

## **The Trouble with Expectations**

Debatable assumptions and the evaluation of CCIs

By Joel Bookman and Andrew Mooney

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### **Section 1: Introduction**

In the mid-1990s, Chicago's civic and community development leaders engaged in a formal public dialogue called The Futures Committee to take a critical look at the community development field and make recommendations for the path it should take in years to come. The Committee formalized its findings in a document entitled 'Changing the Way We Do Things',<sup>1</sup> the seminal map for a radical change in theory and approach that took practical form in the New Communities Program (NCP)<sup>2</sup>, organized by LISC/Chicago and funded by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.

'Changing the Way We Do Things' and NCP arose in response to a crisis in the community development field in the earlier part of the decade. After years of hard work producing literally thousands of affordable housing units in neighborhoods throughout Chicago, several community development corporations folded under the burden of their portfolios, creating a crisis of confidence in the community development field in general. More broadly, the prevailing theory – that a focus on a key community asset such as housing would 'improve' the circumstances of entire neighborhoods – came under fire. The purpose of The Futures Committee was to look at the situation in depth and, if warranted, propose different approaches for the new millennium.

The Committee proposed, and NCP implemented what was in effect a return to the spirit of the incipient days of formalized community development in the 1970s: a comprehensive approach to community development through lead community development organizations<sup>3</sup>. After an exploratory effort in three neighborhoods that was called the New Communities Initiative (NCI), from 1998-2001, the program expanded into NCP in twenty neighborhoods when the Foundation made a considered decision and approved a history-making ten-year, multi-million commitment to the effort. The nation's largest comprehensive community initiative (CCI) was off and running.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Changing the Way We Do Things,' October 1997. Available at <http://tinyurl.com/FuturesCommittee>.

<sup>2</sup> Documents related to NCP can be found at the LISC/Chicago archival website, <http://www.newcommunities.org>.

<sup>3</sup> The design for NCP's methodology was largely informed by the ground-breaking Comprehensive Community Revitalization Program (CCRP) in New York City. Cf., [Going Comprehensive: Anatomy of an Initiative That Worked](#) (Miller and Burns, 2006).

Now, twenty years later, we can reflect on the program and its legacy. The effort has had a long and still-evident impact on community development practice in the city<sup>4</sup>; in its first ten years alone, from 2001-2011, it generated over 800 discrete neighborhood projects and programs, and over \$900 million in total investment, a 17-1 leverage over MacArthur's original commitment<sup>5</sup>.

Like most other CCIs, Chicago's NCP was duly evaluated at the behest of the Foundation. What we found in the course of the evaluation, however, was that the field of social program analysis did not have the methodological theory or tools necessary to address what we considered the principal outcomes of our experience or its actual effect. The third-party evaluation that NCP received was fair and indicated areas of both success and failure with which we would largely agree. But it was hampered overall by an industry-standard approach that cannot capture the essence of a program such as CCI, and by a series of debatable assumptions that underlie that approach.

We contend that CCIs have been misunderstood. Not all CCIs are created equal and some have indeed failed by any standard that might be applied. But the evaluation of CCIs has been impeded by methodological conundra that undervalue the impact of many CCI efforts. The purpose of this article is to shed some light on this matter from a practitioner's point of view, and in particular from the point of view of the authors who had significant responsibility for the development of the theory and practice of what became the nation's largest CCI enterprise, NCP in Chicago.

## **Section 2: New Communities Program**

The NCP methodology emerged from the collective experience of The Futures Committee, the Comprehensive Community Revitalization Program in the South Bronx and NCI in Chicago as a long-term initiative to support comprehensive community development in Chicago neighborhoods. NCP deployed a structured but flexible framework designed to strengthen communities from within – to create healthy communities by building their capacity to manage or govern themselves, both formally and informally.

This was implemented by growing the capacity of local community organizations to serve as neighborhood conveners and intermediaries. They became “connectors,” forming a web of relationships between and among the many and diverse organizations and individuals that would enable a community to take advantage of opportunities as well as to respond to the challenges at hand.

LISC/Chicago empowered a credible *lead agency* and a local director to engage the community, organize meetings, coordinate planning, develop partnerships, manage projects, and communicate success. The lead agencies convened “*Quality-of-Life (QoL)*”

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<sup>4</sup> See sidebar below.

