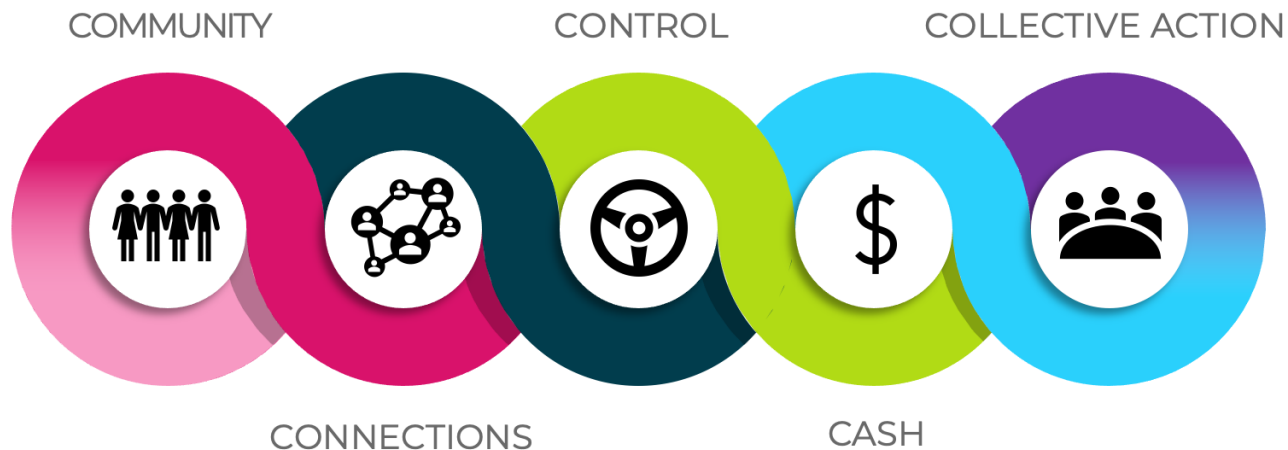


## The Five Cs'



The current health, social justice, violence, and environmental crises call for greater attention to strengthening our communities to care for their members and to take collective action to address the root causes of disadvantage, marginalization, and stress. Strengthening communities, especially those historically disadvantaged, will have the greatest and broadest impact on the well-being of individuals, families, and communities. Social and medical research over the past 150 years has shown that four strategic factors have the most far-reaching and powerful effect on the psychological, social, and physical well-being of people. These factors have been called many things in the literature, for instance, social capital, social networks, empowerment, collective efficacy, economic self-sufficiency, and more, but they really reflect four themes:

- Community — A sense of community;
- Connections — Connections to other networks for resources and the exchange of resources;
- Control — Individual and collective control; and
- Cash — Adequate economic opportunity, financial assets, and other resources.

A large amount of research has shown that these four factors are associated with improvements in a wide range of individual and social problems, including preventing and recovering from strokes; preventing child abuse and neglect; accessing employment opportunities; improving school achievement; increasing neighborhood investment; reducing mortality among the elderly; preventing substance abuse, crime, delinquency, and violence; and promoting health and resilience. Powerful and successful community development demonstrates these four strategic factors, which have a catalytic effect on a wide range of social and health challenges at the individual, community, and societal levels.

We have also learned from history and decades of on-the-ground experience that the most effective way to initiate and sustain the strengthening of community is through a fifth strategic factor: collective action. Collective action is a self-generating, people-centered way to promote greater community, connections, control, and cash. The purpose of this paper is to lay out the basic ideas of the Five C's (community, connections, control, cash, and collective action) and how they can be put together to develop an effective, broad-reaching, and sustainable community development strategy in a variety of situations. The next section will look at each of the Five C's, what they mean, and some basic examples of how to promote them.

# Community



There are many communities or potential communities in our lives. We can experience community where we live, work, learn, shop, worship, or online, as well as in many other situations. There are also many ways to describe what one means by “community.” The greatest impact from any community comes from how we perceive it —our “sense of community.” Culture, history, and other contextual factors influence how communities form and thrive. Theory, research, and practice have shown us that a sense of community has five key elements:

- Meeting needs based on shared values;
- Membership;
- Influence; and
- A shared emotional connection

First and foremost, communities form, grow, and maintain themselves by meeting the needs of their members. Those needs may be shelter and security, better education, common interests, or shared identities. When a community stops meeting the needs of its members, that community begins to disintegrate. Strategies for building community must make sure that members’ needs are met on a continuous basis for as long as they are part of the community. Needs of community members can be met by institutions, such as government, or through collective action by residents working together.

