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Learning About Neighborhood Change Through Funder-Grantee Collaboration

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Keywords: Collaborative learning, evaluating community change, community-impact measurement, neighborhood planning and revitalization, strategic grantmaking, funder-grantee partnerships, survey feedback, shared outcomes, organizational learning

Introduction:

Nature of Collaborative Learning

As practiced by NeighborWorks America (NeighborWorks) and the Wells Fargo Regional Foundation (Regional Foundation), collaborative learning is an approach where the acquisition, sharing, and use of knowledge to inform programs and strategies are core components of grant support. Both funders support change in communities through a rigorous and structured collaborative learning framework that places the resident voice and experience at the center of learning. (See Figure 1.)

Collaborative learning is distinguished from other learning that occurs during the course of a grant relationship by several factors: its intentionality as a strategy to improve outcomes; the premise that information shared among grantees, funders, and partners will inform more robust learning; the level of commitment required by all parties; the degree to which learning is incorporated into grant processes and structure; and the importance of building trust and interpersonal relationships.

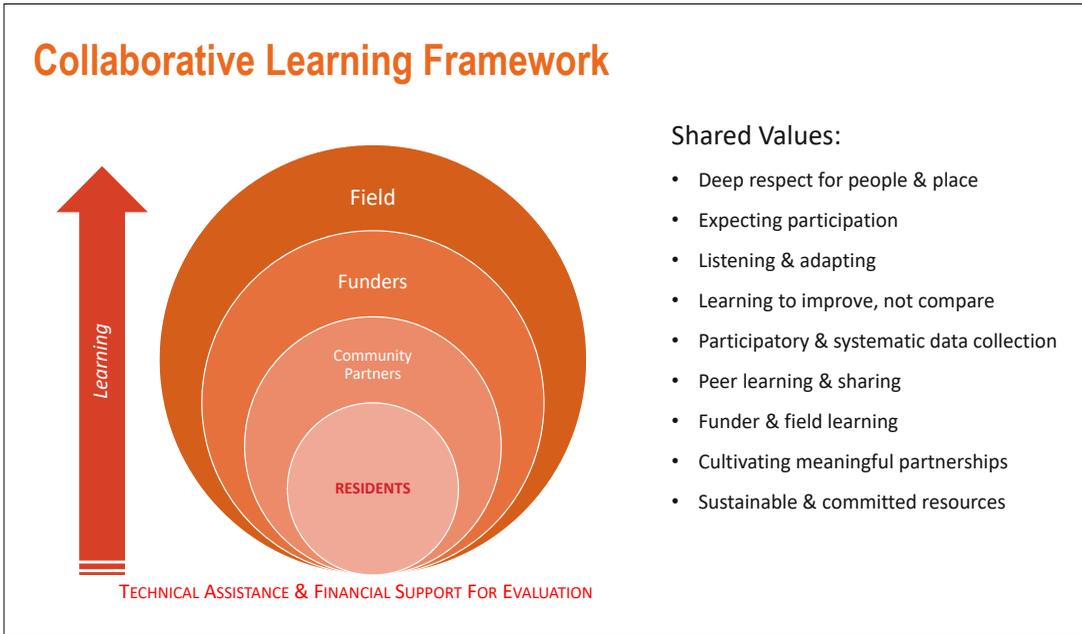
Learning occurs through funder-created activities and opportunities, including technical assistance, evaluation, peer-to-peer learning, cohort-based learning opportunities, resident and stakeholder engagement, and elements of the grant, such as reports and site visits. Grant requirements and support packages have been honed to reflect the needs of grantees as gleaned from formal and informal listening and learning processes. NeighborWorks and the Regional

Key Points

- NeighborWorks America and the Wells Fargo Regional Foundation support change in communities through a rigorous and structured collaborative learning framework that places the resident voice and experience at the center of learning. Both funders regularly engage in collaborative learning processes with their grantees and partners to support local revitalization practices and inform program and grantmaking strategies.
- This article examines the key ingredients and processes needed to develop and sustain collaborative learning among grantee organizations, community residents, and other stakeholders and funding partners, as well as the critical role played by technical assistance providers.
- The authors reflect on their experience with a range of collaborative learning processes and examine the nexus between grantee and funder interests, where the iterative and shared process can result in long-term change. Examples of organizations of varying size and capacity illustrate grantee and funder perspectives in the collaborative learning process, and how the results are being used to advance solutions to local issues and shift program and funding strategies.

