
LIMITATIONS TO ORGANIZATIONAL AND LEADERSHIP PROGRESS IN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT: AN OVERVIEW

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From many different views, the modern community development movement is making strides as a community-based effort to revitalize distressed urban and rural places (NCCED 1991, 1999; Vidal 1996; Briggs et al. 1996). Born from the civil rights and antipoverty movements, the community development movement and its reliance on community-based development institutions to revitalize communities has accomplished much (Faux 1971; Pierce and Steinbach 1987). But even praising its successes reveals one of the prime weaknesses of community development: we do not know much about what we know. Community development corporations (CDCs)—a dominant community development force that has evolved over the past 40 years—now rank as the largest producers of affordable housing in the United States. Beyond that basic fact, we lack information regarding not only the impact but also the evolution of these entities as organizations (Berger and Kasper 1993; Ferguson and Dickens 1999).

Evidence exists that CDCs play a strong role in revitalizing neighborhoods across the country, but as a society, we have scant measure of benefits and costs associated with the dominant community development model. We know little about when and where the model should be used to assure the best and most effective intervention. We know little about the optimal organizational size for community development impact (Blakely 1990; Bratt 1997). We know little about recruiting and training patterns (Local Initiatives Support Corporation 2000; McNeely 1993, 1995). We know even less about staff tenure. In short, for a field that performs a significant function in our society, we do not have much information regarding the important aspects of how it functions (Rodriguez and Herzog 2003).

Recent community development research explains this lack of empirical knowledge as a by-product of a field that is more art than science (Zielenbach 2000). Far from being an academic argument, if community development is more art than science, it cannot make a compelling case to resource providers that it offers a dependable, effective revitalization strategy. Indeed, the state of limited empirical knowledge suggests that the field lacks a core set of principles and, further, the ability to replicate processes and outcomes from one period to the next. While these inferences seem logical enough, they are contestable and, therefore, should

be examined fully. It seems possible that community development's efficacy can be made clear to resource providers. To make this case, however, we must look at community development in a much different and more critical way. We also must establish a base of basic research that, arguably, should have been established some time ago (Keating, Krumholz, and Star 1996; Ferguson and Stoutland 1996).

This paper asserts a need for increased rigor and critical examination of the community development field. Many distinct community development problems benefit from critical examination, but none stands to benefit more than the current discussion regarding the crisis in human capital and building the capacity of CDCs (LISC 1999; Schwartz et al. 1996; Clay 1990; Glickman et al. 2000). There is a growing sense that a human capital crisis in community development limits the organizational capacity of CDCs (Bratt et al. 1994). The demands and expectations placed on CDCs by funders, intermediaries, and community residents grow at faster rates than can be satisfied. CDCs provide a variety of services ranging from real estate and economic development to family services such as day care and workforce development. This range of services leads to expectations that CDCs continually should expand their reach even with the reality of thin revenue streams and difficulty obtaining resources for operating support—the base for real organizational development. The prevailing hypothesis laments the creation of a significant number of undercapitalized, weak organizations. Further, the proliferation of new CDCs diverts resources away from existing organizations with management and capacity challenges (Rohe, Bratt, and Biswas 2003).

Aging leadership provides still another component of this crisis (Rodriguez and Herzog 2003). Many assert that the leadership structure in community development is aging and nearing a natural transition point. They fear that over the next few years many empty leadership positions will need to be filled from a shrinking pool of individuals. These commonly held assertions are not supported by a study that looks at the age structure and makes empirical judgments. If aging leadership is a problem, then through the use of data we can calibrate the extent of training needed to increase the talent pool without a scattered approach to the support of training programs (Rodriguez and Herzog 2003).

This paper argues the affirmative: a crisis of human capital confronts the community development field, but the crisis results from the manner in which the field has evolved (or not evolved). Specifically, after nearly 40 years, there has not been a transition from the art of community development to the science of community development (The Urban Institute 1996). In part, an internal limitation fears any movement away from the field's social-activist roots (Stoecker 1997; Dreier 1996; Bratt 1997). Supporters of this view see themselves combating the development of

a creeping technocracy and bureaucracy that renders community development impotent at the community level. They point to the perceived dominance of professionals and intermediaries with expertise in real estate and economic development instead of those with acute knowledge of, and passion for, the community. Many critics see community organizing as the only hope for revitalizing neighborhoods (Stoecker 1997). Community organizing, they maintain, empowers residents to hold the political system accountable for improving social services, housing, and other public policies that support a viable community. This extreme argument leads to circular reasoning. Progress, defined as the institutionalization and growing impact of a field, comes with knowledge and the development of field-specific tools, concepts, and practices. Without progress, community development remains at an unacceptable level of high passion and low impact. This argument also paints community development and community organizing as mutually exclusive. In reality, they are not.

