantees) were eligible to benefit from the various levels of technical assistance and capacity-building activities. In addition, communities who applied for and were highly ranked but did not receive grant funding were designated Preferred Sustainability Status (PSS) that made them eligible for certain types of low-cost technical assistance and capacity building activities. Finally, communities funded under several EPA grant programs were given access to resources, and some were specifically invited to in-person trainings. Capacity builders were also sent to EPA-hosted trainings, such as the 2013 EPA Area-Wide Brownfield Planning grantee convening.

## **Procedural**

All capacity builders were required to work closely with HUD and EPA staff to ensure the support offered and deployed met community needs and priorities. The CBIs met via phone every 2 weeks to develop collaborative strategies for reaching as many grantees as possible and provide concurrent assistance. HUD staff leaders asked CBIs to make sure that they did not develop conflicting events, did not “over webinar” the grantees, and called on each other if, through interaction with a grantee, they uncovered a need they knew another CBI was better suited to address. The intensity of interaction with HUD and EPA staff is not a common feature for federal technical assistance programs. Often consultants are left to their own devices, working solely with the recipient of the technical assistance. This regular contact and interaction helped HUD staff keep track of the technical assistance being delivered beyond the usual quarterly reporting structures and helped each of the CBIs learn more about how each technical assistance provider delivered assistance and training.

The required regular communication with HUD staff and the other CBIs also facilitated partnerships across CBIs in delivering technical assistance. Over time, individuals in the CBI organizations became more familiar with the expertise each provider brought to the table. Technical assistance delivery teams would often include multiple CBIs. In the end, this communication contributed to the establishment of the learning community that included SCI grantee interactions as well as a dialectic with and between the CBIs.

## **Content Delivery Method**

The CBIs offered a portfolio of well-established strategies and tools in community building, capacity building, and community-based planning that gained a national platform. The CBIs had deep experience in approaches such as scenario planning; leadership “boot camps”; inclusion and diversity trainings; and intensive, onsite, one-on-one assistance in plan development and grant management, affordable housing assessments, communication, and community data analysis using a geographic

information system (GIS) and other data-analysis platforms. CBIs relied on their individual practices and content expertise that were also identified in the capacity-building NOFA. However, the method of delivery and the content of support were primarily grantee driven, with input from the HUD GTRs and, to a lesser extent, HUD regional staff. The intent was to be responsive to grantee needs and interests because the projects were unique, and each came to the planning effort with significantly varying capacity and expertise.

CBIs offered and prioritized assistance that varied by scope of outreach: all grantees; smaller grantee groups characterized by grant type, region or location, and community size, or topic; and one-on-one direct assistance. Grantee communities could find affinity with each other under a variety of different characteristics through interactions facilitated by the CBIs. The platforms for delivering the assistance included grantee in-person annual gatherings hosted by HUD, with a variety of traditional conference panels and hands-on interactive workshops facilitated by the CBIs but often led by grantees; webinars for large and smaller groups; smaller in-person grantee topic-based workshops; in-person one-on-one multiday site visits or work sessions; large and small group conference calls on narrow topics; office hours, when CBIs were available for one-on-one teleconference consultations; and technical reports and toolkits crafted for specific grantee-defined issues. The flexibility in delivery platforms meant that CBIs could respond to specific needs as they arose. Grantees were also not tied to one technical assistance provider and could benefit from the network of eight providers and their associated partners.

The HUD staff and the CBIs wanted to ensure that capacity and knowledge would have a broad reach beyond the life of the grant. To that end, the capacity-building efforts specifically targeted local agencies and organizations that were members of grantee consortia, not paid consultants. Common practice in local and regional planning efforts is to hire a consultant to produce a plan for a community, especially if the community does not have an internal planning department. The entire CBI program challenged the practice of relying solely on outside consultants for plan development. Grantees were expected to send staff from consortia member partners to participate in the in-person technical assistance efforts. For example, in preparing for ISC's leadership training "boot camps," CBIs would interview grantees who asked to participate or those whom CBIs identified as potential participants. They would be asked to put together a team of decisionmakers and stakeholders from their consortia partners and, if needed, offered assistance in identifying other members of the consortia who would benefit from attending. PolicyLink would offer to help identify consortia members who had a history of marginalization and exclusion from decisionmaking. The ideal team included elected officials, community-based organization leaders, and planning staff. This combination would allow them to work together closely and bring stronger team members back to share their knowledge and move toward implementation of their plans.

