

# Toward Greater Effectiveness in Community Change

## Challenges and Responses for Philanthropy

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# Discussion Guide

## Introduction

The goal of this discussion guide is to assist foundations to engage in a dialogue about how philanthropy can become more effective in its support of community-change initiatives. The guide can be used in at least two ways. A foundation or a group of foundations intending to launch a community change initiative can use the guide as part of its planning process. Alternatively, foundations already involved in supporting a community-change initiative can use the guide as a framework to review the project's status and examine whether any changes in philanthropic practice make sense.

The discussion may involve foundation staff and board members or it may be most useful as a forum through which to convene relevant community partners. Questions can be adapted to meet the particular circumstances and needs of participants.

The guide follows the framework presented by Prudence Brown, Robert Chaskin, Ralph Hamilton and Harold Richman in *Toward Greater Effectiveness in Community Change: Challenges and Responses for Philanthropy*. Questions are organized according to foundation thinking, doing and learning, but as the authors note, these activities are interrelated and iterative. In practice, they do not follow sequentially, but inform each other continuously.

## Foundation Thinking

The *Towards More Effective Thinking* section of the paper suggests three strategies for addressing the challenges of “thinking” about community change initiatives:

- Improving understanding of communities and the context in which they are situated.
- Aligning foundation assumptions, information, and ways of thinking with the goals for community change efforts.
- Disciplining foundation strategy with theory-based logic.

The discussion questions in this section focus on ways to sharpen thinking about community change initiatives in the planning stage or examine the assumptions underlying those already underway. The questions provide a way to engage in dialogue with communities and other stakeholders.

### Theory of Change

- What are the key ideas behind the community initiative? Where do these ideas come from? How are they informed by social science research, front-line experience or other sources?
- What, specifically, does the foundation hope to achieve with the initiative? What does it expect success to look like? Do the parties to the initiative have different visions of success? Have these differences been articulated?
- How will the strategies that the foundation selects lead to the outcomes that are hoped for? What would lead you to believe that the expectations—including in terms of time and investment—appear realistic? Why or why not? Is there prior evidence that the strategies will lead to the intended outcomes?

### Risk Tolerance

- How will foundation staff and board members discuss the level of risk the foundation is willing to take as it embarks on the initiative? Do staff and board differ in their expectations?
- Imagine a situation in which the board wants to see dramatic success but has a low tolerance for risk. In such cases, program officers can feel pressure to show that the project has produced measurable outcomes, and begin making demands on grantees, despite previous assurances of support and patience. How will staff and board engage?

### Assessment of Internal and External Capacity

- How will the foundation assess the internal capacity of the community as well as the external dynamics and context in which the community operates? How will the foundation develop an understanding of the internal dynamics—including history, culture, needs, strengths, leadership and trajectories of neighborhood change—as well as the external constraints and dynamics that reinforce community conditions? If the initiative

already is underway, how have these factors affected the shape and pace of the initiative to date?

## Foundation Doing

The *Towards More Effective Doing* section of the paper suggests four strategies for addressing the implementation challenges in community change initiatives:

- 1) Aligning operating style and implementing organizations.
- 2) Negotiating terms for community engagement.
- 3) Building community capacity to implement.
- 4) Expanding foundation potential as a community resource.

The discussion questions that follow are designed to help you explore some potential barriers to implementation, drawing both from the authors' analyses of foundation "thinking" and "doing."

## Connecting Theories of Change and Implementation Approaches

- How will the ideas and goals behind the community change effort be aligned with implementation?
- If the project already is underway, can you identify an example of misalignment? Is the problem because the theory of change was not articulated clearly, or is there an implementation problem, such as lack of time? Should the ideas or theory of change be modified or should an aspect of implementation be adjusted?

## Building Relationships and Investing in the Community

- What are the issues that are likely to keep the foundation from maintaining a continuous relationship with the community? How can they be addressed? How can you help break down the differences in power and authority that seem inherent in foundation/community relationships?
- The parties involved in an initiative are likely to differ in the ways they think about capacity. Furthermore, it takes time to determine what capacity needs to be developed. Imagine and describe a process that will help participants voice their needs, listen to and recognize needs they may not have been aware of,

and provide support over time as the group comes to consensus on what and how capacity should be built.

- What can you do to keep the conversation with the community going? Where have your efforts worked and where have they failed?

### Foundation Internal Capacity

- Organizational culture, board and management expectations, reporting requirements and other constraints can keep foundations from being flexible and responsive to grantees' needs. What are some ways to ease the situation?
- What steps can a foundation take to adapt its procedures so that community organizations can address the problems that inevitably arise in the course of an initiative? Can incremental changes be made in grant making procedures (e.g., to turn around small grants more nimbly), staffing or other areas? Are foundation administrative staff involved in the design of the community change program?

### Foundation Learning

The *Towards More Effective Learning* section of the paper suggests two strategies for the ways in which foundations assess, interpret, revise, share and apply their knowledge in community change initiatives:

- 1) Fostering a learning system characterized by an attitude of inquiry, a commitment to “publicness,” an interest in different kinds of information, and a commitment to key audiences.
- 2) Promoting learning within individual foundations including changes in organizational culture and reward systems, grantmaking that reinforces a commitment to learning, and new administrative practices and support structures.

### Learning Process

- Few philanthropies have developed the kinds of learning systems this paper envisions; that is, systems that are open, based on multiple sources and means, and committed to collecting and shaping knowledge according to users' needs, both within and outside foundations. What are the factors that would keep your foundation from creating such a system? Can you imagine a

small pilot project to tackle some of the obstacles? What would it look like? Who should be at the table to plan the project? Where is your foundation overly cautious about sharing information?

- Can you imagine a process to set learning objectives on a regular basis, perhaps twice per year? How would you make choices about what information is useful and desirable? How will the foundation support the learning process?
- If the foundation is considering an evaluation of community change efforts, what does it hope to learn? Are the expectations realistic? How do you manage the learning needs of different audiences?
- If the evaluation already is underway, is it yielding what the foundation had hoped? Why or why not? Is there a way to supplement an evaluation that has been defined too narrowly?

### Using the Findings

- How will information be used to inform foundation practice internally, improve the implementation of the community change initiative, and contribute to a cumulative knowledge base for the broader field? How would you prioritize the audiences for learning? If resources are limited, can you attend to them all?
- How can foundation staff and board members create safe and productive opportunities for systematic reflection and debate about the experience of the community change initiative as it evolves? To what degree are incentives for learning built into the foundation's culture? How will board and staff dynamics be examined to encourage open exchange?