

Maximum Feasible Self-Reflection: An Argument for a New Round of Comprehensive Community Initiatives

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The comprehensive community initiatives described in the overview essay represent a significant chapter in this country's overall efforts to improve the life prospects of residents in disadvantaged neighborhoods. The authors provide important lessons learned from these latest efforts, primarily from those "in the field" who designed and oversaw these initiatives. This commentary examines these initiatives from a broader historical context and more from the perspective of residents in the neighborhoods. Like the overview essay, my analysis is inductive and my recommendations designed to be provocative.

As the overview essay acknowledges, the comprehensive community initiatives of the last two decades generally have not placed issues of power imbalance, institutional racism, and social equity front and center in their work. They have used other language, such as strengthening "authentic demand," facilitating "shared decision-making," catalyzing "community capacity building," and establishing "family-centered and ecological, asset-based service systems." They generally have worked with, or at least sought to avoid confrontations with, community and state power holders. They often have viewed themselves as offering a trusted bridge between the power-holders in the larger community and the residents in the disinvested one.

The 1960s War on Poverty and Great Society comprehensive community initiatives more squarely and explicitly took on issues of race, class, and power and also is worth reflection. Established in the era of the civil rights movement, many stressed the "maximum feasible participation" of those within the neighborhoods as critical to community building. In establishing community action agencies as an organizational structure for community building and Model Cities as a flagship program, the federal government often intentionally bypassed state and local governmental structures.

Daniel Patrick Moynihan, an Undersecretary Secretary of Labor at the time, provided his assessment of the lessons as "*Maximum Feasible Misunderstanding*." That federal efforts ultimately moved away from that resident engagement and organizing has been well-documented. Moynihan's conclusion that maximum feasible participation was the cause and represented faulty social science, however, was critiqued at the time and to this day.

Some have argued it was incomplete application of resident engagement that produced the turmoil and inability to fully resolve it. Sherry Arnstein's "Ladder of Citizen Participation," for instance, suggested that the word "maximum" often extended within the existing power structure only to the level of tokenism. Robert Fisher's historical analysis of neighborhood organizing, *Let the People Decide*, and Arthur Himmelman's distinction between community betterment and community empowerment, both argued for the need to support resident leadership but to do so in ways to avoid co-optation and recognize and respond to confrontation.

The experiences from the 1960's and the 1990's suggest the importance, in future efforts, to learn from both these past efforts and, in particular, define the terms: "maximum", "feasible,"

and “participation.” Is “maximum” an open-ended concept that grows as resident capacity expands or is it to some predetermined level, beyond which the existing power structure retains control? Who defines “feasible” and how is that conveyed both to the current power structures and to those in the neighborhood who are considered to possess lack the expertise, resources, and management capacity to take on full participatory roles? What constitutes “legitimate participation,” and is a higher bar established for participation and leadership in disinvested neighborhoods than exists in larger society?

Given the absence of convincing, hard evidence of population-wide success from comprehensive community initiatives, it might be comfortable to conclude that the focus upon community building was misplaced. Instead, as Moynihan did, one could argue that employment or education initiatives to enable more residents to buy into the American dream is the more prudent course. This, however, misses the point. In looking forward as well as backward, my commentary argues for a new round of comprehensive community initiatives, based upon responses to four questions.

- Are Place-Based Approaches Needed to Close Gaps and Inequities?
- Are Comprehensive Community Initiatives Necessary within Those Places?
- Are There Different World Views That Must Be Addressed and Resolved?
- What Could Be Done Differently in the Next Iteration of Initiatives to Do It Better?

Are Place-Based Approaches Needed to Close Gaps and Inequities? Much has been written about the globalization of the economy, with community identity for professionals increasingly defined in associations that are not geographically bound. Still, this is a view largely from the top; the concentration of disinvestment and distress remains geographic. The *Clustering of America* has identified a variety of different geographic enclaves representing distinct political, social, and economic cultures. There is a great deal of mobility within these enclaves, but much less across them.

There are two very different American geographies within which the vast majority of Whites live, compared with where the majority of Hispanics, African American, and Native Americans live. Using the 2000 census, *Village Building and School Readiness* categorized all census tracts in the United States according to ten indicators of “child-raising vulnerability.” That analysis showed the profound differences in community characteristics across education, social structure, wealth, and income, with rates of adverse child and family outcomes from twice to eight times greater in higher vulnerability census tracts than lower risk ones.

Comparing the racial and ethnic composition of those census tracts with no vulnerability factors showed sharp racial and ethnic segregation. While 83.2% of Americans living in census tracts with no vulnerability factors were White, non-Hispanic, 82.6% of Americans living in census tracts with six or more vulnerability factors were of color (non-White or Hispanic or both). Fewer than one in fifty of all White, non-Hispanic Americans resided in the highest vulnerability census tracts, but one in five African Americans and one in four Hispanics did. These tracts are concentrated within America’s major metropolitan areas that have been the focus of many of the comprehensive community initiatives.