The common values among members can also strengthen their sense of community. Understanding the shared values among community members is an important step in a community development process. Shared values are things that community members commonly believe are important, such as education or caring for one other. These values reflect the priorities of community members. Shared values can vary as the community evolves and as members’ experiences change. For example, caring for community members may become more important after a disaster or a media campaign that demonstrates how caring for one another can meet individual and collective needs.

A sense of community provides a sense of belonging and membership. The stronger the sense of

community, the stronger an individual's sense of bonding or belonging. This sense of membership also provides a sense of security because community members develop ways of understanding who is a part of their community and who is not. Geographic or other boundaries are established to strengthen this understanding of who is part of the community. A feeling of trust and caring comes from this sense of membership. Committee development efforts can strengthen the sense of membership by developing common symbols and names that help people identify with the community, such as neighborhood names or logos. It is also important to help community members define the boundaries of their community so that it is inclusive of all those who either work or participate in that community environment. Boundaries fill a very important need for identity, trust, and security, but can also create a sense of exclusion and discrimination.

Community members believe that they can individually and collectively influence their communities as well as be influenced by them. Neighborhoods or other residential communities with a strong sense of community have leaders and institutions who residents believe are responsive to their needs and are influenced by their input. Interestingly, the more influence community members believe they have on their community, the more they themselves are influenced by the community themselves. Communities with a strong sense of community provide opportunities for residents to truly influence and improve their community and, in return, members adhere more to the norms and commonly held values of the community.

A shared emotional connection among people is also an essential part of one's sense of community. This shared emotional connection can be fostered and strengthened through collective action that provides members the opportunity for greater influence on the community environment and on the larger systems that greatly affect the community. The increase in influence can compel residents to more collective action to resolve problems as well as stronger adherence to community norms (e.g., caring for one another, taking care of property, valuing diversity, and improving the care of children). A sense of community is a perception, but it is also a feeling that comes from either a sense of shared history or through experiencing a very important event together. That is why it is no surprise that disasters or other major events often strengthen the sense of community. However, we should not have to wait for disasters to occur to strengthen the emotional connection among residents.

Another great source of emotional connection is success. Emerging community organizing initiatives start with small wins (easy initial victories or successes) that can do a lot to strengthen the sense of community. Success builds community. Positive relations among community members, through positive experiences, strengthen a sense of community. Very often, community development efforts start with developing relationships among neighbors where such relationships are very weak or possibly nonexistent. Social events (e.g., block or neighborhood parties) and other celebrations (e.g., common holidays) also strengthen the sense of community.

# Connections



Relationships or connections with other communities or larger and more resourceful institutions greatly influence the well-being of individuals and communities. Not only is it important to have strong relationships within a community, but it is also very important to have access to the resources and exchanges that can come with connections to networks that extend beyond one's community. These connections have been found to make a difference in discovering employment opportunities, accessing childcare, or for other vital services and resources.

Research has also shown that people and organizations with access to networks have a wide number of connections that provide opportunities for change and positive development. For a community development effort, this means that neighborhood residents and organizations should be able to develop relations with larger institutions that serve or have the potential to serve their community.

Organizers or other key change agents play an important role in brokering these relationships, not only by making the connection or introduction, but also by preparing groups to work together. Often, leaders of organized community efforts do not have the experience or positive history of working with leaders of larger institutions (e.g., police chiefs, mayors, or heads of major agencies). Equally, leaders of these larger institutions are not prepared to work with leaders of organized community efforts and may not even understand how such collaboration will benefit the mission of their institution.

Making connections to other communities for resources and help with solutions (often called bridging) or with larger more resource-rich institutions (called linking) are vital parts of the community development process. These vital connections include technical assistance providers and other support organizations so that knowledge about effective strategies and resources needed to implement these strategies can be accessed by members of the community.

