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Community-Building: From Local Wisdom to Public Policy

SYNOPSIS

The authors argue that social changes have caused the rupture of communal life in our neighborhoods and that the answer is community-building: strengthening communities holistically, fostering participation and problem-solving, addressing issues of bigotry and poverty, and engaging institutions to work as partners with residents.

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The powerful forces of globalization, technology, and demographic change shaping our world have had a profound impact on our democracy. The forces of globalization have weakened many civic and governing institutions as the economy has become less connected to place and more difficult to regulate, breaking ties between community and economy and limiting people's ability to govern and control their lives.

Information technology is rapidly changing how we communicate, even live, with each other. While offering multiple benefits, new technologies make it easier to do more in the comfort and convenience of our own homes, further separating neighbor from neighbor.

Demographic change, which has made the country more racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse, is exacerbating the eroding sense of community and connectedness in America. While this diversity provides a rich, vibrant culture, it also means that because of difference, ignorance, and sometimes racism and bigotry, people must work harder to connect.

In the midst of these changes, the social contract is being rewritten in ways that undermine societal obligation and notions of interdependence and community. When we invest disproportionately in prisons to lock up able but neglected young men of color rather than in their education and development; when we limit public assistance even for families whose poor circumstances are clearly beyond their control, and when we end public support for new immigrants, we are distancing ourselves from values of communal responsibility.

The abandonment of societal obligation toward the poor, weakened social institutions, and absence of community have contributed to Americans' disengagement from public life and politics. Indeed, for many, public policy has become unfamiliar and irrelevant, complicated, inaccessible, and confusing. Often those who do think public policy is important feel ineffective in influencing major decisions as the focus of policy discussions becomes more about demonstrating economic efficiency than about promoting the common good and the well-being of families and communities.

The challenge for the future is to create a new public policy paradigm that promotes the common good; builds relationships across "race," ethnicity, class, generations, and geography; strengthens effective institutions; and encourages resident engagement in civic life. In short, we must build community.

THE PROMISE OF COMMUNITY-BUILDING

Central to community-building are developing a strategic vision and building the capacity to solve not only the problem at hand but new ones as they arise. To craft solutions, reformers must pinpoint a community's strengths and bolster existing institutions while building new ones.

In poor communities, where the community-building movement is taking hold, strategic activity and hope have displaced despair as residents apply a "back to the future" approach to tackling persistent poverty. Savvy urban reformers believe that solving the immediate problems is not enough; to sustain improvement, more is required. To them, community-building is not a program, but an approach.

Community-building principles. Community-building means policies that reinvest in communities, are sensitive to the particularities of place, build and sustain social capital, promote community participation, and strengthen families and neighborhoods. These are the basic tenets of community-building:

- *Strengthen communities holistically.* In other words, support all aspects of community living, including economic opportunity, affordable housing, safety and security, youth development, transportation and utility industries, health care, early childhood services, and education, rather than target bits and pieces of the community puzzle.
- *Build local capacity for problem solving and build relationships between communities and resource institutions.* Community organizing is at the heart of community-building. Policies should encourage organizational development and create linkages and partnerships between community organizations and other institutions. They should recognize the value of community assets, strengthen these, and invest in building more.
- *Foster community participation in policy development and implementation.* This can be done through community planning, alternative governance structures, and new financing methods that allow local authorities and even neighborhoods to have a say in the deployment of resources.
- *Deal explicitly with issues of "race" and ethnicity and their role in creating social and economic deprivation.* The face of poverty remains disproportionately African American and Latina(o). Community-building efforts seek to level the playing field and create equitable outcomes for all groups.
- *Break down the isolation of poor communities.* Community improvement should be viewed in the context of the broader region. Neighborhoods must be linked to the larger context of regional development.
- *Tailor programs to local conditions.* The most effective solutions to local problems come from within the community itself, and steps must be taken to engage the community in local problem-solving.
- *Build accountability mechanisms so efforts are tied to community standards.* This enables communities to maintain improvements and monitor the progress they are making toward achieving a better quality of life.