Whether community building initiatives are the solution, to close gaps in results across health, education, and economic disadvantage, at a minimum the residents in these geographic areas must be the disproportionate focus of attention.

Are Comprehensive Community Initiatives Necessary within Those Places? There are options for improving the lives of residents in disinvested neighborhoods that do not entail comprehensive community building work. In “The Myth of Community Development,” Nicholas Lehman even argues for giving residents an avenue out of these disinvested communities, not trying to rebuild them. There continue to be efforts to create functional oases within these neighborhoods – a charter school to improve educational opportunity, a youth engagement program to reconnect disconnected youth, an early childhood initiative to get children to school healthy and equipped for success, a pipeline initiative to link residents with regional job opportunities – that often do provide an avenue for upward mobility for some of those who participate.

At the same time, these sectoral approaches generally do not set their sights on closing the gap for the collective set of current residents (and their offspring a generation later) across health, education, income, and wealth outcomes with those found in larger society. There always has been some level of “upward mobility” within disinvested neighborhoods, but this frequently has left the neighborhoods themselves more impoverished. There clearly have been successes in rebuilding a geographic area, but often through removal of “unwanted elements” or the gentrification of the neighborhood itself.

If the goal is to improve the collective lives of those currently residing in disinvested neighborhoods, I do not know of an answer which does not involve community building. Ultimately, as a “Hopetown” scenario I developed based upon the demographics of a disinvested neighborhood showed, there must be attention to human, social, physical, and economic capital development to succeed.

From a knowledge building perspective, there are some questions whose answers only comprehensive community initiatives can address. Small-scale and targeted interventions in these neighborhoods may be successful in helping select residents grow (and perhaps escape the neighborhood), but these may be the result of getting these residents first in line for scarce resources and simply displacing disadvantage to others. Upward mobility can create some level of cognitive dissonance, as advancing can mean leaving relatives, friends, and social ties behind. Robin Jarrett’s sobering analysis of how families help their children escape such conditions is testament to a certain dysfunctionality inherent in such limited options. Alternatively, comprehensive community initiatives might offer the opportunity for creating the critical mass or tipping point for community growth that does not isolate those experiencing success away from the community but offers them opportunities to lead and grow the community itself. Comprehensive community initiatives might offer the opportunity for identifying what the investment needs truly are to rebuild neighborhoods, answering questions of scale, community impact, and resulting community-level returns-on-investment that Peter Edelman and Beryl Rabin and Michael Porter have raised.

Individually-focused services and supports always will be needed. Human service, education, housing, and employment programs all must improve. Yet these services tend to work least well

and have the least accountability to the people they serve in disinvested neighborhoods. Simply investing in services, and not in the support and development of human and social capital within those disinvested neighborhoods, runs the risk of perpetuating the self-defeating myth that people in disinvested neighborhoods cannot contribute to their own change.

In short, my answer is not whether we need a new round of comprehensive community initiatives, but whether we can learn from the experiences of prior rounds to develop an improved strategy for achieving success.

Are There Different World Views That Must Be Addressed and Resolved? Opinion research shows the vast majority of White Americans would like to put issues of racial discrimination behind and consider America as an egalitarian and post-racial society. At the same time, people of color see the world very differently. On a daily basis, they see themselves exposed to the vestiges of formal discrimination – in institutional racism and an unwillingness of White society to address obligations to truly create equal opportunity. Differences by race on almost all indicators of child and family well-being are profound and independent from differences by economic class, although both exist by geography.

Most of the comprehensive community initiatives described in the overview essay sought to work with residents in the neighborhoods and with the larger community that had the power to make most major funding and allocation choices. Therefore, understanding the differences in perspective that exist between these two worlds and working to reconcile them would seem to be essential to maintaining the engagement of both.

Often, however, that was not a fundamental and explicit part of the work, particularly in the initial engagement of the larger community. Such differences were left unspoken, with those managing the initiatives seeking to navigate around, rather than raise and provide a forum for addressing them. My iteration of some of these unspoken and therefore unresolved questions, that make it difficult to avoid “misunderstanding,” is shown in the Table on page 9.

As described by Ruby Payne in her *Framework for Understanding Poverty*, the “rules of the middle class” are not the same as the rules for those living in disinvested neighborhoods. Geoffrey Canada’s *Fist Stick Knife Gun* provides the perspective of one growing up in a neighborhood where acceptance of violence was a condition for personal survival. Further, some traits in disinvested neighborhoods toward sharing what little may be available is in contrast with a certain selfishness of the American middle class toward saving and sharing only within one’s own family. The dominant culture’s view of middle-class values is not necessarily the one upon which to build community in disinvested ethnic neighborhoods. Families may want to “win at the middle class game,” but not to give up other values that they own.

