Community-Rooted Organizations: Enhanced Accountability and Capacity Building for Community Development

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Communities in Partnership, in Durham, North Carolina, uses a "community-rooted" approach to its work that leverages community residents' expertise and resources, as an alternative to "community-based" organizations that can marginalize community voice, limit capacity building, and neglect the underlying causes of community conditions.

Communities in Partnership[1] (CIP), a nonprofit organization in Durham, North Carolina, addresses the structural barriers that impact low-wealth communities of color across the social determinants of health. They center the experience and expertise of those most affected by negative neighborhood conditions and focus on supporting the self-determination of community members. While working with other community-based organizations, CIP leadership observed practices that perpetuated stereotypes, used the neighborhood's historic disinvestment to obtain resources that did not benefit community residents, and blocked policy interventions that may have aided residents. Recognizing that overly broad application of the label "community-based" can hinder meaningful leadership, access to resources, and positive outcomes, CIP began defining their approach as "community-rooted" to reflect their commitment to dismantle systematic racism through liberative community development practices.

The first seeds of CIP grew from the East Durham community's response to a shooting. Thankfully, there were only minor injuries, but residents were unhappy with the official governmental response that suggested residents should limit their time outside, secure their homes, and run to and from their vehicles. The founders of CIP proposed a different pathway to create a safe, diverse, and vibrant community, which required the collective effort of people living and working in East Durham. Although community-based organizations were working to improve their neighborhood, CIP believed there was a pressing need to depart from charity models and hierarchical power dynamics, and leverage the expertise and resources of long-time residents.

Community-based organizations (CBOs) can provide or subsidize programs and services that are more efficient, culturally aware, and geographically convenient than those offered by government. Yet shifting social safety-net responsibilities to the private sector without sufficient resources can contribute to lower pay and greater uncertainty for employees, competition, and the loss of public-service character and service delivery in favor of administrative professionalization (Baines, Cunningham, Campey and Shields 2014; Alexander 1999). For example, a regional organization received a grant for over $800,000 for a community-based program to address literacy using the demographic profile of the East Durham community. Despite the funding secured on their behalf, residents, local organizations working on literacy, and other community-based organizations were not partners in the grant. Public awareness about programming and services linked to this grant remains limited.

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[1] Website: https://communitiesinpartnership.org.

As intermediaries, CBOs can build coalitions with local agencies or other organizations to access or exchange resources and avoid the duplication of efforts (Frasure and Jones-Correa 2010; McQuarrie and Krumholz 2011). They may also inaccurately translate community values, promote their own organizational survival at the expense of community priorities, or neutralize the more radical agendas of other organizations (Glaser, Parker and Payton 2001; Stoecker 1997). For example, early in a collaboration with CIP to address potential displacement associated with a new multi-use trail, a partnering group sought funding from local organizations and national foundations by suggesting that CIP lacked the capacity to hold effective meetings, build relationships with community members, or shape an advocacy agenda, despite a track record in these areas. Using a deficit model to secure funding undercut this nascent coalition and slowed funding to the initiative.

Finally, while CBOs may raise awareness and help organize residents to appeal to local government, this consolidation of political power with nonelected representatives removes an important safeguard (Levine 2016; Marwell 2004). In Durham, one community organization with a history of shaping local policy through advocacy pushed the city to adopt participatory budgeting even as community members in historically Black neighborhoods voiced concern about the format and the potential shrouding of existing disparities under a veneer of equitable development. While participatory budgeting brought important resources to the school system and the housing authority, it also reinforced disillusionment as residents questioned whether social networks influenced funding; some community proposals were eliminated as infeasible without explanation, and all three of the city's wards received the same funding amount despite differing histories of disinvestment.

In sum, CBOs can play crucial roles in program and service delivery; in mediating relationships with local institutions; and in direct action to influence local policy. However, without careful attention to equity in process, practice, and outcome, they can also marginalize community voice, limit capacity building, and neglect the underlying causes of community conditions.

CIP shaped a community-rooted approach to community development to amplify the lived experience of residents and to address challenges around accountability and decision-making experienced by some community-based organizations. The approach utilizes governance structures, decision-making practices, and strategies that reinforce accountability, enhance community ownership, and emphasize systems-level change. A community-rooted organization may be nonprofit, for-profit or faith-based, formal or informal. The key is that its mission, vision, and day-to-day operations center on those most affected by community conditions.