At a macro level, community development has failed to evolve into a clearly defined field because of an uneven support base by all levels of government and society at large, tied to the dominant governing ethos (Ferguson and Stoutland 1996; LISC 1999). This ethos alternates between expansive and limited government. Without a consistent commitment, community development support and development activity resembles an ad hoc process that alternatively propels the field and limits stabilization and impact (Millennial Housing Commission 2002).

The rest of this paper examines some of the major organizational and leadership development faultlines in community development and argues for more analysis and rigor. No claim is made for the inclusion of all the faultlines. Rather, this paper distills major discussions central to the operational and intellectual life of community development.

THE ASCENDANCY OF TECHNICAL SKILLS

The modern community development movement can be traced to a number of social movements and what can be called the spirit of the times. If there is a “ground zero” in the community development field, it must be the events leading to the formation of the Bedford Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation in Brooklyn, New York. In early 1966, Senator Robert Kennedy took a tour of the predominantly African-American community that, like so many American communities in the mid-1960s, had gone through a period of community unrest linked to poverty, race, and political exclusion (Carlson and Martinez 1988; Schlesinger 1996).

During the tour, local African-American leaders challenged Kennedy to do something substantive about their problems. From this experience, Kennedy and his staff pursued a strategy combining self-help and linkage to power and capital structures beyond the community. They struggled to break the isolation of the community by linking it to centers of power and prestige that the community ordinarily would not have accessed (Perry 1973).

This experiment captured the attention of the nation as a way to address not only poverty but also social and political exclusion through community residents taking the lead in rebuilding their communities. The experiment received backing from foundations and the political, social, and economic elite in New York. Replication of this model across the country was not far behind.

The Brooklyn experiment, while unique in the measure of support and backing it received, was embraced by rural and urban communities, where marginalized people sought to change their circumstances. Senator Kennedy later sponsored and got federal legislation passed to support not only the Brooklyn experiment but also other such experiments (Carlson and Martinez 1988; Schlesinger 1996).

The leaders of the movement—in both devastated and privileged communities—realized that CDCs, like small businesses, need individuals who not only are able to capture the entrepreneurial spirit but also are capable of administering with a solid grounding in business principles. An impressionistic look at the early experiments indicates that CDCs led by these social entrepreneurs lasted longer than CDCs with leaders with other types of skill sets (Carlson and Martinez 1988; Halpern 1995).

A fair amount of failure marked early efforts. Community development was a new experimental wrinkle on traditional themes of community self-help and action. As Seessel (2003) argues, the foundation community—with the Ford Foundation in the lead—was a guiding force in supporting the research and development of this nascent field. The Ford Foundation helped formalize the infrastructure of the field by supporting the development of regional and national intermediaries. These intermediaries provide consistent technical support and limited core support (Seessel 2003).

The work of these intermediaries—some not created by Ford—has molded a promising experiment into a powerful example of how communities can refashion their circumstances. The birth of Neighborhood Housing Services, the Local Initiative Support Corporation, The Enterprise Foundation, and others presaged a move toward consolidation and institutionalizing the best of the early programmatic experiments (Seessel 2003).

The early movement struggled with economic development efforts. Much like the broader economy, shifting economies troubled the fragile efforts of small- to medium-sized efforts of CDCs. Many CDC workforce development efforts did succeed, but these efforts became specialized, transformed by the availability of federal funds into solely workforce development organizations. CDCs did perform well in the area of housing development (Carlson and Martinez 1988; Halpern 1995). With the advent of the Community Reinvestment Act and the Low Income Housing Tax Credit, coupled with the reduction of government support that came in the 1970s and early 1980s, housing development became the significant area of work for CDCs and their support organizations (Millennial Housing Commission 2002).

The often arcane field of housing development requires a great deal of background knowledge and skill to navigate. The “art of the housing deal” captured the attention of the community development field in the late 1980s to the mid-1990s. Critics point to a concurrent lessening of community development passion and the ascendancy of technical skill. In some quarters, critics state that the passionate, committed resident in a distressed community no longer can rise to leadership of a CDC and assist in community development (Stoecker 1997).