Examples of community-building efforts. In Savannah, Georgia, the Savannah Youth Futures Authority (YFA) has changed the relationship between the commu-

nity and public agencies, finding ways to effectively meld public resources and community assets to improve the well-being of children and families. One example of their accomplishments is the Family to Family initiative run by the Department of Family and Children's Services. Working with and listening to YFA and residents, the Department trained neighbors to help county workers determine the best response to reports of abuse and neglect. The community established emergency homes where children could go until family problems were resolved. The Family to Family Initiative has reduced foster care placements by 25% over the last two years.

The Department, however, did not stop there. Last year, in a joint effort with the Housing Authority of Savannah and some senior citizens, the Department added another layer of community support. In one public housing unit, there is now a Granny House where children can get care from senior citizens while a parent is getting treatment for a drug addiction or a health problem.

Another example of community-building principles in action is happening in Boston. There, the Ten Point Coalition, an ecumenical group of Christian clergy and lay leaders formed in 1995 in the wake of increased gang-related killings, engaged residents and the Boston Police in crafting a new, citywide Strategic Plan for Neighborhood Policing, which had specific goals and objectives tailored for each neighborhood. One feature of the new neighborhood policing strategy is that it keeps the same cops working in the same neighborhoods, allowing police to work with the community to resolve local problems through local solutions. Together, the police and community focused on prevention and youth development, and created youth leadership and summer jobs programs. They also worked to recreate the culture of the old neighborhoods, in which police officers first try to take troublemaking kids to responsible adults rather than to juvenile hall.

In collaboration with the judicial system, the coalition developed court advocacy and mentoring programs for juveniles in which advocates and ombudspersons work closely with probation officers, law enforcement officials,

and youth streetworkers to assist at-risk youth and their families. The coalition also acts as a referral service for alternative community-based programs for juvenile offenders, and has created a curriculum for fathers who get into trouble with the law that emphasizes the importance of the role of a father and how to perform that role responsibly.

The cumulative effect of this community-building approach has been astounding. For an incredible streak from July 1995 to December 1997, not one juvenile (16 years old or younger) was murdered by a firearm in the city of Boston. In contrast, in 1994, six juveniles were murdered in the city. During the latter half of 1996, the number of gun-related murders of residents younger than age 25 plummeted by 65%. In 1996, 35 fewer people died violently than in 1995, dropping the overall murder toll by 36%, its lowest point in three decades.

If community-building principles are fully embraced, policy making itself becomes a community-building process because community residents will be involved in every step, from framing the issues to interpreting the data and discussing the options.

INCORPORATING COMMUNITY- BUILDING PRINCIPLES INTO PUBLIC POLICY

The challenge. If community-building principles are fully embraced, policy making itself becomes a community-building process because community residents will be involved in every step, from framing the issues to interpreting the data and discussing the options. Approaching policy in this way could bring isolated and fragmented movements for change to scale, moving results from years of experimentation and innovation into policies. But, first, there are barriers to remove, including: eroding public will for equity and inclusion; declining resources devoted to poor families and communities;

limited capacity in many communities and institutions for solving problems; and incomplete knowledge about what works and how to bring successful methods to scale.

Despite its promise and a growing constituency, the insights of community-building have not been incorporated into public policy. At the local, state, and federal levels, policies and programs intended to improve lives



are still imposed, for the most part, from the top down and fail to build on valuable insights and participation from community residents and practitioners. Place-based community development strategies still conjure up bricks and mortar, and do not focus enough on people. Probably most important, existing public programs are not strategically designed to build a community's capacity to solve its problems.

How would applying community-building principles make a difference in policy design? Unfortunately, there aren't many examples of large-scale policy initiatives that have truly incorporated community-building. One of the few examples is the Healthy Start initiative, a government-funded program launched in 1991 that seeks to lower high infant mortality rates. Acknowledging that the traditional medical approach to the problem is not adequate to address the complexity of factors that cause babies to die before their first birthday, Healthy Start incorporates a community involvement component that enables community participation in the shaping and devising of strategies to combat the problem. More than 90 Healthy Start initiatives around the country address the problem of infant mortality through this approach.

Welfare reform is an area of policy that could greatly benefit from community-building insights. Informed and grounded policy analysts have long recognized the value of community supports in maintaining people in jobs. Many of the problems associated with finding and keeping work emanate from community-level issues—such as lack of child care, inadequate transportation, absence of support for the work lifestyle in the immediate environment—that are beyond the capacity or purview of welfare departments. Incorporating a community-building approach into welfare policy would focus on the well-being of families and communities, not just on reductions in welfare rolls.