Peer-to-peer learning was a key element in much of the capacity-building program. A stated outcome of the CBI effort was to facilitate the creation of a national learning community centered on sustainable community planning. The effort to provide platforms for that to occur can be seen in the agendas for in-person workshops and convenings. Grantees facilitated sessions and presented their projects to and with each other in a majority of the in-person capacity-building events and in many of the virtual forums. Grantees frankly discussed obstacles and mistakes they made along the way during some sessions. Each in-person event intentionally left space for informal

grantee interactions so that networks could be established and information shared in those spaces. Importantly, CBIs tried to provide an online platform to support the emerging learning community using a website that was initially password protected but later opened and made more widely available. The intent was to provide a protected platform in which grantees could share draft plans with each other, engage in information exchanges, house links to resources and helpful documents, serve as a protected discussion platform among grantees, as well as provide information about upcoming technical assistance opportunities. Grantees, however, did not use the space for sharing plan drafts as initially expected, nor did they use it as a significant discussion forum. Eventually, access was granted to anyone who requested it, but the use of the site never became pervasive. Although it is not possible to systematically document the establishment of a functioning “learning community,” the efforts to support peer-to-peer learning and networks of grantee communities were an important feature of this capacity-building program. Policy diffusion often happens in peer-to-peer interactions and the effort to provide forums for local leaders and practitioners to share and learn from each other (Wolman and Page, 2002); these were successful ingredients for peer learning among the SCI grantees and supported and cultivated by the CBIs.

Equity, inclusion, and collaboration framed the capacity-building efforts. PolicyLink was tasked with assisting not only the grantees in executing their projects, using equity to frame their efforts and outcomes, but also with offering assistance to other capacity builders to ensure that they approached their work with equity in mind. The regular communication among the CBIs meant that PolicyLink could easily identify gaps in the capacity of CBIs to address equity issues and provide feedback for improvement. For instance, PolicyLink staff provided constructive assessments of in-person training events that may not have included participants who were representative of the racial and ethnic makeup of the communities involved. The focus on equity across all elements of the program meant that the approach could have a broader impact beyond the program boundaries. The MHP, along with PolicyLink, worked with grantees who needed assistance with completing FHEAs and RAIs and their associated action plans. Completing the equity assessments and the identification of impediments and connecting them to the regional plans were crucial to getting regions and cities to recognize the connections between affordable housing, transportation, economic development, and any of a number of land use decisions that affect equity outcomes. Because this type of assessment was new to many of the grantees, capacity builders had to walk several of the grantees step by step through building their capacity to do this type of analysis on their own.

The timing of the capacity-building program implementation created some problems for engaging grantees in some of the subject areas offered by the technical assistance providers. The CBIs did not establish work plans until 2011, well after the 2010 grantees were into their projects. Because grantees were accustomed to adhering strictly to their proposed plans and fulfilling HUD's reporting requirements, they were not ready to consider any approach beyond what they may have proposed or the minimum that HUD required of them. Some of the topics for assistance, such as integrating water infrastructure, were not specified in the original NOFA, and grantees were permitted and encouraged to define their own sustainability and criteria for success. Combined, these elements, along with the imperative for grantee-driven assistance, created a challenging environment in which to deliver grantee assistance.

The CBIs kept detailed track of their interactions with grantees throughout the grant program. This reporting enabled HUD staff, as well as the CBIs, to see where, what type of technical assistance was being delivered, and which platforms were being used. Using this knowledge, the CBIs could coordinate and understand where gaps existed. Even so, it remained difficult to reach all eligible grantees the SCI and eligible EPA programs. The SCI-CCP grantees took less advantage of capacity-building opportunities than the SCI-RPG grantees. During the final year of the technical assistance program, CBIs identified 40 grantees who took least advantage of the technical assistance. Of those 40, 85 percent were SCI-CCP grantees, 19 from 2010 and 15 from 2011. Of the remaining 6, 4 were 2010 SCI-RPG grantees and 2 were 2011 SCI-RPG grantees.<sup>7</sup> This disparity of attention between the grant types was due to the SCI-RPG grantees' areas of need more closely aligning with the offerings of the CBIs. Furthermore, the SCI-CCP grantees had smaller grant awards, limiting their financial ability to take advantage of technical assistance, due to the staff time or travel funds required to take advantage of the assistance. Finally, many of the first-round grantees had spent most of their budget by the time the second round of capacity-building support became available in 2013. This finding was true of many of the 2010 SCI-RPG grantees as well. Although grantees who completed their grants remained eligible for assistance, many did not have resources needed to use the assistance.

