Collective Wisdom:
Lessons for Organizational Partners

EVALUATION BRIEF   APRIL 2021

Photo: City of Detroit

THE KRESGE FOUNDATION

COLLECTIVE WISDOM: LESSONS FOR ORGANIZATIONAL PARTNERS

Throughout the first three rounds of the Kresge Innovative Projects: Detroit (KIP:D) initiative (2015–2017), 56 planning or implementation grants were awarded to 40 unique organizations in Detroit neighborhoods. KIP:D funding began, initially, as the Kresge Foundation's commitment to the Detroit Future City goals with: 1) transforming vacant land into an innovative open-space network; and 2) stabilizing neighborhoods (Detroit Future City, nd).

After receiving feedback from KIP:D funding recipients (hereby referred to as organizational partners), 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.

Through a retrospective look at the first three rounds of grant funding, our team will use insights gleaned from a variety of stakeholders to offer lessons learned for current and future organizational partners. Data was collected by speaking with community residents, community leaders and past organizational partners using multiple participatory and qualitative methods. We also had extended conversations with longtime community development leaders who were recommended by organizational partners and were

themselves KIP:D organizational partners during the first three rounds.

The lessons in this brief highlight the ways organizational partners navigated planning and implementing projects in the complex and diverse landscape of Detroit. To see the full evaluation report please visit: kresge.org/resource/kipd-evaluation

LESSON 1

The legacy of structural racism and white supremacy in Detroit means it is especially critical for organizational partners to spend time establishing trust among those impacted by projects.

Although there are many causes for the decline of Detroit in the 20th century, one practice that has had clear and lasting impact is housing discrimination. Racist practices such as redlining, mortgage discrimination, rental discrimination and predatory loans have all contributed to the current need to revitalize vacant and blighted areas of the city.

As of October 2020, the Detroit Land Bank Authority has an inventory of 85,159 vacant or blighted properties

(Detroit Land Bank Authority, 2020). Due to historically racist and destructive practices toward Detroit and Detroiters, many residents admitted distrust of outside agencies and funders.

"I think in general there's skepticism in the city. There's a spirit of skepticism because people have been taken advantage of. And, when it comes to things like whether there are community spaces or businesses or whatever, people look at things like, 'What's happening? Are you really for us?' So there has to be continued trust there with my neighbors," said one organizational partner.

Implementing projects in communities that have been historically marginalized can understandably be met with concern regarding the intentions of the funder and project leaders.

An organizational partner mentioned, "I mean you're talking about a community that has generations of trauma, so it's hard to build that trust."

Organizational partners frequently discussed how they navigated the process of gaining credibility and confidence within the context of Detroit, stressing the importance of relationship building, forming authentic connections and listening to and following up on expressed concerns from neighbors. Other discussions centered on being transparent with what the project's goals and intentions are. Organizational partners also noted the importance of consistency and long-term relationships. Many specifically called out how they had been working within the same community for many years. Put simply, trust is built, not given.

LESSON ②

Even with historically racist practices impacting generations of Detroiters, communities within the city have their own legacy of leadership, thriving community organizations, natural beauty, local businesses and culture that organizational partners should build upon.

Through plugging into existing leadership and engagement structures, KIP:D projects can gain momentum and support. As noted in the first lesson, trust is built, and the process of building trust can take longer than the time projects have access to funding. The process of building trust doesn't have to start from scratch if organizational partners begin their work by tapping into the strengths and assets of the communities they are working in.

"As much as possible we try to use existing structures. And then also with that resident leadership," mentioned an organizational partner.

Working within existing structures and with trusted community leaders can frame the intention of a project with the lens of those past structures and leaders' work. One organizational partner noted, **"Even though we're funded by certain entities, our first allegiance is to the communities we're trying to organize with."**

Organizational partners leveraged the assets of the communities they worked in by utilizing trusted community spaces, working with current neighborhood leaders and building from current neighborhood engagement structures, such as block clubs or meetings. One resident noted that information about a project was provided during a neighborhood cookout because it was a time when everyone had already gathered together.

**Photo: Woodbridge
Neighborhood Development**

LESSON 3

Maintain credibility by understanding the limits of funding and resources; incremental change can have exponential effects that can become radical change if momentum is maintained.

The reality of KIP:D projects is that they are funded for short, finite periods of time. While tapping into community assets helps create momentum and expands available resources, momentum can fade if the project becomes too big and unwieldy to be maintained or completed.

"Some of it is a self-fulfilling prophecy. Because on the one hand, funders give us grants and we promise we're going to do X-Y-Z, A-B-C, 1-2-3. But then, on the other hand, a lot of organizations, particularly here in Detroit, don't have the resources to hire the people that know how to do those things," said an organizational partner. "And then when the things don't happen in the timeline that was agreed upon, it's assumed the nonprofit has done something wrong. Well, did they? Or was it all just a setup that, in general, you're going to get little success because you don't have the right ingredients?"

