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Understanding Factors Contributing to Community Change

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Understanding Factors Contributing to Community Change

Cover Page Footnote

A Report from the CDS Fellows Initiative. Contributing authors: Daniel Kahl, PhD, and Kristina Hains, PhD, University of Kentucky

Bringing Effective Long-term Changes to Communities

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Helping communities adjust to changing demographic and economic conditions has challenged local leaders for many years as they experimented with a variety of approaches and tools but encountered difficulties bringing about the transformations needed to bring lasting results. Several principles are known to be essential in the transformation process including engaging a cross-section of residents in forming a common agenda with metrics and follow through on outcomes (Walzer and Weaver 2018).

Frustration with being able to achieve lasting results was experienced by both local leaders and agencies that have funded numerous programs and strategies. Many funding agencies are relatively small and lack internal expertise on the change process. Consequently, they fund local agencies with specific projects that ultimately may not bring about the lasting changes desired. However, even large funders sometimes have difficulty achieving and documenting desired outcomes.

Further complicating the discussions is a lack of consensus regarding types of metrics that best measure desired changes, even though this information is crucial to adjusting strategies used in the communities. Research on this topic continues as researchers and practitioners try to find new approaches to monitor the local processes used and how they can be improved (Walzer, Leonard, and Emery 2016)

The Community Change Network (CCN) includes university faculty, professional agencies, and foundations/nonprofits engaged in community development. It started from grants by the North Central Regional Center for Rural Development (NCRCRD) to help practitioners understand factors

underlying change processes. This collaboration of scholars and practitioners enables CCN to apply what has been learned to effective practices. By focusing on opportunities, challenges, and barriers facing communities, CCN helps scholars and practitioners understand both the change initiatives and themes leading to successful outcomes.

This issue of *Community Development Practice* describes efforts by the CCN to define community change processes more clearly and help practitioners use effective practices to achieve desired outcomes. It summarizes findings from surveys of practitioners and funding agencies as well as describes contributions to the scholarly literature regarding factors contributing to successful community change efforts.

The discussion begins with an operating definition of community change followed by findings from past CCN research activities. For current purposes, Community Change is defined as:

Community and Economic Development approaches which include design and launch of initiatives, facilitation of strategic efforts, and development of shared measurement systems in an effort to sustain and scale long-term systemic change and impact in the community in keeping with the Principles of Good Practice, as identified by Community Development Society <http://comm-dev.org/component/k2/item/86-principles-of-good-practice>.

While this definition is broad, it summarizes the intents and/or interests of many CCN participants and local public officials engaged in similar endeavors so it drives the CNN research and fact-finding activities. The main purpose is to be a “go-to” resource for communities and organizations involved in or seeking to engage in community change initiatives. CCN materials can avoid the need to re-invent the wheel when practitioners learn from past experiences in designing and moving forward with their efforts.

CCN Activities

Starting in 2010 the CCN has pursued several key initiatives to help understand effective change practices.

Community Change Resource Bank (CCRB). CCN created a Community Change Resource Bank (www.ruralxchange.net/communitychange) to provide information on promising practices. The CCRB includes case studies, research, and promising strategies related to community change and provides an easily accessible source of information for both practitioners and researchers. It includes a searchable data base and provides opportunities for users to insert best practices, case studies, or other materials regarding innovative practices.

As convener, host, and clearinghouse, the CCRB concept has three goals:

- a. help maintain a vibrant network of community change practitioners, researchers, and funders working together to coalesce knowledge

fragments into an interdisciplinary framework to exchange, learn, and build a constant stream of community change materials;

- b. use that network and knowledge to provide a clearinghouse of resources and matchmaking that connects those needing community change support with those who can provide the specific help needed that can; and
- c. promote and spotlight the practice of community development and the measurable impact it can have on a community's health and well-being.

CCN members offer a robust go-to source of multidisciplinary problem solvers and innovators in the complex and ever-evolving work of community change. Our passion is to transfer that knowledge and help communities expand their capacity to being more resilient and improving the quality of life for residents.

Survey of Training Needs. Bringing successful long-term changes to communities requires informed local leaders and participants in the change process. Today's rapidly changing and globally connected world creates new challenges as communities are affected by many complex forces beyond their immediate control (Walzer and Cordes 2017). Increasing local capacity to understand and react in ways that bring systemic and long-term change is crucial in effectively anticipating and responding to these changes. This capacity sometimes does not exist locally.