Foundation have also developed pathways for learning with technical assistance partners and internal business units, and among and across grantee cohorts.

FIGURE 1 Collaborative Learning Framework



Reflective Practice

The approach offers funders a different paradigm and a pathway for increasing inclusion and equity by shifting the emphasis from confirming a funder-driven hypothesis to the joint learning that occurs when there is a robust and deliberate path for resident and grantee participation and input that drives learning. Some funders may be reluctant to adopt this approach, because it shifts some of the power from funders to local organizations and the communities they represent. A major benefit is the potential for greater impact, as grantees build capacity, experiment, and learn which strategies are most effective.

In the remainder of this article, the authors provide examples of collaborative learning, reflect on their experience, and offer a model for building collaborative learning into community development grantmaking that can be applied by most funders, regardless of scale. The article highlights the critical role of technical assistance providers, using Success Measures, an evaluation resource group at NeighborWorks America, as an example of how learning partners create efficiencies and additional value for all

collaborators. (See boxed text on the following page for organizational profiles.)

Wells Fargo Regional Foundation's Neighborhood Grants Program

The Regional Foundation's pathway to a collaborative learning model began when the foundation was first forming its approach and strategies. In those early stages, staff had expertise in commercial lending, but no formal training or experience in community development. Reaching out to leaders in the community development field and grantees became an important strategy for staff to understand how to be impactful. The writings of management consultant and educator Peter Drucker, sometimes described as the "founder of modern management" (Denning, 2014, para. 1), stressed the importance of creating a learning organization and also resonated with the founding board of directors and foundation leadership, as did the importance of longer-term strategic investments and demonstrating impact.

The result has been a culture that is humble, reflective, and responsive to what is heard or

learned. The Regional Foundation's strategic plan solidified around a grantmaking model that emphasized the resident voice in neighborhood planning and development; resident engagement and leadership development; participatory evaluation; and a strong package of technical assistance for capacity building in evaluation and using data to inform strategies and enhance impact.

Collaborative learning is a good fit for what became the Neighborhood Grants Program because of a common emphasis on the resident voice and a communication flow that originates with residents and grantees and then moves

upward, rather than the more traditional top down, funder-driven model. Throughout its experience with the program, the Regional Foundation has found that collaborative learning can increase neighborhood social cohesion through heightened engagement and relationship building (Greco, Grieve, & Goldstein, 2015). And it reinforces one of the key elements of its overall approach to revitalization.

The work of one Regional Foundation grantee illustrates how social connections are stronger when they begin with resident-to-resident relationships. Ironbound Community Corporation

Wells Fargo Regional Foundation's Neighborhood Grants Program has awarded grants to more than 80 community development organizations in eastern Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Delaware, totaling more than \$66.5 million between 2003 and 2018. Across a series of large, multiyear grants, all grantees develop and implement multifaceted resident-driven neighborhood plans and revitalization strategies rooted in collaborative learning. Grantees can receive up to \$2.3 million over an 11-year period. In addition, the foundation's Strategic Initiative Grants, totaling \$6.2 million since 2003, support partners and coaches that provide a range of technical assistance to grantees, including data-informed learning, evaluation, financial sustainability, and collective action.

NeighborWorks America works with more than 240 member organizations in every state, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico, offering grant funding (totaling more than \$158.67 million in fiscal year 2018), technical assistance, peer exchange, evaluation tools, and access to its nationally recognized training of housing and community development professionals. The NeighborWorks network organizations provide residents in their communities with owned and rented affordable homes, financial counseling and coaching, community building through resident engagement, and collaboration in the areas of health, employment, and education. NeighborWorks' ongoing Community Impact Measurement Project was launched in 2013, involving over 120 local NeighborWorks organizations using a common learning framework to collect rigorous baseline and tracking data on resident experience and social, economic, and physical conditions in communities across the country. Participating organizations use the results to inform programs and strategies to strengthen their place-based revitalization efforts and for resource development, community engagement, and partnership development.