In terms of political power and leadership itself, there often is an implicit, higher standard established by the power holding community for accepting as legitimate neighborhood resident leadership than power holders apply to themselves. Finding and nurturing authentic leadership can mean nurturing those who will be compliant in buying into the initiative’s often shifting goals, not those who have their own views. Initiatives may dismiss certain resident leaders as

being self-promoting or biased, while they accept and work with power holders in the larger community who are just as self-promoting or biased.

While identifying and addressing these differences can be painful, explosive, and even counter-productive if not established within a setting to move forward, the issue is whether it is possible to achieve success without identifying and resolving these differences in world view.

The beginning of James Wright's *Native Son*, published seventy years ago, pointed to the tragedy that would unfold when Biggar Thomas looked toward the sky, saw a jet overhead, and mused on his opportunity to become the pilot. Ultimately, whether enough Geoffrey Canada's can be identified and provided avenues to leadership and power or whether we also must find ways to reach the Biggar Thomas's and support opportunities for them is a fundamental question that should be explored.

What Might Be Done Differently in the Next Iteration of Initiatives to Do It Better? People often learn more from their mistakes than their successes. The overview essay has provided some important lessons learned. The following are based upon my own experiences in observing and working with such initiatives.

- *Be frank at the outset about what is on the table to both residents and power holders.* In eagerness to start initiatives, funders often paint a picture that embraces a broad vision for success and skirts issues of power and control. The rhetorical loftiness can produce ambiguity about what is actually on the table and where decision-making lies. When funders and their technical assistance and project management staff discover points of dissension caused by such ambiguity, they may rework their theories of change and their expectations and goals, usually to maintain involvement of the community power structure and further educate resident leaders (or find a new set of such leaders). Being more clear in the beginning may make engagement of the existing community power structure more problematic, but doing so also would place the initiative on more solid ground to face and address underlying issues of race, class, and power that emerge.
- *Provide maximum feasible participation of the resident worldview in overall initiative planning and oversight and technical assistance.* There are many very smart people within foundations and their grantee organizations dedicated to community building. Usually, however, those guiding the initiatives have a worldview and life experience that comes from being successful in the dominant culture. While stressing participation of residents at the community level, the initiative's own planning and decision-making structures on how to allocate resources, offer technical assistance, and revise strategies often are made absent the same involvement of persons with worldviews more directly aligned with those of the communities in the neighborhood. While initiative developers may view themselves as "catalytic" agents, Maria Chavez has argued this is a misnomer. Initiative developers also need to be changed by the process as they work within communities. Restructuring the overall management of comprehensive community initiatives to incorporate those with resident worldviews would be a step toward this end.

- *Establish outcome expectations commensurate with the resources to be deployed.* There is increased emphasis upon results-accountability in all aspects of grant-making and public funding for social programs. Comprehensive community initiatives by their nature seek to impact important child and family outcomes on a geographic and population, as well as individual, level. The ultimate amount of investment that may be needed to transform disinvested communities – in human, social, physical, and economic capital development – is to some extent calculable simply by examining the gaps and changes needed and consequent logical investments to close them. So are the societal costs of doing nothing. If the goal of initiatives is to achieve such transformation, initiatives need to commit to securing the necessary investments to achieve their goals and, from the outset, give some attention to the economic scope of the endeavor they are undertaking. If their ability to commit resources is circumscribed, that should be acknowledged and goals reduced, accordingly. The issue of scale is critical to community initiatives but too often has been skirted.
- *Focus upon multiple avenues for the growth and development of community leaders.* Inevitably, comprehensive community initiatives seek to strengthen political leadership within the community. While existing resident leadership represents a necessary introduction into the community, it rarely is sufficient to accomplish the goals of community transformation. Many initiatives have sought to identify and nurture new leadership – focusing upon roles within the initiative for participation in planning, community education, and “authentic” community representation. This can include leadership programs and board recruitment and training efforts. As the overview essay suggests, what initiatives often have sought are leaders with qualities and characteristics that include charisma, management expertise, and an ability to gain the trust of and activate multiple constituencies. The challenge is that even affluent communities rarely have leaders that combine these talents of Mother Teresa, Machiavelli, and a certified CPA. Instead, affluent communities have multiple avenues and channels for individuals to exert effort, take on new roles and responsibilities, and gain credit, rewards, and credibility in their own areas of passion and spheres of influence. Reaching out to find one type of leadership within disinvested neighborhoods ignores the fact that leaders generally emerge from first assuming more focused contributing roles. Even if one finds an individual or individuals from the community with talents for community-wide leadership, placing them on governance structures without establishing a representational base denies them part of their needed representational legitimacy. Leadership comes from opportunity and not training. Explicit efforts to establish multiple opportunities for taking on leadership roles, particularly through mutual assistance and self help groups, offer the potential for diverse leadership and its social as well as human capital.
- *Be partners in the sense of a marriage and not a business relationship.* While some comprehensive community initiatives have established decade-long time frames for their involvement, the expectation generally is that the initiative will end. Help for developing sustainability plans may be provided from the funder, but the responsibility for sustainability ultimately rests with the grantee. If funders are to be more than catalysts and actually be changed by the process, however, the analogy to a marriage rather than a business relationship better signifies the needed type of partnership. This does not mean that there cannot be divorces. This does mean that each partner has certain commitments which