Organizational partners noted that momentum is built through small, incremental changes and noted the importance of setting both short-term and long-term goals. Setting smaller goals not only helps combat the challenges of limited funding and resources, but also helps when building trust.

LESSON 4

Engage neighbors through any possible avenue; both informal and formal engagement are valuable and have big impacts on how residents perceive projects.

Engaging residents can be done both formally and informally, but it needs to be a core tenet of any project and an organizational value. As one organizational partner noted, "We built our skills in engaging community members. But that's not because Kresge paid for it; it is because of how we approach our work."

Some successful strategies of engagement that organizational partners noted included: door-knocking, surveying neighbors on what they want to see in the neighborhood, encouraging individuals to be a champion for beautifying their block, partnering with block clubs, distributing neighborhood newsletters and hosting community meetings.

Engagement should be comprehensive and accessible to all neighbors. Not every resident will be able to participate in the same capacity, and engagement strategies should meet neighbors where they are. Organizational partners stressed the need to host formal engagement in trusted community spaces. Formal engagement should also be reliable; meetings should be at regular times and not move around or change frequently.

LESSON 5

Community engagement efforts will provide supportive and critical insights; be prepared to respond to neighbors' concerns and adjust plans when appropriate.

Neighborhoods are not monolithic; the wants and needs of individuals within neighborhoods are unique and residents

will have their own ideas as to what would best serve them. Organizational partners should be ready and open to receive feedback that will require them to shift the course of their projects.
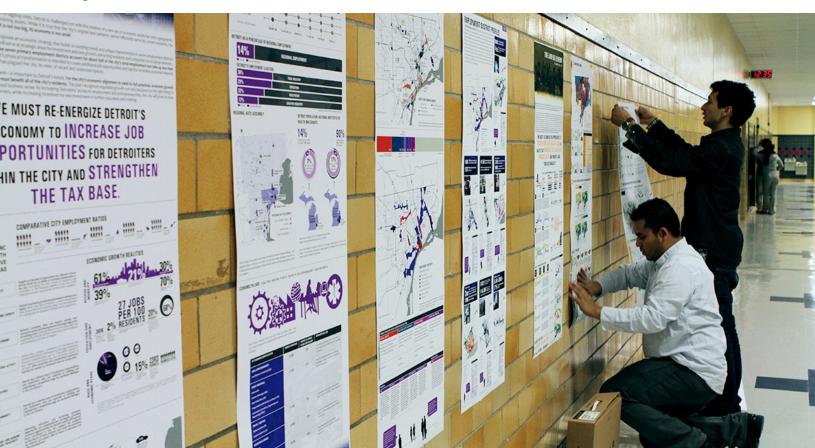
An organizational partner said, "The more you [engage the community], I think the more you realize that not everybody is going to agree. And once you hear what people say, what are you willing to do about it? If they hate your project, do you stop?"

Organizational partners should have a strategy for deciding what course of action to take after receiving critical feedback through engagement efforts. An example of an organizational partner shifting goals was provided by a project that proposed putting more lights in alleyways, and the partner was surprised when it was met with opposition. Moving forward ended up looking different based on what individual neighbors wanted.

An organizational partner mentioned, "We went basically block by block and let people decide if they wanted alley lights or if they didn't. So, there were some blocks where we just didn't do it because people didn't want it. And so, that was one of those things where you would think we would understand that there are bigger issues where there's going to be lots of different opinions on how to proceed."

Similarly, community engagement can help organizational partners understand how to best leverage community assets, or if they should be leveraging them at all. While utilizing a strengths-based approach and working from within the community is important for projects, focusing only on what has been done can be limiting and past focus does not necessarily address current community needs.

Photo: Michigan Environmental Council

CONCLUSION

The work that KIP:D organizational partners have accomplished is not easy; projects take commitment, dedication, strategic planning, adherence to deadlines and follow-through. Each neighborhood in Detroit is unique with its own set of assets, strengths, resources and challenges. While these five points represent broad lessons learned across the first three rounds of funding, each of them may not apply to each unique project.

It should be noted that KIP:D has continued evolving the initiative, and additional supports for organizational partners have been integrated into the funding that are not reflected in this retrospective look at the first three rounds. Every cohort of KIP:D funding will inevitably have more advice and lessons for the next rounds and the initiative will keep adjusting to best serve the needs of the organizational partners, especially as practices adapt to the current COVID-19 global pandemic.

Although the challenges future organizational partners will face is not known and projects may have to adjust how they operate, positive change can be achieved through building trust, engaging neighbors, listening, planning and adapting.

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