Success Measures, a social enterprise at NeighborWorks America, provides evaluation consulting, technical assistance, data-collection tools, and technology to community development and health-related foundations, intermediaries, and nonprofit organizations to help them measure and document the impact of their programs and investments across the country. It partners with NeighborWorks and the Wells Fargo Regional Foundation to assist their member or grantee organizations in developing evaluation capacity through an approach that reflects collaborative learning and participatory evaluation.¹

¹ Participatory evaluation, as practiced in community development, engages residents and other community stakeholders in developing evaluation questions, creating tools, and interpreting the results from the evaluation. The practice stems from the premise that community participation in the process enhances understanding of the community and resident perspective.

FIGURE 2 The Neighborhood Planning Process



of Newark, New Jersey, organized diverse resident teams to collect surveys in a neighborhood that includes public housing, whose residents are largely African American, and single-family homes, whose residents are mostly Hispanic. While knocking on doors in public housing, a single-family resident learned of the significant unemployment facing public housing residents and shared information about an upcoming recruiting event by a large area employer. Many of the public housing residents subsequently attended the event and were hired.

The Neighborhood Grants Program offers a continuum of grants supporting the development and implementation of a comprehensive neighborhood plan. The planning process focuses on community engagement, incorporating the resident voice through door-to-door surveys, community meetings, one-on-one meetings, and focus groups. (See Figure 2.) Regional Foundation partner Success Measures assists grantees in planning and implementing the resident survey. Another partner, the Reinvestment Fund’s Policy Solutions Group,² completes a

pre-planning analysis of neighborhood demographics, housing and real estate characteristics, employment and jobs, and a survey of property conditions throughout the neighborhood.

Learning is supported throughout the grant relationship through technical assistance, cohort-based learning, and opportunities for feedback. (See Table 1.) For example, grantees repeat the resident survey at specific intervals and review other secondary data to assess change in key indicators. Another resource provided by Policy Solutions Group is access to PolicyMap,³ an online data and mapping tool with which users can select from demographic, economic, housing, health, and other data sets and patterns within a selected neighborhood. A third partner, Community Wealth Partners,⁴ a social enterprise of Share Our Strength, helps grantees craft a professional prospectus and strategies to secure continued funding as part of the Sustainability Initiative. Community Wealth Partners also trains and coaches grantees working as a collaborative to improve the quality of the collaboration.

² <https://www.reinvestment.com/policy-solutions>

³ www.policymap.com

⁴ <https://communitywealth.com>

TABLE 1 Funder-Supported Components of Collaborative Learning

	Wells Fargo Regional Foundation	NeighborWorks America
Technical Assistance	<p>Success Measures:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data collection system and tools • Evaluation design and implementation • Theory-of-change development • Resident survey guide • Resident survey data analysis and reports <p>Coaching: Evaluation, sustainability, collaboration</p> <p>Reinvestment Fund:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access and analysis of data via PolicyMap • Community reports and change reports <p>Community Wealth Partners:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaboration Building Initiative • Sustainability Initiative <p>Opportunity grant for leadership/professional development</p>	<p>Success Measures:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data collection system and tools • Evaluation design and implementation • Theory-of-change development • Resident survey guide • Resident survey data analysis and reports • Custom data-analysis tool • Evaluation coaching <p>Coaching: Strategy development</p> <p>Community Profile (secondary data)</p> <p>Strategy and Impact Demonstration (leveraging data for programmatic strategies)</p>
Cohort Learning Activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peer sharing: Site visits, cohort presentations • Grantee spotlight • Grantee convening • Hot topics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peer sharing • NeighborWorks Training Institute sharing session • Webinars and supplemental materials • Consultant learning forums
Feedback	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listening exercises • Strategic planning review • Site visits • Interim reports 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Phone interviews with project lead staff • Process documentation • Comments from network organization executives

Reflective Practice

NeighborWorks’ Community Impact Measurement Project

The second example of a program designed for learning is NeighborWorks America’s Community Impact Measurement Project. Part of the impetus for this collaborative learning project came from a desire by NeighborWorks to tell a more robust, documented story of its impact in communities around the country.

Many of the now 244 organizations in the NeighborWorks network engage in place-based work in neighborhoods, including affordable

housing development and management, homeownership, financial capability, community health, comprehensive community development, and resident engagement. In 2012, most member organizations were measuring community-level outcomes of these various programs, but the tools and methodologies were not uniform across the network and, therefore, not suitable for aggregating to tell a common story.