Goal 1: Build public will. The first step in creating a new policy philosophy is to build the public will to support it. Americans have become cynical, believing that nothing can be done to eliminate poverty. This cynicism can and must be combated by highlighting the promising and successful efforts being tried in communities. An effective media strategy that showcases stories of community-building successes must be employed. The proliferation of television news programs and magazine formats offers tremendous opportunities to communicate messages about these successful efforts.

In addition, building public will means correcting the misperceptions that have taken hold through inconsistent past reporting. Prosperity is limited and concentrated,

while inequity is pervasive and rampant. Media outlets are not revealing these vast inequalities. Accurate knowledge is a necessary policy foundation. For example, perceptions about people on welfare are very different from reality: despite what most people think, the majority of welfare recipients are not African-American women saddled with several children.

Goal 2: Expand resources, engage more partners. Scaling up promising community-building efforts requires more resources and more partners invested in community-building. Many of the community-building efforts around the country have relied heavily on philanthropy and on patching together various public and private funding streams. It is time to take advantage of policy opportunities at the national, state, and local levels to expand the resources that support community-building initiatives.

At the same time, efforts to build local capacity should encourage organizational development that connects community organizations to new partners and builds new relationships. Many social institutions that work with communities are recognizing that they are no longer structured effectively to meet the challenges facing communities. They are, therefore, building new relationships across traditional boundaries of geography and sectors in order to find new governing and administrative structures that work. We see examples of this in public housing, human services, and health care. Effective efforts, however, are still few and far between.

Goal 3: Enhance community power. It is not enough just to open powerful institutions to resident and practitioner voices. To achieve sustainable changes in public policy, community-building practitioners and their allies must be more forcefully engaged in policy development and implementation. Community residents must be integral to framing issues, fashioning and implementing strategies, monitoring progress, and participating in governance of policy initiatives.

This goal requires several steps:

1. To increase the level of civic engagement and political participation among community residents, communities need more knowledge about the process and substance of policy. This helps ensure greater understanding of the importance and relevance of their participation. Many in the faith community, labor, and others are already working hard to do this.
2. Strong networks of community-builders and organizations must be built with a shared vision, strategy, and

capacity for developing, influencing, and implementing policy based on a community-building framework. This will require building relationships and coalitions among a broad range of constituents: organized labor, the faith community, community development organizations, and ethnic organizations, among others.

3. A serious investment in building the capacity of local constituents in policy analysis, advocacy, and communications is required. Many community organizations focus on direct services and lack the resources and the analytical tools and information to act proactively on policy questions.
4. Local leaders with broad vision, commitment, and experience in building community are solving our most difficult challenges. They are national leaders. The world needs to know about them and their work; they need bigger platforms to function as national leaders.

Goal 4: Build knowledge. Information and knowledge are critical to effective policy development and implementation. We must develop an extensive body of knowledge about community-building successes and gain support for community-building as a viable field of study in the academic community. Lessons must be disseminated broadly and made accessible to both professionals and the general public.

Traditional research methods are not very applicable to multilayered, comprehensive community initiatives,

and often do not provide timely information for effective program development and policy advocacy. Researchers are now developing new ways to capture information about what is working in community-building. These efforts must be supported and continued.

Ultimately, the goal is not only to learn and teach more about community-building, but also to build local capacity for analysis, problem-solving, and policy development. This type of knowledge-building must be strategic, timely, and designed to engage broad community participation. This requires investing in policy analysis and research that embraces community-building principles, recognizing that community residents and practitioners, not just researchers, are key in diagnosing problems and in developing policy solutions.

CONCLUSION

The themes discussed here, like community-building itself, need to be explored in much more depth. In communities that are engaged in community-building, the excitement about the new approaches is evident, but the challenges are many. Once again, there are no easy answers. The resources are too few, the partners too limited, the victories too new, the broader society too impatient, and bureaucracies too intransigent. Still, if solutions are to be found and sustained, the starting point must be with people in the context of the places where they live. It is a struggle, to be sure, but one that deserves societal investment, scholarly investigation, and policy exploration. ■