<sup>5</sup> See MDRC's 'An Evaluation of the New Communities Program,'

<https://www.macfound.org/press/evaluation/assessment-new-communities-program>

planning processes to unite stakeholders around a shared vision, goals, and projects. QoL plans served as the blueprint for collective action, mobilizing local organizations and leveraging support from public, private and philanthropic agencies. Neighborhood planning teams targeted *early-action projects* – “doing while planning” -- to create short-term visible improvements that would showcase positive activities and grow collaborative relationships. Plans for larger, catalytic projects were accompanied by 5-year timelines, priorities, and the lead partners responsible for making them happen.

A rigorous *documentation and communication* program was integrated into NCP to galvanize community action, educate funders and public officials, and attract partners and resources. Peer learning and media training among participants sparked innovation, enhanced program replication, and shared stories with key audiences.

Throughout, LISC/Chicago served as a *central intermediary*, channeling resources and expertise communities, coordinating efforts among its lead agencies, and providing flexible long-term funding. LISC program officers linked organizations to technical assistance, potential partners, and available resources. They were charged with seeking investment opportunities that supported implementation of quality-of-life plans, strengthening the capacity of the lead agencies, or providing strategic financial support to leverage additional investment. As NCP evolved, communities were organized, and strategic relationships were formed. Quality-of-Life plans were implemented, and a multitude of projects were completed. NCP

### **Innovation and Investment Emerged from NCP Model**

- When the Quad Communities Quality-of-Life Plan envisioned a new shopping development along a disinvested commercial corridor, the NCP lead agency Quad Communities Development Corporation used a LISC MetroEdge market analysis, aggressive marketing, and public sector incentives to secure the commitment of a developer for a \$46 million mixed-use project at a key corner in the community.
- With the guidance of LISC/Chicago, NCP lead agencies and their partners shared information, coordinated activities, and collaborated in planning and implementation of projects. When several QoL plans highlighted the critical importance of increasing the financial stability of low- and moderate-income families, NCP established a new citywide network of ten neighborhood-based Financial Opportunity Centers that continue to provide families with financial counseling, employment services, and access to public benefits.
- NCP attracted a major national foundation to commit \$18 million to implement a new model of community schools with a health clinic component – precisely because these communities had in place a web of relationships committed to deliver neighborhood level change, a system of accountability, and the commitment and the flexibility to experiment with new ideas and to foster innovation.

communities attracted new public and private investments and their neighborhoods became more intensely connected to the socio-economic mainstream of the region. While

not all participating neighborhoods reached the same degree of success<sup>6</sup>, the aggregate tangible outcomes of the program were significant. But, as will be described below, it may have been the intangible aspects of the effort that were the most important, and perhaps the most enduring.

### **Section 3: Assumptions and Expectations?**

To be frank, the expectations for NCP and its communities were inchoate at best at the beginning of the program. We knew that what we had been doing – focusing on housing as our principal tool – had not blossomed into an overall redevelopment strategy in most cases but had led to the demise of several important neighborhood organizations. Our experience had chastened us enough to realize that we should choose our methodology carefully<sup>7</sup>, based on both experience and theory, and that our expectations should be tempered by our immediate history. So, NCP began with modest goals and a humble disposition, with a hope for incremental change rather than an expectation of radical transformation.

What ultimately guided us were an underlying assumption we made at the beginning of the program and a somewhat surprising discovery we made as the program unfolded.

Our initial assumption: neighborhoods matter. In our guts, we knew that the formal dichotomy between ‘people’ and ‘place’ was false. Neighborhoods have a significant impact on the people who live in them, just as it is those same people who form the character of a neighborhood. It really mattered what we did and how we did it. Our gut feel was not without a theoretical basis, however. In particular, we were aligned with the findings of Robert Sampson and his colleagues, whose decade-long research into Chicago’s neighborhoods proved the point.<sup>8</sup> With their concept of *collective efficacy* we also gained a pivotal insight into just how neighborhoods and their constituents interact, through systems of relationships that can create a positive neighborhood character and have an affirmative impact on its residents.

This notion of a system of relationships underlying the fundamental well-being of a neighborhood was the unforeseen discovery that emerged early in NCP and intensified as the program matured. Given that we were sometime community organizers ourselves, we were already quite familiar with the concept of community empowerment. But we now transitioned to a different understanding of community action, that of community-building or the creation and strengthening of systems of relationships, personal and institutional, social and economic, within a defined community area.<sup>9</sup> Those systems, we found, could form a *platform* for neighborhood development on which we could build local leadership and decision-making, information channels and community action, external investments

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<sup>6</sup> Indeed, throughout NCI and NCP, LISC/Chicago replaced lead agencies on several occasions.