HUD and the CBIs struggled with documenting the value of the capacity-building efforts. Although internal event evaluations showed grantees found CBI assistance to be valuable, grantees were unable to document the difference the assistance made in creating or implementing their plan. This critique however is true of many technical assistance or capacity-building efforts related to community planning. The outcomes of such interactions often cannot be seen in any immediate product of the interaction; this area would benefit from further study and inclusion in future federal planning programs.

## **The Program and Policy Lessons of the Sustainable Communities Initiative**

The SCI represented a substantial commitment to build new capacities in regional and local planning and expand understanding about the contemporary challenges of resilience and sustainability. The roots of SCI's planning focus can be found in other HUD programs, such as Section 701 Comprehensive Planning Assistance Grants and the Urban Development Action Grant Program (Tregoning, 2015). SCI was launched during the middle of national economic crisis and had to continuously adapt to ever shifting political winds.<sup>8</sup>

As is to be expected in any effort to institutionalize new practices and programs through a new initiative, SCI staff ran into obstacles within HUD's traditional framework and culture. In response,

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<sup>7</sup> These data are based on an internal CBI review of tracking records of grantee assistance performed in September 2014 near the end of the CBI program.

<sup>8</sup> During interviews to confirm specific program details, SCI leaders and staff conveyed a sense of enthusiasm and accomplishment for being part of a creative and entrepreneurial office and initiative despite the obstacles they faced. The authors' perspectives as outsiders with inside knowledge enabled us to see that SCI, especially during the first 2 to 3 years, spent lots of energy to align its people, grantees, and sustainability policies, and organize them under a cohesive program.

the program and its people evolved and adapted to changing leadership, a tough political climate, and the inevitable shift in federal priorities. The OSHC experienced changes in leadership and staffing on a regular basis. Four different individuals filled the office director position during the life of the initiative (2009 to 2015), and the GTRs and grant officers assigned to the grantees shifted under each program. The results of the 2010 mid-term election and the subsequent rise of the Tea Party created substantive political obstacles to getting SCI authorized by Congress. This development also posed barriers—in some cases temporary and in others long term—to achieving state, regional, and local buy-in to grantee efforts toward implementing sustainable development plans (Berry and Portney, 2016). In response to leadership changes, political challenges, and shifts in priorities over time—common occurrences at all levels of government—OSHC changed names, becoming the Office of Economic Resilience in February 2014 and then the Office of Economic Development in November 2016. These names changes reflect the political realities of the time that placed more emphasis on economic development rather than sustainability.

In the following sections, we distill, in more depth, these and other important policy and program insights that are relevant for any capacity-building initiative involving regional and urban sustainability.

## **Contributions to Fields of Urban and Regional Planning**

### **Expanding the Practice of Regional and Urban Sustainability Policy and Planning**

Although SCI administered only two rounds of its regional and community challenge grant programs, it represented a significant federal investment in regional and urban planning. SCI's model offered metropolitan agencies and local government funds to develop new or implement existing plans and codes. Furthermore, it established a cohort of communities and practitioners among its regional grantees that has potential to further hone their initial activities and contribute substantively to an emerging community of practice around regional sustainability planning in the United States.

SCI's signature grant programs put a spotlight on the intersection of transportation, housing, and land use planning as essential policies for becoming a sustainable community. This is not a new framework. Throughout the years, many urban planning scholars have studied this nexus (Barbour and Teitz, 2006; Beatley and Manning, 1997; Berke and Conroy, 2000; Duany and Talen, 2002; Wheeler, 2013). In addition, for more than 20 years, EPA's Smart Growth Network promoted these core principles of housing affordability, transportation choice, and sound land use planning through its publications, convenings, and technical assistance. What was new was that a federal initiative, SCI, put these practices, principles, and research into action by funding such a wide array of plans, programs, and projects at diverse scales and geography. These sustainability planning efforts required, at times, new approaches to coordinate local and regional agencies that did not have a history of coordinating and collaborating, so they could for example, integrate water infrastructure planning into the work supported through the grants.

