



Strategic Factors for Building Community: The Five C's Community, Connections, Control, Cash, & Collective Action

Have you ever wondered what would have the greatest and broadest impact on the well being of individuals, families, and communities? Social and medical research over the last 150 years has shown that four factors have the most far-reaching and powerful effect on the psychological, social, and physical well-being of people. These factors are based on the degree to which people feel/have:

- A sense of community;
- Connections to other networks for resources and exchange;
- Individual and collective control; and
- Adequate economic, financial assets, and other resources.

These four factors have been called many things in the social and medical science literature such as social capital, social networks, empowerment, collective efficacy, economic self-sufficiency, etc. These factors reflect four consistent themes that emerged from the scientific literature that can be described as: **Community, Connections, Control, and Cash.**

These four factors have been associated with improvements in a wide range of individual and social problems including: preventing and recovering from strokes; child abuse

and neglect; access to employment opportunities; school achievement; neighborhood investment; mortality among the elderly; prevention of substance abuse, crime, delinquency, violence; and the promotion of health and resilience.

The most powerful and successful community development campaigns are linked to these strategic factors. By creating a greater sense of community, connections with networks that offer new resources and other supports, a greater sense of individual and collective control, and greater economic resources, those who are working to build and re-build communities can have a greater catalytic effect on a wide range of individual, social, and medical problems.

We have also learned through decades of on-the-ground and field-tested experience that the most effective way to initiate and sustain the development of community is through the fifth strategic factor: **Collective Action.** Collective action is a self-generating, citizen-centered way to promote greater community, connections, cash, and control.

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 on how to promote them.

Community

There are many different communities or potential communities in our lives. We can experience community where we live, work, learn, shop, worship, or even among those who we communicate with on the Internet, as well as in many other different situations. There are also many different ways to describe what one means by "community." The greatest impact from any community comes from how we perceive it - or our "sense of community." Theory and practice have shown us that a sense of community has five key elements:

- Meeting needs
- Sharing values
- Membership
- Influence, and
- A shared emotional connection

First and foremost, communities form, grow, and maintain themselves *by meeting the needs of their members*. That need may be shelter and security, better education, to address common interests, or for identification. When a community stops meeting the needs of its members, that community begins to disintegrate. Strategies for building community must make sure that the needs of its members 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 one of the important steps in a community development process. Shared values are things that community members commonly believe are important, such as education or caring for each other. Values reflect the priorities of community members. Shared values can be changed as the community evolves and 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 each other 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 the sense of bonding or belonging individuals experience. 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 in order to strengthen an understanding of who is part of the community and who is not. 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 can 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 at the same time, can 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 that 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 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 by doing so, members adhere more to the norms and commonly held values of the community.

Here again, collective action can play an important role in building a sense of community by providing members the opportunity for greater influence on the community environment and on the larger systems that greatly affect the community. The increase in influence created by successful collective action can lead residents to more collective action to resolve problems as well as stronger adherence to community norms (e.g. caring for each other, 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 often disasters or other major events often strengthen the sense of community in an area. However, we do not have to wait for disasters to occur in order to strengthen the *emotional connection* among residents.

Another great source of emotional connection comes through 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 relationship 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

The 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 finding out about employment opportunities, 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 tremendous 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 their community or have the potential to serve the community.

Organizers or other key "change agents" play an important role in brokering these relationships by not only making the connection or introductions, but also 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 for developing a sense of individual and collective control. Research has shown that participating in a successful collective actions 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 not only has stories about how 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 his or her family are to a wide variety of psychological, social, and medical problems. Individuals and families need access to education and training for meaningful employment; access to employment opportunities that have growth potential; access to capital for investment in business and homeownership; and financial literacy or management skills. When there is a concentration of lower income persons and families, individuals and families are exposed to an even greater amount of problems and stressors.

What is not well known is that there are community strategies that can be effective in increasing the financial assets - 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.

Collective Action

There are different ways that we can promote Community, Connections, Control, and Cash in disenfranchised and distressed communities. A multifaceted approach would be ideal. Collective action is an essential part of any approach to bring about these improvements in communities.

Community, Connections, Control, and Cash can be promoted and advanced through organized Collective Action, such as neighborhood associations, parent advocacy groups in schools, self-help groups, youth organizing efforts, food co-ops, and co-op banks—all of which 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 large numbers of community residents working together to change their environment and holding larger institutions accountable for providing them with the resources and services they need to be viable and healthy. While there are unfortunately many poor individuals and families, there are not really any poor communities. The pooled economic and other resources of communities with low-income persons are actually quite large. Through collective action, these economic and other resources can be 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 different 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 inform us how well our efforts are 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 greater 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?

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