In 2017, CCN participants and past presidents of the Community Development Society (CDS) surveyed community development practitioners and researchers on the roles of community development in sustaining local vitality and change. The survey, conducted between May and July of 2017, had 96 respondents, many of whom had worked in community development for more than 20 years.

The respondents include:

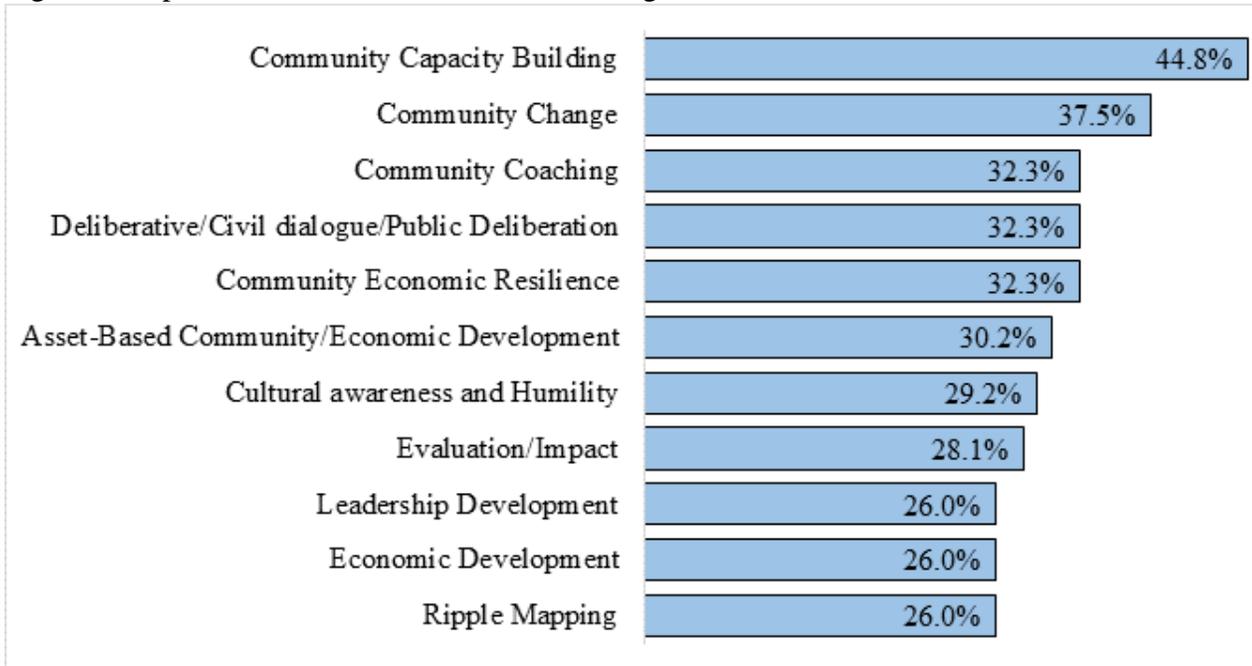
- 63% practitioners (Extension educators¹, work for community-based organization, etc.);
- 13.5% teaching faculty;
- 10.4% researchers; and
- 12.5% who checked the "Other" category.

Survey respondents are employed by the following entities:

- 77% - University, college or community college;
- 3% - Local, state, county, provincial, national, or other government entity;
- 5% - Not for profit organization;
- 4% - Self-employed;
- 2% - For profit organization;
- 1% - Retired
- 7.3% - Other

¹ "Extension" refers to University-based faculty and regional educators whose primary responsibility is to engage with community leaders and residents on a wide range of community development topics.

Figure 1. Topics of Interest for Additional Training*



*For simplicity, excludes subjects mentioned by less than 25% of responses.

Source: Community Change Survey, June 2017

Respondents differ in reported training needs but focused on several topics (Figure 1). Most often reported were community capacity, community change, Asset-Based Community Development, community coaching, community economic development, and community economic resilience. These subject areas are often included within systemic and holistic community development approaches known to be effective in bringing lasting changes.

Other topics with significant interest include conflict resolution, deliberative and civil dialogue/public deliberation, cultural awareness, environmental issues, and similar topics. These issues speak to some of the changes and conflicts happening around the world as cultures mix and passionate voices struggle to be heard. Fortunately, work by CCN members and other groups apply to issues and efforts to change them in many locations.