### **Inclusion and Equity**

SCI put equity front and center as a policy priority, connecting it to sustainability planning activities supported by the grants (Tregoning, 2015). Most definitions of sustainability include some notion of social equity. However, many local policies, plans, and programs do not explicitly make equity

a community goal. Moreover, local government attitudes toward sustainability and equity vary tremendously (Svara, Watt, and Takai, 2015). Through its grant and capacity-building activities, SCI stressed the importance of how regional and urban planning have the ability to address racial and economic inequities by establishing stronger connections between transportation and housing. SCI's requirement for its regional planning grantees to conduct an FHEA or RAI helped fulfill its legal obligations under the Fair Housing Act. More importantly, these analyses gave grantees and their partners important data and insights about concentrations of poverty, gaps in access to critical social services, and transportation barriers that impinged on the mobility of low-income families. The process also gave grantees the opportunity to have difficult conversations about race and, in some cases like Baltimore, allowed them to explicitly reference structural racism as an obstacle to employment opportunities in their plans (Opportunity Collaborative, 2015).

### Use of New Planning Tools

During the course of the SCI, technological development in data collection, mapping, and communication expanded dramatically. Grantees and CBIs made use of these advancements by developing and augmenting planning tools. In many cases, these tools were new to the field or used new technology that made certain accepted practices easier, increased public access, and facilitated the use of a wider variety of information and data. Many of the tools opened new methods of engaging the public in the planning process. Some grantees simply lacked capacity to use certain tools, and the grant provided resources to augment that capacity. Notable tools that were supported and, in some cases, required in the SCI programs included scenario planning (specifically, Envision Utah and Place Matters), equity assessments (PolicyLink, PERE, and Kerwin Institute), GIS mapping of community and regional attributes and projections (Place Matters and HUD's eventual AFFH tool), and web-based social media applications.

Chakraborty et al. (2011) remarked that the HUD FY 2010 NOFA for regional plans required grantees to engage in scenario planning but left the details for the grantees to determine. The subsequent 2011 NOFA for capacity building specified technical assistance in scenario planning. Envision Utah, also a grantee, built on existing scenario-planning tools, augmenting them and making them available to other regional grantees such as Austin, Texas, and Kansas City, Missouri (Minner, 2015). This scenario-planning tool, Envision Tomorrow<sup>9</sup> continues to be marketed, adapted, and used in a variety of planning efforts.

The Equity Profiles produced by PolicyLink with grantees and partners from PERE at USC provided regional summaries of demographic and economic baselines and projections that could then be used for some scenario-planning work. The presentation to local decisionmakers of the demographic shifts in age, race, income, education, and employment in a regional context highlighted how communities are interdependent and was intended to facilitate collaborative approaches to equitable planning that would lead to more equitable outcomes. PolicyLink and PERE continue to produce detailed equity profiles and have since launched a public database, Equity Atlas,<sup>10</sup> for communities to use on their own.

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.envisiontomorrow.org/et-intro/>.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.nationalequityatlas.org/>.

GIS and other mapping tools to collect and analyze community data also gained more traction as communities built capacity to produce their own maps through their grants. The Housing and Transportation Affordability Index from the Center for Neighborhood Technology (a CBI subawardee) was used by grantees and eventually integrated into HUD's analysis of housing affordability. Place Matters and their team of experts provided extensive assistance to grantees in assessing their technological capacity to use mapping and other tools for analysis and community engagement.

## **Federal and State Policy and Program Lessons**

Previous administrations over the years have experimented with similar types of interdepartmental collaborations, such as the Bush administration's Cooperative Conservation initiative or the Clinton administration's Brownfields Showcase Communities program. Perhaps SCI's major contribution to this space is how it served as a hub for the PSC interagency collaboration and how collaboration permeated virtually all their activities in their two signature grant programs. Federal urban policy traditionally involves awarding cities categorical grants for specific types of socioeconomic problems or regulating the actions of local governments, such as prohibitions against discrimination or discharges of pollution. SCI represented a different approach to local governments.

A primary focus and major highlight of the SCI experiences were cross-agency collaborations and capacity building within and across the different levels of government. Collaboration arose in a variety of settings—within and across the federal agencies guided by PSC and within and across regional and local governments, actors, organizations, and institutions. Capacity building also occurred at different levels, at different dimensions of the grant program and across the spectrum of urban and regional sustainability planning. Within the policy and public management literature, the definitions and focus of federal intergovernmental capacity-building approaches have been and will continue to be shaped and directed by past and present presidential administrations and policy movements. In the following sections, we situate the SCI experiences within the public administration or public policy literature and extract a few important lessons for current and future policymakers, program managers, and partners.