NeighborWorks recognized that implementing an evaluation with a common set of outcome measures and tools could be accomplished only

An example of this is the foundation’s “listening exercises,” which play a prominent role in its learning toolbox and have been instrumental in identifying the needs of grantees and residents and making the necessary adjustments to the grant program.

with the full and active participation of most organizations engaged in neighborhood-level work. An internal cross-divisional team developed program goals and parameters, a common methodology, tools, communications strategies, technical assistance guidelines, and recommendations regarding financial support and incentives, all of which were presented to corporate leadership. The resulting Community Impact Measurement Project leverages the strength of the diverse NeighborWorks network to implement the largest comprehensive, national evaluation of its kind. The program debuted in 2013 with the first round of data collection, with network organizations completing a second round of data collection in either 2016 or 2017. The first cohort of the third round of data collection commenced in 2019.

Collaborative learning elements built into the project include an explicit commitment to use results for learning and not as criteria for rating organizations’ overall performance; an embedded element of peer-learning among participating organizations; emphasis on actively seeking feedback from network organizations throughout the process; and high levels of technical assistance and support. NeighborWorks engages internal partners, including Success Measures, in providing technical assistance and learning opportunities for cohort organizations.

For example, Success Measures has developed a series of webinar trainings that not only review the basics of evaluation planning and data collection, but also focus on such timely topics as advances in using technology for data collection in the field and sessions where participants share current data-collection challenges and best practices.

The Value of Collaborative Learning for Funders and Grantees

Connecting Funders to Grantees and Communities

Collaborative learning can help funders ground their work in the realities of their grantees and resident beneficiaries by elevating the importance of the local and resident voice in community revitalization activities and grantmaking.

For the Regional Foundation, connecting with local organizations and residents is the primary benefit for the funder that justifies the investment. This came as a surprise to the foundation, as the expectation was that the primary benefit would be the ability to assess the impact of its work. Both benefits have been realized, but as the program has evolved and grantees have discovered how to be more effective in creating change in their communities, the connection to the resident voice and the community has provided the greater value.

An example of this is the foundation’s “listening exercises,” which play a prominent role in its learning toolbox and have been instrumental in identifying the needs of grantees and residents and making the necessary adjustments to the grant program. Since 2010, the foundation has completed two formal listening exercises to amplify the grantee voice and identify opportunities to strengthen support for communities. The results of the exercises led to significant changes in the Neighborhood Grants Program:

- a Sustainability Initiative, to support an understanding of the actual cost of a place-based initiative, and the corresponding development of a targeted fundraising

strategy that included a prospectus and identification of potential funders;

- lengthening the renewal grant from three to five years to extend operating support during capacity building;
- increased monetary support for collaborative projects to ensure the lead entity had the financial capacity to fulfill its oversight requirements, and that subgrantees had resources to fulfill the evaluation and partnership expectations; and
- technical assistance to help collaborative grantees build the shared vision, structure, capacity, trust, and other elements necessary for successful collaboration.

Assessing Impact

Collaborative learning also helps funders answer the following questions with more confidence: Is our approach to community development changing communities? How can we understand and improve our individual and aggregate impact?

Confirming the impact of its network organizations in communities, NeighborWorks incorporated into its strategic plan the goal that 75 percent of network organizations participating in the Community Impact Measurement Project would demonstrate positive impact in at least one of three identified characteristics of community change. In 2017, after completing the project's second round of data collection, NeighborWorks was able to document this result.

In 2014, the Regional Foundation conducted a strategic review of its Neighborhood Grants Program. In one element of the review, secondary analysis demonstrated that a greater percentage of grantees initially designated as "higher risk" continued to demonstrate positive results compared to grantees designated as "lower risk." This outcome was attributed to the strategic use of high levels of technical assistance provided to grantees throughout the relationship.

A primary benefit for grantees is the knowledge acquired as part of the learning process. The door-to-door resident survey used by foundation grantees and NeighborWorks organizations is the most effective tool for connecting to residents.

Collaborative learning can also do the following:

- Enhance a funder's reputation or brand position as a thought-leader in the field;
- Help funder coalitions demonstrate the benefits from measuring impact and develop greater influence with larger funders, including government agencies, regarding its importance; and
- Increase efficiency for funders and technical assistance providers through sharing of materials, approaches, and experiences.

Gaining Knowledge

A primary benefit for grantees is the knowledge acquired as part of the learning process. The door-to-door resident survey used by foundation grantees and NeighborWorks organizations is the most effective tool for connecting to residents. The survey provides valuable, in-depth insights that are more broadly reflective of a diverse community than, for example, a resident council or forum, or a resident member on a nonprofit board. In part, this is due to the survey methodology that requires random sampling of households.

