

# Collective Wisdom: **Lessons for the Community Development Sector**

EVALUATION BRIEF

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THE KRESGE FOUNDATION



SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK  
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# COLLECTIVE WISDOM: LESSONS FOR THE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT SECTOR

**Like many fields, community development is engaged in a space of reflection regarding its role in addressing inequities. A recent publication from the National Alliance of Community Economic Development Associations (NACEDA) titled “Talking Values” asks a central question: “How can [community development associations] change the world without losing [their] soul?”**

At the heart of this question are two ideas: 1) In order for physical development to be sustainable, simultaneous investments are needed in social, health and leadership development; and 2) Community and economic development has drifted from its movement-oriented roots and become more focused on physical development and real estate.

In this brief, our team examines Kresge Innovative Projects: Detroit (KIP:D) as an example of a partnership between community development organizations (CDOs)<sup>1</sup>, grassroots organizations (GROs) and philanthropy that, at its heart, invests in promoting community engagement and organizing.

Detroit’s community development (CD) system faces unique issues. Long seen as a “dying Rust Belt city,” Detroit has seen increased investment in physical and economic development since the 2000s. This has come with increased tension between government and

longtime residents, who feel they are being left behind in favor of investments for new businesses. The CD system in Detroit grew exponentially in the 1980s and 1990s as a response to the impact of decades of economic disinvestment and its consequences (Ash *et al.*, 2009).

In the 2000s, initiatives such as the Skillman Foundation’s Good Neighborhood Initiative (2006-2016) and Building The Engine of Community Development in Detroit (BECDD) (since 2016) were designed to support the development and mobilization of the CDOs and GROs operating in Detroit. Such initiatives were designed to build on the assets of the system while fulfilling some of its needs.

In a 2009 report titled “Growing Stronger,” authors identified strengths of the Detroit CD system, including diverse organizational missions, growing communication efforts among stakeholders, opportunities for foundation support, high per-capita allocation of

<sup>1</sup> In this brief, we use the terminology adopted by Building The Engine of Community Development in Detroit (BECDD). Community Development Organizations are professional not-for-profit tax-exempt organizations and the key facilitators of community development work in a defined neighborhood. Grassroots organizations are volunteer organizations that focus on small geographic areas or projects within a defined neighborhood. **When a cited article refers to CDOs as CDCs, we defer to the author’s terms.**





Photo: City of Detroit

community development block grant (CDBG) dollars to the city from HUD and a history of successful housing development (Ash *et al.*, 2009). The Detroit CD system faced challenges as well, including low levels of CDBG funding for community development corporations (CDCs), poor data access, loss of developer fees due to economic conditions, lack of evaluation standards for CDCs and a culture of distrust among leaders of different parts of the CDC industry. Our interviews, and the stories people shared, also raised the question of the extent and impact of race and gender disparities in Detroit's development sector.

The KIP:D, announced in 2014, built on strengths in the sector by supporting CDOs with experience in community development and innovative ideas for neighborhood revitalization projects. The initiative has supported Detroit neighborhood development projects for 127 organizations in its six rounds of funding (as of summer 2020). Initially, funding priorities were rooted in the Detroit Future City (DFC) goals of:

1. transforming vacant land into an innovative open-space network; and
2. stabilizing neighborhoods (Detroit Future City, n.d.).

After receiving feedback from funding recipients, KIP:D shifted the priorities of the initiative to better meet community needs. Updates integrated into the second and third rounds of funding shifted the framework for how projects were conceptualized; projects were seen as drivers for building organizational capacity and leadership to steward long-term community investment. Rather than focusing on “shovel-ready” projects and addressing land use, KIP:D lengthened project timelines and invested in more grassroots efforts in order to build neighborhood connectivity and cohesion. From the outset, KIP:D also emphasized community engagement: applicants were required to articulate how residents would be part of project planning and/or implementation.

Our team conducted research to better understand the impact of KIP:D by taking a retrospective look at the first three rounds of grant funding (2015-2017). We spoke with a variety of stakeholders across the city, including community residents, community leaders and past grantees, using multiple participatory and qualitative methods. We also had extended conversations with longtime community development leaders who were recommended by



grantees and were themselves KIP:D grantees during the first three rounds.

In this brief, we will use the example of KIP:D to provide insight into how CDOs and associations can support community-led change while simultaneously building the advocacy networks needed to challenge structural factors that drive neighborhood instability. Beyond the planning and implementation of neighborhood development projects, KIP:D projects reinforced existing and developed new relationships with residents, thus facilitating conditions for continued advocacy on community and economic inequities.

One recommendation in “Growing Stronger,” was to elevate the importance of community organizing (Ash *et al.*, 2009). In our conversations with stakeholders, we heard many stories about how KIP:D projects facilitated neighborhood cohesion and community ownership. We posit that KIP:D was able to accomplish this because underlying its design were community organizing principles, such as leadership development, community capacity building, relationship building and community action (Community Science, n.d.).

Community development has its roots in community organizing; connecting with these roots strengthens CD network and political capacities in neighborhoods. “A vibrant organizing ecosystem can spark community involvement, particularly during times of political and social uncertainty,” writes Tamara Holmes (n.d.), in an essay series with Detroit CD professionals, including Sarida Scott (formerly of Community Development Advocates of Detroit). While there continue to be barriers to full neighborhood participation and engagement that stem from systemic issues such as poverty, KIP:D facilitated community empowerment. We explore the lessons learned along the way here.