## **Characteristics of Place-Based Urban Policy**

SCI represents one of several place-based urban policy initiatives launched during the Obama administration. Important characteristics of these initiatives include geographic targeting of resources and actions, interdisciplinary approaches, coordination of agencies and sectors, data-driven decisions and results, and flexibility and creativity that can adapt to local context and rapidly changing environments. Through the White House Domestic Policy Council's interagency Neighborhood Revitalization Initiative, place-based policies became a priority across a variety of housing, community, economic, and environmental programs, such as Choice Neighborhood, Promise Neighborhoods, Byrne Criminal Justice Innovations, Brownfields Area Wide Grants, Strong Cities, Strong Communities Initiative, and the special Federal—Local Partnership in Detroit (Swanstrom, 2015). SCI exemplified this emerging model of place-based urban policy by facilitating collaboration with and among regional and local grantees and exploring how public policy problems play out in different and diverse communities and settings. Moreover, SCI's comprehensive capacity building activities set the pace among these other federal place based urban initiatives.

## Impact and Influence of SCI's Program Design

SCI's program design as a competitive grant process enabled HUD and its partners to select SCI-RPG and SCI-CCP grantees at different scales, from different parts of the country, and at different stages of sustainability planning. For example, SCI grantees included diverse rural regions with a range of capacity and challenges, such as New River Valley Planning District Commission in southwestern Virginia, Thunder Valley Community Development Corporation in South Dakota, Heart of Texas Council of Governments in central Texas, and Northern Maine Development Commission for two counties in northern Maine that leveraged their HUD grants with local public and private investment dollars. Within metropolitan regions, SCI grantees represented those with strong economic and population growth (for example, Boston, Chicago, and New York City), as well as those combating years of economic distress and dramatic demographic change (for example, Fresno, California, and Cleveland and Akron, Ohio). SCI's two-tiered program structure supported the implementation of existing regional plans already in place (Category 1) and those that focused their grant on the design and engagement to develop and adopt a region's first sustainability blueprint plan (Category 2).

The community engagement program requirements also drove grantee applications, approaches, and results. OSHC recognized that collaboration would be critical to ensure eventual implementation of the sustainable plans or projects and the longer-term impacts would be sustained, achieved (HUD Staff Interviews 2016–2017). The NOFA established upfront that grantees had to engage a wide range of partners and collaborators, such as local governments, nonprofit organizations, and universities. Although the level of actual input and contributions from each of these partners varied from region to region, SCI's program design elevated the importance of cross-sector collaboration as a critical component in sustainability planning that touches so many different socioeconomic and environmental issues. SCI's program design and structure enabled HUD and its partners to stretch the dimensions, reach, and practice of urban and regional sustainability planning.

## Collaboration

Effective collaborations among multiple organizations, agencies, and departments, and those across sectors (public, private, and nonprofit) exhibit certain characteristics, core competencies, and processes. Based on an extensive literature synthesis, (Foster-Fishman et al. 2001) developed a model that suggests four critical levels of collaborative capacity for fostering systems change by coalitions (1) within their members, (2) within their relationship, (3) within their organizational structure, and (4) within the programs they sponsor. Each of the four capacities has different degrees of interdependence. They also observed that community context will greatly influence the impact and influence of such collaborative capacities.

SCI's leadership, staffs, grantees, partners, and capacity builders exhibited various aspects of the Foster-Fishman's four collaborative competencies. Collaboration was heightened within each partner's membership; for example, within HUD, SCI led to the appointment of sustainability officers across HUD's regions to facilitate collaboration from headquarters to the regions and their respective grantees. Within EPA, the Smart Growth Program worked closely with the Brownfields programs and the Office of Water to make the most of EPA's financial commitments to capacity building. At times organizational structures had to be shifted to allow for financial commitments from EPA to be transferred to HUD. Essentially, EPA had to figure out how to write a check to HUD and establish the financial relationship to permit that level of collaboration.

Relationships across PSC members were strengthened through inclusion in grant review and during implementation, in which all the PSC members contributed staff time to efforts, such as the grantee convenings and other in-person capacity-building efforts. These interagency collaborations resulted in programs recognizing that their grantees had overlap and should benefit formally for leveraging those grant dollars and resources. Thus, the recognition of the PSC for points on future grant applications in other departments or agencies served to strengthen collaboration across programs. Within program collaboration in innumerable ways, the grantees replicated federal collaboration in the creation of their regional planning consortia, building on longstanding partnerships and bringing new partnerships to their efforts.