- *Work locally, advocate globally.* By definition, the disinvested neighborhoods that are subject to comprehensive community initiatives lack the economic and physical capital that exists in more affluent communities. They have the same innate human capital and the ability to establish social capital (if given the time, space, and opportunity to do so). Ultimately, however, they require economic capital from outside to build their physical, human, and social capital. At both the state and federal levels, many funding and taxing systems – for education, economic development, and infrastructure – actually disproportionately benefit the geographic “haves,” and not the “have nots.” Programs to ameliorate (or maintain) poverty and provide for social control – welfare programs, treatment services, and corrections – disproportionately are directed to residents in disinvested communities. The employment and economic opportunity from those investments, however, often goes to professionals outside the neighborhoods. If America is to become more economically egalitarian, a shift in this resource allocation is needed. Advocacy will be needed at all levels of government to create the political will to undo disinvestments in these neighborhoods. Investing in state and federal public education and advocacy is needed to create a sharing of power beyond the community to the state and federal levels, as well.

Some will take issue with these observations and recommendations. They may have tried some of these recommendations and have lessons to share about them. They may have developed alternative approaches they believed better able to achieve equivalent end goals. Hopefully, however, they will be stimulated in some way that causes self-reflection. I know I learn most when I am challenged, even though it is uncomfortable. My commentary has many more raised and unresolved questions than there are even tentative answers.

I do believe, however, that our country needs a new round of comprehensive community initiatives that starts with an honest reflection of what worked and what didn't in the past, and particularly what worked and what did not in securing “maximum feasible participation.”

We cannot change communities for the better in spite of the people who live there. We cannot change communities for the better by not facing the imbalances of power and different worldviews that exist. We cannot change communities without a willingness to change ourselves and share some of the power we hold. For at least a critical mass of advocates and scholars, there remains a commitment to comprehensive community building, but we need to learn from the past in shaping the future. If, in outcome accountability terms, “trying hard is not good enough,” as we contribute to the design of new comprehensive community initiatives, we must work to change our current grade of “incomplete” to at least a passing mark.

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**Two Views of Barriers and Pathways to Community Development:
Bridging Resident and Community Power Holder Views**

Resident Activist Views

Community Power-Holder Views

Legitimate Community Leadership

People who step forward and want change need to be recognized and heard. The neighborhood will decide who its leaders are (which does not require consensus or formal action).

We will not bow to the demands of self-anointed spokespersons for the community. We will recognize people who demonstrate they are legitimate, offer approaches that can gain consensus in the community, and understand and respect the decision-making rules by which we operate.

Resident Participation and Decision-Making

Those with the most at stake in the decisions being made should have a majority voice in the decisions. We are not here to be co-opted or to have people who are co-opted represent us.

As residents gain experience and decision-skills and knowledge of the current systems around which decisions are made, will ensure they gain increasing voice in those decisions.

Roles for Expertise

Professionals do not know us nor do they necessarily have our interests at heart. Part of the problem is that professionals are committed to retaining their authority and the status quo.

There is expertise and knowledge that needs to be respected and applied in decision-making, management, and service provision. We rely upon expertise and need to draw upon it rather than question it. We cannot go forward as a society without building and using that knowledge and expertise.

Accountability

We are accountable to our people and their goals and aspirations. We do not accept accountability that is based upon following rules, particularly those designed for reasons of social control and maintaining the status quo.

We cannot make investments that do not adhere to accepted rules and procedures and meet the conditions upon which they are provided. We need to be accountable for showing public funds were used appropriately, including monitoring and record-keeping.

Racism, Classism, and Discrimination

Racism, classism, and discrimination are at the root of our poverty. Power-holders need to accept their role in keeping us down.

We need to get beyond issues of race and discrimination. We need to make sure there is equal opportunity today, not dwell on the past.

Personal Initiative and Responsibility

We need collective actions and responses. Our people are ready; it is institutions that hold us back.

People must accept personal responsibility and develop their skills and move up the ladder through hard work. We will provide a hand-up, but not a hand-out. There is a culture of poverty that exists that doesn't accept this personal responsibility, which is a precondition for success in American society.

Source: Bruner, *Reshaping the advocacy direction in poverty reduction: Bridging individual and community strategies*