## LESSON 1

### **Partnering with GROs, such as block clubs, is a powerful avenue for leadership development and community capacity building.**

In “Talking Values,” Joe McNeely notes that because of the size and scope of CDCs, they can be somewhat removed from the communities and neighborhoods they serve. However, central to CDCs’ work is understanding the needs of their neighborhoods and advocating for them. By partnering with residents and leaders via grassroots organizations, CDOs helped build neighborhood capacity to take ownership over projects and drive neighborhood-level outcomes. Community engagement alone, however, does not automatically produce a sense of community ownership of projects.



Photo: Lon Horwedel for The Kresge Foundation

Key to translating engagement to ownership is honing in on relationships with community leaders, including individuals who were well-networked. Organizational partners' investment in these relationships paid off in the level of community support they received for their projects. Building leadership from the ground up exhibits that the CDOs works for the neighborhood, not the other way around.

In line with community organizing principles, it is key to “partner” with leaders rather than “win them over” to ideas an organization may have prior to engaging community members. Part of that may entail facilitating a process by which residents clarify and strengthen their concept of community in order to help solidify a shared vision. This process of defining a community also helps to build community capacity for later action and cohesion.

## LESSON 2

### **Relationship building needs to be a central part of a CDO's culture and ongoing work.**

In our learning about KIP:D, we found that many organizational partners and residents pointed to relationship building as a key element in making their project launches successful and a vital element to implementing and sustaining community change. In part, this stems from residents' past experiences of being taken advantage of and experiences of promised investments not coming to fruition.

“Detroiters have been fed a lot of promises that did not come true. A lot of things that were supposed to happen didn't happen,” mentioned one resident.

More specifically, organizational partners highlighted the need to build

trust with residents before planning and implementing projects.

“I think [the project is] all just a cumulative effort of 14 years to finally get people comfortable with seeing us around. I mean you're talking about a community that has generations of trauma, so it's hard to build that trust.”

However, relationship building isn't comprised of doing solely what a neighborhood instructs. Sometimes there is conflict among residents about what to do. Sometimes what neighborhood residents want to do is outside the scope of available, tangible resources and/or time. CDOs are called to leverage their experience in facilitating a community-led process and, most importantly, be persistent about showing up and working through challenges.

According to one organizational partner, “I think that it's important that when you're working with community, you have to be very open to what they want to see. I think that it's our responsibility as professionals in the field to also help to guide the community to understand what the parameters and the limits are, both in terms of time and resources, *et cetera*, and to help them determine the most feasible approach. And so it's not fair to raise people's expectations that you're going to deliver this opulent thing to them when you have no idea if you can do it or not.”

## LESSON 3

### **Leverage neighborhood physical development projects as a means of building support for further community action.**

Physical development is not going to change the structural forces operating as barriers in residents' lives. However, it can improve how residents perceive their

neighborhoods, and this may be enough of a push to encourage residents to stay and get more involved with other CD efforts.

“I think the biggest step forward that this project and this building has made is to bring together people who are deeply invested in the neighborhood. This has started to build a really strong network of trust which has already shown itself in shows and events and different groups of people coming together,” said an organizational partner.

In talking with others about KIP:D, we learned that the process of planning and implementation facilitated and strengthened community cohesion and engagement that, for some neighborhoods, continues to this day. This suggests that physical rehabilitation can be a mechanism for strengthening neighborhood-level social capital; projects have a multiplying effect for community engagement. In turn, CDOs have greater capacity to engage in social change and policy advocacy work.

An organizational partner mentioned, “[There] was just the outpouring of folks from the community saying ‘can we be part of this,’ either because they have kids or because they want to volunteer themselves or help, you know?”

## LESSON 4

**CDOs have an opportunity to mobilize across the CD system to build organizational capacity, make a collective impact and advocate for structural-level and policy-level change.**

KIP:D organizational partners noted the benefits of peer relationships during and after the first three rounds. We learned that CDOs appreciated opportunities to learn from their peers and partner on broader efforts.

Organizations strengthened many existing partnerships, particularly with other neighborhood-based organizations. Partners also formed new partnerships, many of which would likely not have happened outside the context of the grant. Multiple partners maintained these relationships, which paved the way for increased organizational capacity over the long term.

As organizational partners reflected on their experience in implementing these projects, they also shared how the initiative can make a greater collective impact in its next iterations. Specifically, they highlighted the need to reassess the development needs in the city and align grant projects with identified gaps. This included tackling more time-intensive and resource-heavy physical development projects such as business corridors, as well as aligning CD with broader city initiatives.

“If you know the work that’s going on, you can take incoming work and begin to align it around what’s already being done,” said an organizational partner.

Finally, community development systems have an opportunity to move the needle on needed structural and policy changes through mobilization. CDOs care for the social, health and leadership development of their communities, but they have limited capacity to alone solve all the problems a neighborhood identifies, such as crime, interpersonal violence and unemployment. But, as partners noted, addressing these challenges is critical in stabilizing and revitalizing communities.

In our work, we learned about other efforts to strengthen the CD system’s position in advocating for city-level policy change; KIP:D projects complemented these efforts. Because GROs and CDOs increased community buy-in and engagement due to these projects, the CDOs could advocate for





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changes they knew residents wanted and needed, or challenge policies that would have a detrimental impact on neighborhoods.

## CONCLUSION

So how does the CD system change the world without losing its soul? By returning to its community organizing roots—building capacity, leaders and a movement for community action. Building real estate and parks are laudable goals that neighborhood residents and CDOs can get behind. But these goals should not be considered above building communities. KIP:D shows us they are and must be complementary.

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