Exceed Program. The CCN also helps practitioner groups create demonstration programs. A recent CCN product rollout was the “Building Local Prosperity” engagement model developed by the ExCEED program at University of Missouri Extension (<https://extension2.missouri.edu/programs/exceed-community-economic-and-entrepreneurial-development>). The program incorporated research and outreach activities by Network members in its design.

Survey of Small-Medium Size Foundations. Insights into funding sources for change projects and expectations are needed since successful community changes usually rely on funding to start and manage initiatives. This support often comes

from local community foundations. As noted previously, small and mid-size foundations are sometimes frustrated by a lack of lasting successful outcomes from their investments.

In 2018, CCN members, working with the Kansas Association of Community Foundations (KACF), surveyed 150 small to mid-size community foundations to determine how they measure returns on investment and their perceptions of how applications could be better prepared or can more effectively manage the local efforts.

While based on a small sample size (32), findings suggest several key points, even though the sample size is not sufficient to generalize at this time. The respondents are, by and large, community foundations rather than family foundations. They serve both small communities and metro areas in their region. Most are endowed with restrictions regarding awards but approximately one-third are mostly endowed and not restricted as to awards. Most responding foundations (87.5%) reported funding local private groups, nonprofits, or organizations, and several reported funding more than one of these agencies. Respondents are evenly divided regarding whether they have defined grant-making goals that include community change projects; they do fund projects typically associated with community change. These topics include asset-building and protection; community economic development; community leadership; and nonprofit sustainability and effectiveness. These are among the most common purposes based on practitioner survey responses.

The CCN plans to link with other community foundations across the U.S. to continue a dialogue about tracking investments in community change projects and related efforts. Many foundations, especially small and medium size, reported a limited understanding of actual long-term impacts and would welcome a common set of measures. To that end, prior to the 2012 CDS Conference in New Orleans, CCN held a meeting of representatives from foundations to expand on this topic including ways to support their efforts. Small and mid-size foundations can gain the most from this research. Several important issues were identified in the foundations survey.

Obstacles to Change. Core to CCN interests is to understand the factors that block or limit community change efforts, and foundation survey respondents reported the following key issues:

- Lack of funding;
- Understanding community development;
- Impact/measurement/outcomes;
- Conflicts/polarities in politics and community issues; and
- Need to attract young professionals to work in the field of CD

Respondents cited a need for better collaboration across community development organizations, communicating more effectively, and recognizing the value and impact of CD programs as essential to ensure the CD field continues to have the ability to support effective community change. Fortunately, CCN members have published on several of these issues already (Hales, Walzer, and Calvin 2015; Walzer, Weaver, and McGuire 2018)

Becoming More Effective. Respondents were asked about ways to make them more effective in working with community change processes in their community. Summary responses point to interest in more case studies and expertise-sharing, such as:

- Sharing case studies and promising practices;
- Hosting practice and professional exchanges/study tours;
- Sharing knowledge resources and effective impact measurement;
- Professional/community coaching; and
- Leadership development.

The survey results will help chart a course to assist in efforts to expand effective professional development opportunities, research additional promising practices, and expand practice resources for communities working on change processes.

Continued Interest by Foundations. Since community foundations are often a main financing tool to support community development efforts, they have a serious interest in CCN activities. Of special interest is information or approaches to help guide their investments to maximize the impact. Consequently, CCN members explored linkages between community change and foundation funding. Conversations with foundations, large and small, across the U.S. illustrated basic ways in which they engage and monitor impacts from investments in community change efforts. They understand the immediate impacts from projects but need more information about long-term impacts as well as training on measuring meaningful positive impacts.

The foundations reported using several key indicators of success from their investments. The metrics include: community groups are more engaged in processes; amount of investment generated because of foundation dollars spent; and the community now has an action plan in place. While these measures are based on a small number of foundations completing the question, it is likely that non-respondents use similar approaches. A substantial number of respondents reported that they are not satisfied with the measurement approaches.

On further inspection, they reported insufficient staff time or resources to conduct more in-depth examinations of outcomes. Some reported that the grant dollars are too small and too diverse to have a major impact on long-term community change, or that measuring this type of change is overly complex for foundations of their size.

The preliminary findings, presented to the October 2019 Annual National Conference for Growing Community Foundations, advance past research and training by CCN to support efforts by practitioners. Achieving community change is difficult and not yet well-understood (Walzer and Weaver 2018). Models such as Collective Impact have advanced in these efforts and the literature is growing but there is still a way to go before practitioners and community leaders have confidence that they understand how the process works. The topics and issues addressed by CNN change as its members actively participate in conferences, webinars, and related venues.