<sup>7</sup> Note our reliance on CCRP in New York, cited above.

<sup>8</sup> *The Great American City*, Sampson, Robert J., University of Chicago Press, 2012.

<sup>9</sup> For an excellent discussion on this topic, see “Building Community in Place: Limitations and Promise,” by Bill Traynor in *The Community Development Reader*, ed. James D. Filippis and Susan Saegert, New York: Routledge 2008.

and internal commitments and economic growth. The platform also allowed for an intentional connection to the larger systems in which they were embedded, including the city or region, in a dynamic process of mutual influence.<sup>10</sup>

With this exciting new perspective on what neighborhoods are and how they function, we came to see that the practice of community development is the art of *influencing* the trajectory of neighborhood systems through the dynamic agents active in those systems. We moved therefore from a standard ‘theory of neighborhood change’ to a much more robust ‘theory of influence’. That’s what NCP was all about.

Some have called community development the ‘science of muddling through’ and there is much truth to that. Through our particular lens, we saw that there is no such thing as linear causality (‘A’ directly leads to ‘B’) in the way communities develop; rather, there are always multiple agents and factors that can lead to any number of outcomes. The trick is to comprehend the many elements at play and temper their arc toward the common good.

It is much more difficult to measure and evaluate the success or failure of a community development intervention within this perspective. There are several sets of threshold questions that have to be addressed, including the following:

At the tactical level:

After identifying the system of relationships in a neighborhood, does a specific intervention methodology like NCP strengthen that system?

Does the intervention form or strengthen those systems into sustainable neighborhood platforms that are resilient in the face of the vagaries and challenges that beset communities over time (such as the Great Recession of 2008)?

At the strategic level:

What are the express values driving an evaluation of a community development intervention? For example, what is the meaning of ‘common good’ in the specific circumstances of a particular neighborhood, or set of neighborhoods?

Is the trajectory of the neighborhood toward its common good decidedly influenced by the intervention and by the local agents of that intervention?

The standard tools for evaluating community development initiatives do not typically start with these questions. During NCP, we worked closely with The MacArthur Foundation to

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<sup>10</sup> In effect, we discovered what theoreticians in the budding field of complexity science were suggesting in their research: that cities and their component parts are complex adaptive systems with agents whose dynamic relationships lead to an organizational structure with emergent properties that are more than the sum of their parts and are determinative of the long-term trajectory of the system.

try to find a solution by reviewing or underwriting several alternatives.<sup>11</sup> The Foundation eventually brought in MDRC, a leading not-for-profit think tank, to evaluate NCP. MDRC took our perspective seriously and their reports reflected our emphasis on systems analysis.<sup>12</sup>

None of this is to say that standard reporting on a program's outcomes is unnecessary or unuseful. In community development, hard outcomes drive an initiative. NCP invested nearly a billion dollars over ten years in 20 communities, in over 800 discrete projects that ranged from a neighborhood newspaper to major real estate developments.<sup>13</sup> The accretion of these projects and, to the degree possible, their integration in an overall approach not only bolsters community-building but will impact the trajectory of a neighborhood in the long run. Not to mention the value of the projects in and of themselves.

But the problem of evaluation has befuddled community development practitioners and evaluators since the first comprehensive community initiative in the 1980s. An inaccurate assumption about what a CCI is all about has led to high and false expectations about what it can do and how it should be measured. Moreover, the tools that are available to evaluators address these expectations and not the real value of the efforts themselves.