SCI was primarily a federal government initiative designed to facilitate collaboration on two levels—across and within federal agencies and among regional and local governments and their partners. By requiring collaboration at each level, SCI would lead to higher levels of cooperation among and between agency staff and grantees; that would result in stronger policy and program coordination, breaking down strict federal policy silos, which, in turn, would streamline program and service delivery and lead to federal programs that were more responsive to regional and local priorities.

At the federal level, a 2013 strategic assessment of the Partnership found preliminary success (2009 to 2012) in helping federal agencies (primarily DOT, EPA, and HUD) break down policy and program silos based on—

- Shared commitment to an important set of implementable policy goals.
- High level of commitment from the top leadership of each agency.
- Substantial concern with, and responsiveness to, the input as well as fears of some stakeholders.
- Significant focus on choosing only applicants that took the program requirements seriously.
- Tremendous thought given by HUD to the design and execution of grant requirements.

(Pendall et al., 2013: 1)

SCI's most visible collaborations arose during the design of the grant program requirements and the cross-agency selection of grantees. Cooperation arose through use of the right processes, such as regular interagency conversations and meetings, and having the right people in the right places who were developing and following the same script. For example, DOT created their transportation planning and projects grants (TIGER II) that parallel HUD's SCI-RPG and the later SCI-CCP grants; this action ultimately led to the jointly issued DOT and HUD NOFA and jointly evaluating the applications for all three grant programs (Pendall et al., 2013).

The program also encouraged de-siloing at the regional and local levels in the very structure of the NOFA requirements. The NOFAs required demonstration of committed consortia with the inclusion of stakeholders and organizations that were traditionally not included in planning decisions, and collaboration across agencies that may not have had the structural capacity or a history of regular communication, let alone collaboration. For instance, housing authorities across a region would be included in discussions about transportation plans, green infrastructure, or water infrastructure improvements. The federal levels were engaged in better collaboration, and de-siloing facilitated cooperation across local agencies that often relied on different federal grant resources for implementation that had different and sometimes conflicting requirements.

Concrete examples of federal de-siloing that resulted in regional and local de-siloing include the creation of the PSS that garnered points on applications to other federal grant programs; the acceptance of grantees' completed FHEAs for the soon-to-be launched AFFH rule; and the willingness of the U.S. Economic Development Administration (EDA) to regard some of the regional plans as equivalent or alternatives for a community's Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy, making them eligible for EDA funds.

### **Intergovernmental Capacity Building**

Another high policy priority for SCI was to build intergovernmental planning capacity with coalitions of regional and local governments and their local partners. At a 1981 symposium on local government capacity building, then Director of the Federal Executive Institute, Chester A. Newland, offered a classic definition and rationale: "Capacity building—increasing the ability of people and institutions to do what is required of them—is a term that grew out of the recognition that governments must augment their capabilities if they to meet daily operating requirements and changing needs" (Newland, 1981: 1).

Beginning with the advent of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society, the federal government has a long history of investing in capacity-building and technical assistance programs as part of its portfolio of urban programs and policies designed to help communities address a myriad of social, economic, and environmental issues. These federal government programs would fail unless state and local governments had the capacity and competency to administer and implement them (Hansen, 1981). Administrations brought different approaches to capacity building over time. During the Nixon era, an Office of Management and Budget report offered the guidance that intergovernmental capacity building should encourage federal, state, and local governments to cooperate in developing the necessary skills for planning, management, and evaluation. Plus, the federal government should promote research, experimentation, and innovation at all levels of government to encourage more effective and responsive practices (Burgess, 1975). Under the Reagan administration's increased emphasis on devolving greater responsibilities to the state and local governments, capacity-building efforts focused on improving state and local abilities to take on the management of federal government programs. Starting in 2011, the Obama administration launched a series of place-based initiatives (Promise Neighborhoods, Choice Neighborhoods, PSC, and the Strong Cities, Strong Communities Initiative) that not only sought to break down federal policy silos but also develop local capacities that foster cross-sector collaboration (Swanstrom, 2015). Building on these longstanding intergovernmental dynamics, SCI offers intriguing lessons for future federal and state programs designed to build the planning capacity of regional and local governments and communities.