When residents participate as surveyors, the value of the survey increases and it becomes much more than a tablet and a checklist. It is an

[T]he Dwelling Place, a NeighborWorks organization in Grand Rapids, Michigan, used the Community Impact Measurement survey to launch another, more intensive, process among residents, the city, and other partners that ultimately gave residents a much greater voice in determining change in the city's downtown Heartside neighborhood.

opportunity for residents to engage and connect with neighbors, ensuring that residents' experience is central to how local efforts are focused and how success is measured. In many cases, new leaders emerge who might not have otherwise been included, thereby strengthening the community's social capital. A staff person from one grantee organization observed,

I think one part that stuck out to me was hearing members of the survey team talk about how the survey work affected their perspective on their work as a block leader. It helped them build even deeper relationships with their neighbors and inspired new ideas or new approaches to community organizing efforts they already had underway.

A corresponding benefit to residents from conducting the survey in this way is that by sharing their opinions and having those opinions recognized, residents feel empowered. In practice, the survey process activates community residents through listening and reflecting the results back to residents at the neighborhood level. For example, the Dwelling Place, a NeighborWorks

organization in Grand Rapids, Michigan, used the Community Impact Measurement survey to launch another, more intensive, process among residents, the city, and other partners that ultimately gave residents a much greater voice in determining change in the city's downtown Heartside neighborhood. Heartside, with exclusively multifamily rental housing, had been widely perceived as having a mobile, transient population, so city officials and staff were surprised to learn from the survey that 21 percent of residents have lived in Heartside for 10 years or more. As a follow-up to the survey, Dwelling Place and the city supported a series of community listening sessions to expand and reflect on residents' needs. Now, the neighborhood has a written plan for improvements and there has been progress on several fronts. The experience has also rekindled neighborhood pride, and residents have greater trust in the city as a partner that cares about the future of Heartside and its residents.

Grantees and network organizations have used survey findings to inform strategies, design programs, develop partnerships, engage in collective action, and secure funding from other sources. One NeighborWorks organization discovered a connection between the location of abandoned homes in the neighborhood and pockets of lower resident satisfaction and perceptions of safety. The organization worked with the city to vacate and shutter these vacant structures and strengthen enforcement of city policies relating to abandoned properties.

Sharing Best Practices

Another benefit from collaborative learning is that best practices surface and are shared more quickly. Training webinars, peer-learning cohorts (sustainability and collaborative building initiatives); and special sessions at the NeighborWorks Training Institute⁵ are all venues where attendees share best practices, results, and strategies.

⁵NeighborWorks Training Institute is a five-day "mobile university" offering more than 100 courses related to housing and community development. The institute is held three times a year in major U.S. cities and draws attendees from nearly 2,500 organizations.

Cohort gatherings — like the Regional Foundation’s annual grantee conference, which includes “hot topic” presentations — are another venue that can create an atmosphere for generating big ideas and finding common interests. At one of those conferences, a new land bank for abandoned property in the Wilmington, Delaware, area gained momentum as the result of an animated side conversation between two grantees during a convening. One of the individuals involved in the conversation became the executive director of the land bank and has subsequently focused on forming a state housing advocacy alliance drawing upon relationships she built through foundation grantee conferences and peer cohorts. The foundation also encourages peer learning through site visits for grantees to learn from groups that have successfully addressed similar challenges.

Cross-fertilization of ideas occurs when groups from different neighborhoods share their work or when an organization working locally in a collaborative shares ideas and processes. For example, inadequate street lighting is often associated with lower resident perceptions of safety. One NeighborWorks organization used results from block observations and the resident survey to document this phenomenon and shared this experience with peer groups at a forum. Hearing how the organization worked with the city, the electric utility, and the resident association sparked interest from other attendees in doing something similar in their neighborhoods.

Collaborative learning, when coupled with sustained funding of grantees and their longer-term strategies, can increase impact as both grantees and funders become more effective in identifying strategies that work and more efficient in allocating resources. The approach encourages experimentation — which may be an innovative response to a challenge — and allows for adjustment and recalibration based on the learning that occurs.