A systems approach to community change

CIP's early efforts around community building centered on monthly potluck dinners, which, along with community canvassing, highlighted issues of food insecurity including the stigma, lack of choice, and lack of nutritional options associated with food pantries and banks, and the limited proximity to full-service grocery stores. Initial interventions progressed from organizing transportation to stores and subsidizing food purchases to creating a community co-op. Prior to Covid-19, the co-op's structure enabled families to access $350–$500 of fresh food and dry goods for $5 per month. Responding to the increased need from the pandemic, members now have access to $500–$650 of fresh food and shelf staples for the same contribution. Becoming a co-op member requires racial equity training and ongoing community-led conversations on the history of oppression linked to food production, the linkage between health disparities and food access, and how to advocate for the access and funding needed to make community-identified goals a reality. Co-op owners determine how the market can best serve the community, decides what items the co-op stocks, and helps direct the agreements and relationships with the farmers. The co-op now sources 80% of its fresh fruits and vegetables from black and brown farmers to help address racial and economic inequity within the larger food system.

Community-rooted organizations use a systems approach to change because the problems they address are, by definition, "wicked problems" (Rittel and Webber 1973). Community development issues are interrelated with multiple problem formulations and solutions. There is no single correct solution as any solution will generate additional concerns. In our experience, economically and racially marginalized communities are predisposed to be systems thinkers because their lives are full of interconnected feedback loops that undermine linear problem solving. It is not enough to provide a job opportunity (even if it is a living-wage job) if other services (e.g. housing, healthcare, adequate healthy foods, affordable energy) remain out of reach. It is residents' local knowledge about the components and connections of systems that informs a community-rooted organization's vision, mission, and community development strategies.

Equitable engagement

To be accountable to a broad cross-section of the community, community-rooted organizations layer engagement techniques and involve residents in decision-making processes at multiple levels. CIP combines formal approaches (e.g. porch-to-porch canvassing; town-hall meetings; racial equity trainings; strategic planning sessions) and informal interactions (i.e. block parties and potluck gatherings) to promote transparent communication and ongoing participation in the organization's agenda-setting and policymaking. This bidirectional exchange of information ensures CIP's work is communicated within the community and the organization receives guidance and feedback from residents. Different engagement opportunities and approaches allow residents to tailor the level of their participation and time commitment. As a result, these interactions move beyond awareness or consultation activities to engagement in the organization's mission, programs and services, and advocacy activities (Rowe and Frewer 2000).

While training and credentials bring crucial information and analyses to community development, there is a tendency to discount the expertise of community residents in understanding their own circumstances (Corburn 2005). Community-rooted organizations recognize that individuals with undervalued skill sets that are difficult to quantify or who lack professional credentials must have opportunities that acknowledge their talent and capabilities. Their asset-based approaches match existing skill sets with organizational activities and provide access to training, career development, and coaching to build leadership capacity. These opportunities vary in their time commitment and level of responsibility, and include payment at a living wage. The flexible opportunities meet community residents where they are, provide support for individual leadership development, and recognize that unpaid volunteer work is a barrier to participation, particularly in low-wealth communities.

Organizational leadership and operations

CIP's leadership is directly impacted by racist or classist policies because their leaders reflect their neighborhood's demographics. The staff responsible for the day-to-day operations are accountable to their neighbors because they are from the community, live within the community, or have substantial ties to the community. Overall, 95% of the board of directors are community residents, 90% identify as people of color, and 80% live close to, at, or below the poverty level. An additional advisory board of individuals representing the categories often recruited to serve on boards (i.e. attorneys, financial specialists, nonprofit professionals) assist CIP's board of directors, but do not have legal responsibility or voting power. They earned the trust of board members and community residents, and understand their role in transferring power and resources to CIP and the residents it serves.

Most, if not all, community-based organizations include community members on governing or advisory boards, but having community representation in leadership or among the organization's

staff does not prevent an organization from creating hierarchies built on socioeconomic status, education, and/or identity that perpetuate inequality. Community-rooted organizations limit unequal power dynamics through numerical representation and a commitment to make decisions through consensus. Community residents most affected by community conditions make up the majority of the board and use a consensus approach to build ownership and commitment. As a result, residents most affected by a community-rooted organization's action (or inaction) are better able to shape the organization's direction. Consensus decision-making acts as a check on the power of influential individuals or powerful coalitions.

In conclusion, while their structure and operating procedures address some identified limitations in community development work (Alexander 1999; Arnstein 1969; Silverman, Louis Taylor, Yin, Miller and Buggs 2019), it is the dedication to making systems change and altering power dynamics that guide the day-to-day operations of community-rooted organizations. Community-rooted organizations are not a panacea for the challenges faced by community-based organizations. Funding mechanisms, political pressure, and incomplete power transference have constrained previous attempts to alter community development work within stratified systems. Instead, community-rooted organizations represent a model that builds on lessons from community-based organizations. These groups deserve greater financial and institutional support to explore this evolution in community development work.

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