# Control



The development and exercise of individual and collective control are among the most basic of human drives. Without a sense of control, there is little sense of hope. And, without hope, communities deteriorate. In disenfranchised communities, organized collective action to improve these communities is the most effective way to develop a sense of individual and collective control. Research has shown that participating in a successful collective action not only leads to a greater sense of collective control, but also influences how much control people believe they have in other aspects of their lives.

A sense of control over your environment can be infectious, and every successful community organizing effort has stories about how not only the committee environment has changed, but also how the lives of many people have changed in a variety of ways. Organizing people to work together through collective action to meet their common goals is the most effective method for building community and promoting well-being.

It is important to differentiate control from mere influence or input. While influence and input can affect people's connection with their community, it is the sense that they actually have control of their individual and collective destiny that has the greatest impact. Strong citizen-led and inclusive community organizations build that sense of individual and collective control, which then leads to their hope and belief that they can make their environment a better and healthier place to live.

# Cash



It is no new discovery that inadequate financial resources are a major threat to the well-being of communities and individuals. Poverty destroys lives and affects everyone. The lower one's income, the more susceptible that person and family are to a wide variety of psychological, social, and medical problems and disparities. Individuals and families need access to education and skills training for meaningful employment; access to employment opportunities that have growth potential; access to capital for investment in business and homeownership; and financial literacy and management skills to be able to save, budget, and invest. People and families' exposure to stressors, problems, and disparities increase when they live in places with low concentration of cash and other resources.

There are community strategies that can be effective in increasing the financial assets – the cash – available to community residents and community organizations. Community and neighborhood-based economic development strategies provide proven opportunities for individuals, families, and communities to increase their income and financial assets, especially when they are linked to regional resources. Improvements in educational achievement are the single best predictor of increased economic success. Also, while individuals and families may be poor, there are not really any poor communities when you consider the collective financial and other assets these communities have. The pooled economic and other resources of communities with low-income persons can be quite large.

# Collective Action



There cannot be equity for historically disadvantaged groups without equity in power over their communities. Collective action by members of these communities and their allies can create shifts in power that will bring more equitable change. History has shown that communities can use collective action to exert their power to transform systems so that the systems are fairer and more aware of and responsive to historical and other factors that keep people from opportunities to reach their fullest potential. Funders, consultants, and evaluators committed to promoting greater power for disadvantaged groups should include community organizing and other forms of advocacy strategies. These can lead to changes such as more voting, more community members in positions of influence, and new relationships with larger systems and their leaders, which can in turn contribute to systems change. Collective action can also lead to conflict and tensions, which need to be accepted as part of the process. Funders and other people from outside a community have the privilege to not engage in conflict and their avoidance of it can restrict the systemic changes possible and diminish the sense of community and hope among the people in these communities. As a matter of fact, their avoidance of it can harm the people and their communities.

Community, connections, control, and cash can be promoted through organized collective action, as mentioned before. Neighborhood associations, parent advocacy groups in schools, self-help groups, youth organizing efforts, food co-ops, and co-op banks—all are vehicles for collective action.

Collective action through community organization develops a sense of community by creating a sense of membership and belonging, increased influence, and a shared emotional connection. Collective action also brings about a greater sense of control through the power of numbers — many community residents working together to change their environment and holding larger institutions accountable for the resources and services they need to be viable and healthy. Through collective action, economic and other resources in low-income communities also can be pooled, leveraged, and used to increase the cash available to residents and their ability to manage and invest cash over the long term.



## Questions for evaluating and reflecting on community building work

There are understandably many ways to approach this community development process through the promotion of community, connections, control, and cash and the organizing of collective action. The different settings in which we conduct our work provide different opportunities. One of the advantages of this research-based approach to community development is that it offers some very basic questions that we can use to assess our efforts in promoting community, connections, control, and cash through collective action:

- How is the work that I'm doing promoting community?
- How am I developing connections with other communities and larger institutions that have resources and information that could benefit this community?
- How much more control do members of this community have over their environment and for holding their institutions accountable because of the work I am doing?
- How does this work increase the cash and other resources available to communities as well as build up their ability to manage and sustain their economic growth?
- How is what I am doing enhancing the ability of community members to work together to take collective action to improve the community vs. responding to community conditions individually or relying on larger institutions to take care of community problems and needs?

## Learn More

For more information on how to understand and measure a sense of community, [click here](#).

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