Very often, those who sponsor CCIs and those who evaluate them are burdened by a hopeful if unrealistic aspiration. Reduced to the simplest terms, 'comprehensive development' is taken to mean that entire neighborhoods will improve on all commonly accepted socio-economic indicators as a linear result of direct broad-scale action by one or more agents (who may or may not be neighborhood-based). The result will be a 'transformation' of the neighborhood in which most if not all extant residents will see a tangible improvement in their life-fortunes. The improvements will occur in a defined (usually brief) period and will be the result of a discrete investment by a funder or funders; the change that occurs will be sustainable.<sup>14</sup>

While commendable, this aspiration demonstrates a fundamental naivete about the human condition. It is unlikely that generational socio-economic issues in a neighborhood<sup>15</sup> can be faced meaningfully in a short period of time with a limited amount of resources, no matter how well-intentioned or well-spent -- unless a neighborhood is otherwise experiencing unwanted gentrification and its counter-point displacement. It is also unlikely that an agent or set of agents (most of which are not-for-profit community-based organizations) will effect a transformational level of impact. Even the progress they might make with

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<sup>11</sup> These included a series of roundtables organized by Xavier de Souza Briggs, then at MIT; seminal work by the Metro Chicago Information Center and the business group Social Compact; and such research as Robert Sampson's (cited above) and Sean Safford's (see [Why the Garden Club Couldn't Save Youngstown: The Transformation of the Rustbelt](#), Harvard University Press, 2009).

<sup>12</sup> Op. cit., MDRC evaluation.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> "Did the Comprehensive Community Initiatives of the 1990s, early 2000s Bring About Change?", *ShelterForce*, March 15, 2021.

<sup>15</sup> Often exacerbated by a history of racial injustice.

respect to standard indicators can be challenged at any moment by vagaries over which they have no control (such as the Great Recession of 2008).

These expectations rely on an oft-implied assumption that there is a ‘silver bullet’ yet to be found in community development that will lead to an abrupt, non-displacement transformation of neighborhoods. None has yet been found. Still, the hunt continues, which itself has consequences. It suggests that neighborhoods are a-contextual: a single strategy can be found and imposed that will lead all neighborhoods, regardless of their organizational, leadership, political, social and economic histories to a profound improvement, however defined. Yet we are consistently disappointed when the newest fad flounders on the hard reality of neighborhood complexity.

As we said above, our NCP understanding of ‘comprehensive development’ and ‘neighborhood transformation’ was quite different than the caricature just described. We therefore also searched for a very different methodological approach to evaluation.

What we and our neighborhood partners were attempting to do was ‘comprehend’ or understand and act upon the many different dynamics that were at play in the participating neighborhoods. We considered ourselves successful if that comprehensive effort established a system of relationships or platforms in those neighborhoods that could influence their long-term trajectories toward the common good. That is not to say that hard-outcomes were unimportant; they were valuable in and of themselves and essential to the community-building effort that created systemic relationships and platforms. But it was the latter that became the final long-term goals of the Program.

A fitting evaluation would therefore have multiple aspects to it, including analyses of the relational networks in the neighborhoods, the success or failure at creating platforms, and the influence those platforms had over time and in view of the various challenges that arose during that time. MDRC made good progress along these lines in their evaluation of NCP.<sup>16</sup> Unfortunately, their promising analytical approach has been neglected and the field is still without a fitting evaluation model.

#### **Section 4: The Next Generation**

We would argue that it is inappropriate to make a final judgement on the value of comprehensive community initiatives, as some have, because the assumptions and expectations that have guided funders, practitioners and evaluators alike in the past have too often been ill-conceived and ended up undermining an accurate assessment.

We would also argue that there have indeed been successful CCIs – such as CCRP in New York and NCP in Chicago – that can be replicated elsewhere. Whether or not future enterprises are called CCIs, community organizations will continue to do the same kind of work for their neighborhoods. They would be greatly aided if they could rely on more

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<sup>16</sup> See <https://www.mdrc.org/chicago-community-networks-study/mapping-neighborhood-networks>

sophisticated assumptions and expectations of what they are doing, and on more sophisticated evaluations, such as those called for above.

While MDRC made headway on these matters in its evaluation of NCP, the next generation – and there will be a next generation – should revisit the NCP/CCRP experience and enhance the evaluation approach with the kind of theoretical framework we’ve outlined above.

In Chicago alone, the infrastructure created by NCP is still robust and continues to influence the neighborhoods in which NCP organizations are active.<sup>17</sup> Organizations in other cities, including many in the national LISC network, continue to approach their work with a fulsome agenda. It will be incumbent on funders and evaluators to re-think and remodel their approach to the analysis of these efforts along the lines we have suggested. There is as much work to do in the research field as there is in the field of practice. We hope that our experience in NCP can provide some insight into the path ahead.

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<sup>17</sup> See, for example, <https://www.lisc.org/chicago/regional-stories/liscs-quality-life-planning-bettering-neighborhoods-throughout-chicago/>