THE SEARCH FOR COMPREHENSIVENESS

The question of passion and direction in community development led to a range of foundation-sponsored efforts in the 1990s to put the community back in community development (Sviridoff and Ryan 1996; Brown 1996). The comprehensiveness movement purported to bring residents back into the equation by supporting their place as leaders of a wide range of planning and programmatic activity, all focused on comprehensive community development. Its base assumptions can be distilled in the following:

- Residents, not professionals, must drive community development.
- Residents know the problems of a community and will demand a comprehensive, integrative approach to community development.

The comprehensive community development movement proceeded along a path littered with undistinguished results (Sviridoff and Ryan 1996). Its experiments showed no particular benefit to community residents, regardless of the level of their involvement, if the residents do not possess the skills and experience to guide the community development process. A successful development process relies on professional skills and knowledge. Moreover, small, unorganized bands of well-

meaning individuals are of little use in the development process. Effective community development requires an organization with a paid staff devoted to forwarding the development process (Vidal and Gittel 1998; Sviridoff and Ryan 1996).

The limitations of trying to implement comprehensive community development present an important lesson, indeed, but this lesson was learned in the early days of the modern community development movement (Sviridoff and Ryan 1996). The problem today is unwillingness on the part of many to acknowledge that community development, if it is to succeed, cannot be viewed only as a social movement. Rather, community development, as it has evolved, mirrors representative democracy for all its negative and positive aspects. The evident difference in this analogy is that CDCs do not possess the same types of accountability functions (such as voting) that characterize representative democracy (Anglin 2000).

Does that mean community development success is predicated on development professionals the way political success in a representative democracy now is predicated on professional politicians? The evidence, diffuse as it is, indicates that community organizations using a representative model of governance are more likely to foster community improvement. The level of accountability and representation of a community's interest and voice is tied to normal elements of organizational life such as a strong board, competent leadership, and a clear mission and organizational values (Anglin 2000).

Community control and direction always will be a source of tension in community development, as they should be. But the idea of pure resident control of the community development process limits the effectiveness and impact of CDCs as agents of change and the reality that they must become enduring institutions to make a difference over time.

WEAK GOVERNANCE AND ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURES

Because CDCs subsist mainly on project support, they find it difficult to invest in human capital development activities such as developing professional staff, providing a defined benefits structure that covers retirement, devising strategic planning procedures, and putting in place organizational policies and procedures (LISC 1999, 2000; LISC's Organizational Development Initiative, 2000). Many CDCs still do not have written job classifications and crucial documents such as a personnel manual. Cash-flow statements and other financial information are critical to effective decisionmaking and organizational sustainability. If asked to produce monthly statements

of cash flow, many CDCs would not be able to do so in a timely fashion. If statements were produced, they likely would not be understood and grounded in fiscal reality (Clay 1990; Bratt et al. 1994; Millennial Housing Commission 2002). Weak and ineffective boards, operating under limited external accountability, also represent a continuing challenge (Anglin 2000; Bratt et al. 1994).

National intermediaries and local community development partnerships have invested much in addressing these weaknesses. Some voices assert that CDC proliferation dilutes the limited resources available to the field. A recent study examined the phenomena of CDC mergers and the benefits accruing to consolidation. Further work is necessary to discover if the CDC field is too large and is spreading resources too thin (Rohe et al. 2003). Beyond examining the question of consolidation, future studies must address the policy implications of choosing between groups if opting for consolidation.

RECRUITMENT, RETENTION, AND PROFESSIONALIZING THE FIELD

The field faces substantial challenges in attracting and retaining a strong workforce. Practitioners often cite the low prestige and visibility associated with the field. They speak of the field's identity crisis: do community development practitioners include real estate developers, entrepreneurs, community organizers, and bankers? As happens in other fields of practice, CDC practitioners express a significant desire to define the scope and standards of their practice, a crucial step in defining a profession. Community development lacks professional definition, resulting in the loss of talented people to professions with clearer identities. The field experiences difficulty in attracting new talent for the same reason.

Other factors in turnover include limited career ladders. The average CDC is small, with staff size totaling fewer than 10 individuals. Small organizations do not leave much room for career advancement. Combine this with CDC operating environments that often are hierarchical, socially isolating, and thinly capitalized, and the resulting workplaces are difficult to sustain for any considerable length of time (McNeely 1993, 1995). Although this latter point is speculative, the experiences of practitioners and funders provide its basis. An extensive search of the literature reveals that there are no studies on CDC organizational culture and its direct bearing on organizational capacity (Rodriguez and Herzog 2003). Lack of such studies can be traced to reticence on the part of funders to invest in "soft studies" when important work must be done in poverty-stricken communities. Nevertheless, we have reached an important juncture in community development. Studies of organi-

zational culture can assist all parts of the community development ecology learn to overcome some of the limits of organizational culture that now exist (Rodriguez and Herzog 2003).