When it comes to the design and administration of local government capacity-building programs, three challenges seem to remain constant throughout the decades. First is the sheer number and diversity of governments, special districts, and interplay with local politics (Hansen, 1981). Second is the multiplicity of federal government capacity building and technical assistance activities across dozens of domestic agencies (Burgess, 1975). Third is how changes in presidential administrations and contemporary policy issues impact intergovernmental relationships and, thus, the design and implementation of intergovernmental capacity-building programs had to operate within this

context by acknowledging these intergovernmental complexities, resisting the internal dynamics of doing capacity building as it had always been done in HUD and other federal agencies and, at the same time, pilot testing a new place-based urban policy model for facilitating stronger interagency coordination and intergovernmental collaboration on urban and regional sustainability planning.

These emerging place-based urban policy models also imposed additional pressures on this foundation of intergovernmental complexity. For example, they relied on regional systems of governance that place heavy demands on voluntary collaboration among actors from fragmented local governments; thus, it required patience and time to transform such informal collaborations into a set of shared values and, ultimately, build the requisite level of trust. Beyond the organizational capacity limits of distressed cities and smaller, suburban cities to implement federal urban grants, Swanstrom argues that their lack of civic capacity to collaborate across sectors, governments, and silos posed the greatest challenge to this new suite of place-based urban policy. Although SCI grant program resources, requirements for enhance partnerships and community engagement, and technical assistance programs were a “step in the right direction,” Swanstrom noted that capacity building also requires thoughtful approaches to the problem of urban strategy, justice, and fairness (Swanstrom, 2015).

Important program lessons for current and future intergovernmental capacity-building efforts from SCI's experience include—

- Bifurcating the federal grant program administration responsibilities and process from technical assistance or capacity-building efforts on urban and regional sustainability planning.
- Having access to a strong expansive network of national nonprofits and academic institutions, with expertise in urban and regional planning and sustainability, to provide technical assistance or substantive capacity-building activities across governance bodies.
- Developing a collaborative, intergovernmental network or a “learning community” of grantees around urban and regional sustainability.

### **Partnerships With Philanthropy**

An often overlooked outcome of SCI was the impact and knowledge gained by regional partnerships and philanthropic groups. By bringing philanthropic stakeholders to the table, communities could utilize these groups as conveners, advocates, network weavers, narrators, capacity builders, and above all, thought partners. SCI regions, through philanthropic partnerships, could enhance trust with additional community stakeholders. During the grant process, the use of creative citizen engagement enabled a more holistic approach to the regions' problems (Geevarghese and Tregoning, 2016). The philanthropic community perceived the public-private partnerships that were established and strengthened as part of SCI as accelerants to the community change in which they were already engaged. SCI was thus a catalyst in holistically strengthening community collaboration.

Additionally, the partnerships between SCI regions, HUD, philanthropic organizations, along with other stakeholders further assisted in the use of indepth data by all groups to enhance community decisionmaking. From a more macro policy perspective, SCI helped to create a new norm within HUD where working with philanthropy moved from feeling “uncomfortable and risky” to an asset

to HUD program offices (Geevarghese and Tregoning, 2016). This cultural change shifted how HUD approaches, and asks their grantees to engage with, philanthropic groups. Communities that succeeded in the creation of strong public-private partnerships were catalyzed further beyond the grant process, due to the development and identification of shared goals and methods across a regional network of philanthropic and public stakeholders (Geevarghese and Tregoning, 2016). Going forward, HUD sees philanthropic partnerships as a best practice; grantees need to create and nurture philanthropic engagement early on. SCI showed how public-private partnerships both engage and create a broad level of trust between grantees, HUD, and philanthropy. Thus, SCI leaves a lasting impact on the importance of philanthropy in broad stakeholder collaboration.