Other CCN Professional Activities. CCN members have led several workshops at CDS conferences in recent years, including the “Community Resilience” pre-conference at the 2018 conference. In addition, many of the findings are now incorporated into the promising practices literature (*IACD Practice Insights*). They also published scholarly volumes on innovative measurement practices, innovative community change practices, and Collective Impact practices. (See References.) This research helps practitioners learn the latest techniques to manage lasting community change.

Where from Here?

During the 2019 Community Development Society annual conference, the Network conducted a facilitated roundtable to discuss community change issues and identify actions that will move the Network and its work on community change forward. The two sessions included 20 or more practitioners, researchers, and community foundation representatives.

Several priorities were established, including preparation of a measurement guide that will define community change and provide case studies of successful approaches; develop ways to help community groups understand the value of long-term change; identify both tangible and intangible outcomes and ways to measure them; and help funding agencies understand community development and change. Work has started on this publication.

The Community Change Network is an evolving model to help practitioners and researchers transcend organizational and institutional boundaries to advance knowledge across those boundaries. For these reasons, the CCN participated in the CDS Fellows project to accomplish the following three key outcomes: bring additional focus and momentum back to the ongoing work of the CCN; increase the awareness of CDS members to the ongoing work, products, and goals of the CCN; and explore the potential advantages of a stronger CDS/CCN collaboration, including linking with CDS to respond to identified professional development needs and foundation-supported community change indicator measurement concepts identified through CCN initiatives.

The CDS Fellows program provides a catalyst for the CCN to expand its efforts and is a vehicle to share outcomes with a cohort group of other CDS Fellow working teams and Community Development Society. CCN participates in a variety of outlets: CDS Discussion Groups, social media, *Community Development Practice*, CDS conferences, and other professional activities. This participation has:

- 1) Brought additional focus and momentum back to the ongoing work of the CCN;
- 2) Generated a better understanding of training needs in community change and community development overall by a survey of practitioners;
- 3) Made practitioners and researchers more aware of community change issues by communicating key components of successful initiatives by conference presentations and professional publications such as *Practice Insights* and *CD Practice*;

- 4) Engaged new partners in the foundation world through a survey of foundations involved in community change efforts;
- 5) Explored potential advantages from stronger CDS/CCN collaborations, including linking with CDS to respond to identified professional development needs and foundation-supported community change indicator measurement ideas. A joint invitation from CDS leadership and the CCN specifically inviting foundations to participate in the CDS Conference and a CCN Roundtable Discussion are being discussed.

CCN and CDS are both communities of practice. In addition, the CCN is a community of interest. As a project-based network CCN engages members regularly with goals and outcomes in mind (common interest). The CDS Fellows funds and timeline strengthened the level of commitment and shared responsibility for outcomes.

How to Participate in CCN Activities?

As a community of interest, CCN welcomes new members to participate in research and demonstration projects in which they have interest. CCN members can participate directly in research activities or can be a sounding board for others designing research projects. They can also provide direct assistance to practitioners seeking better ways to bring about lasting changes and build on past successes. New members are invited to participate in scholarly and practitioner discussions at conferences and programs.

CCN is mainly interested in advancing the state of knowledge and understanding of community change so opportunities for new members to join these efforts are almost limitless. Since CCN is a network, members participate on a need or interest basis, and the active membership changes over time as interests change. New members with new ideas for projects are always welcome! For more information, please contact Connie Loden cloden@thenewnorth.com or Sharon Gulick at CCBSKG@gmail.com.

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IACD Practice Insights magazine – Americas Issue #10

(<http://www.iacdglobal.org/2018/11/04/subscribe-to-our-magazine-2/>):

- Issue Content Coordinator Community Change Network Member, Connie Loden - January 2018;
- Community Change Professional Development /Survey – Connie Loden and Sharon Gulick;
- Exploring Our Role as Community Development Professional (Development of CDS Fellows Program) – Daniel Kahl and Kristina Hains

Community Change Network www.ruralxchange.net/communitychange

Case Studies

- Community Progress Initiative
<http://ruralxchange.net/communitychange/community-progress-initiative-a-case-study-of-community-change/>
- Doniphan, MO <http://ruralxchange.net/communitychange/building-local-prosperity-doniphan-mo/>
- Community Heart & Soul
<http://ruralxchange.net/communitychange/community-heart-soul-field-guide/>