AGING OUT: THE FIRST GENERATION OF CDC LEADERS

The idea that a layer of leadership is still in place, dating to the beginning of the CDC movement, has gained prominence in recent years, especially in the funding community, which fears a wave of retirement would limit the gains made by the CDC sector (Rodriguez and Herzog 2003). Coupled with a perceived lack of entry points for new CDC professionals, many observers voice concern that the CDC field faces a significant leadership crisis.

Another set of voices argues that some overstate the aging out of CDC leadership, saying observers who worry about the age of CDC leadership focus on a set number of visible CDCs with founding leaders. Important as some of those organizations are in their communities, they do not represent the majority of the field. Indeed, some would argue that they represent no more than a small percentage of the total organizations working in community development.

CDCs formed after 1980 may exhibit different tendencies in terms of tenure than their older colleagues. Born at the time of the major intermediaries, these organizations attracted a type of leader different than the charismatic leader during what might be termed the first phase of community development. Leaders in the first phase learned economic and housing development skills on the job, while in many cases, leaders of organizations after 1980 came to the field after careers in law, banking, the foundation world, and other allied fields. Better prepared for leadership, they possessed more career mobility than did their predecessors. If this line of thinking holds, the leadership crisis will be abated by a steady stream of career changers.

The continuing availability of career changers cannot be relied on. Career changers arrive in cycles and have options to go to other positions. Further, we do not know the number of career changers who opt for positions other than those at the executive level.

PEOPLE OF COLOR IN LEADERSHIP POSITIONS: IS THERE A SPECIAL PROBLEM?

The question of people of color in leadership positions has been bundled into the community development field's human capital crisis. On one side, critics say not enough people of color lead CDCs, an important problem given that CDCs operate

in distressed communities where people of color predominate. These voices also point to intermediaries and foundations that do not have people of color in significant leadership positions and ask the question: how can these institutions make decisions and implement strategies for these communities without representation from these communities?

The assertion that community development institutions need to reflect the communities they serve cannot be disputed, though some question remains regarding the extent of the problem. Though not documented in any study, some claim there is not much of a problem in the number of people of color leading CDCs. Those who do not see a problem argue that Whites lead many CDCs, but this is not representative of the field. Again, our state of knowledge renders this question unanswerable. If an imbalance in CDC leadership exists, then we need to understand the issue, though any such reality brings the very real question of what to do to introduce balance (Rodriguez and Herzog 2003).

Apart from the relevant question of representative CDC leadership is the related question of skills transference. Earlier, we argued that dilettantes have no place in community development, no matter how well meaning. Do CDCs and their support agencies, however, create opportunities for neighborhood residents to acquire development skills if they want to play an active role in community development? If they do not provide such opportunities in current practice, then they must develop strategies to help residents acquire the skills necessary for community self-help (Anglin 2000). Community colleges might provide this service. If a problem exists with lack of CDC leadership of color, one way to get more candidates into the pipeline would be through a ground-up skills-development strategy.

LEADERSHIP AND STAFF DEVELOPMENT

The CDC field prides itself on developing leaders through actual practice. Staff often learn development skills as they complete actual housing units or economic development projects. While necessary and valuable as a human capital development tool, on-the-job training neither produces leadership that can build strong, competent organizations nor, necessarily, leadership with programmatic innovation and vision (Glickman et al. 2000). Despite the field's near 40-year existence and the presence of intermediary organizations, leadership and staff development are random propositions.

The field could benefit from a level of standardization and rationalization of training efforts. In many cases, practitioners avail themselves of multiple training opportunities, but no standard exists from which to judge the relevance of training (LISC 1998).

CONCLUSION

Community development has evolved into a fairly mature field characterized by institutions and organizations that perform a solid service to low-income communities needing development. Community development has yet to demonstrate to funders and the general public that it has progressed from a social movement to a field that can articulate rigorous development principles undergirding the work of CDCs and intermediaries. Remarkably, community development still lacks a solid base of research knowledge that could clarify some of the organizational and leadership limits now facing the field.

Research on organizational challenges to the field is limited. Apart from philanthropy commissioning a few studies, a sustained research agenda has not examined the specific capacity challenges facing the community development field. In part, the field has been in growth mode, limiting research. Growth often clouds underlying problems. To date, funders have placed their resources in actual projects or programs, not research. Now that community development has reached a stage of maturity, the capacity challenges facing CDCs no longer can go unexamined by stakeholders in the field. Not addressing the capacity challenges means losing the gains made by this important part of the nonprofit sector.

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