### **Evaluation of Planning and Capacity-Building Components**

SCI was a difficult and complex program for HUD to evaluate and assess, especially within the established time horizons. HUD's grant administration office establishes a consistent process for grantees to report certain performance data in a standardized spreadsheet. This reporting and tracking process covers HUD's categorical and development grants to local governments with some variations or tailoring for specific grant programs. These generic department reporting requirements and formats did not fit SCI's focus on urban and regional planning and sustainability. SCI's Category 2 regional grantees used their grants on activities to implement existing regional sustainability plans, whereas Category 1 grantees were engaged in the process of creating and adopting a plan. Within the planning literature, while the theory and practice of evaluating comprehensive land use plans continues to improve, the methods remain more art than science (Baer, 1997; Berke and Godschalk, 2009; Berke and Conroy, 2000; Hoch, 2002). Moreover, for Category 2 grantees engaged in creating a plan, it would be hard to track anything more than process outputs—the number of meetings and attendees—with some qualitative analysis of shifts in attitudes, perceptions, and opinions. In SCI's competitive policy and political environment, policymakers were looking for data that could directly link HUD's grant investments with jobs and other economic indicators. Without such data about SCI's economic impact, it became a never-ending quest for SCI's leaders and staff to devise new ways of calculating and communicating SCI's value to Congress and other policymakers (HUD Staff Interviews, 2016–2017).

SCI's focus on the design and development of regional sustainability plans also posed challenges for doing a more formal and comprehensive program evaluation as the long-term impacts or outcomes from adopted plans might not surface until years later. Plus, HUD funding rules prohibit HUD from contacting and demanding data after the grant expires. The important lesson here is effective program evaluation should be integrated from the outside, and HUD and other federal agencies should make the resources available for independent, third-party program evaluations.

## **Conclusions—What Is the Legacy of the Sustainable Communities Initiative?**

In reflecting on SCI's contributions to intergovernmental capacity building, regional planning, and the constant ebb and flow of urban sustainability, what stands out today, more than 5 years since its peak, is SCI's ambitious agenda to infuse livability principles and policies through the vehicle of regional planning. SCI's policy agenda and suite of capacity-building activities sought to test the

range and scale of sustainability planning in diverse metropolitan and rural regions of the country. Moreover, in their efforts to bridge the polarization of urban and rural communities, SCI and its grantees confronted some of the difficult political realities and policy limitations in the United States.

For state and federal government leaders involved with designing and developing intergovernmental capacity-building initiatives around urban and regional planning, SCI's holistic program design offers an intriguing model. SCI's breadth supported a wide range of grantees from different regions of the country, at different scales and at different stages in their planning experiences. SCI also provided its national capacity-building network with the resources and flexibility to effectively build a grantee cohort and expand their technical planning capabilities. These and other components could be adapted for other intergovernmental capacity-building efforts at the federal or even state government level. One recommendation to strengthen the SCI model is to develop upfront a set of meaningful indicators that grantees and program officers can easily use to track progress and impact over time along with sufficient resources for independent program evaluation.

Considering the dramatic shifts in the national and local political and policy landscapes, SCI had to constantly adjust and adapt, whether it was renaming the office three times, changing directorship four times, or recalibrating the policy focus from sustainability planning grants to resilience competition. These are also important tactics and insights for any entity (for example, nonprofit, public, or private) that works in the sustainability space in the United States. These are perhaps even more critical lessons for federal or state agencies, in which the layers of longstanding bureaucratic rules make it more difficult to host innovative initiatives that require more receptive organizational cultures. Even with its flexibility and continual policy adjustments, the SCI experience illustrates the skepticism that remains in many parts of the United States around the role of the federal government and the issues associated with urban and regional sustainability. The recent U.S. withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement reconfirms and reinforces these sentiments. From our interviews, this constant state of flux did take a toll on SCI leaders and staff and made it difficult to concentrate their energies and resources on the core mission of building intergovernmental capacity.

Another way of reflecting on SCI's legacy is to consider the wide range of future research that could uncover its ripple effects. For example, researchers should explore the long-term impacts from this large number of grantee applicants. Although it represents a huge interest and commitment at that time, how many of grantees leveraged the relationships and insights from their applications to launch a sustainability planning process or project without SCI resources? What research could be started now to identify and track the ripple effect of the SCI-RPG grantees' planning activities over time? Did these planning processes create a stronger community culture around collaboration and perhaps a more supportive political climate for sustainability? Did the SCI-supported activities lead to other changes in policies, codes, and programs? What impact did the emphasis on social justice and equitable development have on the grantees' organizations and communities? What economic impact can be traced from SCI supported activities? Did the grantees test and expand their new regional and urban planning tools, techniques, and capacities to other issues or to other communities? Did SCI cultivate an alumni network of grantees, staff, capacity builders, and leaders that are silently continuing about their work to build more sustainable communities and preparing for a day when future generations can reap the benefits from the seeds that were sown under the auspices of SCI? Such research would not only confirm SCI's policy legacy, but test the effectiveness of these place-based, capacity building initiatives.

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