The Importance of Partners

Partners can enhance collaborative learning by bringing additional skills, perspectives, and resources to the table. Technical assistance

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providers, expert advisors, and various internal funder units can play critical roles as sources of advice and ideas on program elements and goals.

Technical Assistance Providers

Technical assistance is an important component of grant support and a facilitator of collaborative learning. Regional Foundation grantees and NeighborWorks organizations vary in the level of expertise and experience that they bring to the table, and technical assistance must be designed to meet the organization at its current level of capacity. For both funders, the important message they want grantee organizations to hear is that even if they do not yet have the capacity to meet all the challenges of a project, the funders are committed to providing the support to help get them there.

Success Measures provides technical assistance to both foundation and NeighborWorks grantees in all phases of evaluation. Grantees work one-on-one with a Success Measures consultant to plan and implement the resident survey. With

The Regional Foundation views Success Measures, the Reinvestment Fund, and Community Wealth Partners not as silos of expertise in their respective areas, but as a “think tank” of experts committed to the importance of collaborative learning and community change.

guidance from the consultant, NeighborWorks organizations also design and execute block and parcel observations, and may elect to complete key informant interviews to incorporate an additional perspective on the neighborhood. Grantees all have access to Success Measures resources, including its data-collection tools and the Success Measures Data System, a comprehensive online platform for planning, data collection, and analysis.⁶

At another level, synergies and efficiencies have occurred that benefit each of the funders’ grantees because they have their technical assistance provider — Success Measures — in common. Improvements to tools, materials, and methods are shared within and across the foundation and NeighborWorks cohorts. Coaches, who might work with both sets of grantees, are the connectors for sharing materials, information, and ideas, such as best practices and resources Success Measures posts to an online library.

For example, materials created by a NeighborWorks organization for promoting the resident survey was shared through the library and became the basis for many other organizations’ versions, each customized for a different local community. In other examples,

the Regional Foundation adopted changes to its resident survey based on improvements to the NeighborWorks resident survey, while a survey guide — initially created for foundation grantees — became a valuable reference for a subsequent guide for NeighborWorks organizations.

A ‘Think Tank’ of Experts

The Regional Foundation views Success Measures, the Reinvestment Fund, and Community Wealth Partners not as silos of expertise in their respective areas, but as a “think tank” of experts committed to the importance of collaborative learning and community change. Partners ask difficult questions and engage in high-level dialogue that lead to learning and improvement.

Conversations among foundation partners go beyond the more familiar discussion of grantee progress. Partners view each other as a sounding board and have developed the high level of interpersonal trust that is essential for open and candid conversations.

Internal Partners

NeighborWorks’ Community Impact Measurement Project has benefited from engagement of internal program and service units in addition to Success Measures. Key input from across the corporation has included framing and adjusting the overall approach, interpreting the aggregated results, and expanding opportunities for network organizations to use data from the project to inform their work.

As network organizations began sharing project results, there has been a much clearer understanding and appreciation within both the local organizations and NeighborWorks about the mutual benefits from evaluation and learning. Increasingly, as the organizations identify the value of the project results and they are used in grant applications, reports, peer forums, and communications, other units within NeighborWorks are responding with greater interest in supporting impact measurement and

⁶<https://successmeasures.org/data-system>

collaborative learning and in seeking ways to expand their value. The most recent initiative is a one-year demonstration project with a cohort of NeighborWorks organizations to build capacity in using their Community Impact Measurement data to inform program and service deployment decisions. The project focuses specifically on developing strategies that are targeted to move the needle in particular areas. NeighborWorks has also observed an increase at the corporate level in using data, which had been routinely collected from network organizations, to stimulate organizational learning and expand peer-learning opportunities within the network.

While many elements of impact measurement are supported internally, Success Measures engages external consultants as coaches for local organizations; the structure and quality of these coaching relationships reflects collaborative learning. Project coaches have regular monthly calls to share successes and challenges and suggest improvements or changes in processes and materials. Coaches also tap local organization staff to share best practices during topical webinars. Success Measures draws on individuals in the coaching pool for expertise in specific areas, including statistical analysis, recruiting and managing volunteers, data-collection methodologies, mapping, and graphics. At the end of the project, coaches are asked to provide feedback for future cohorts.

Building a Collaborative Learning Approach

Organizations will have different objectives and contexts for collaborative learning. NeighborWorks America launched its impact evaluation with the Success Measures team as part of a corporate commitment to strengthening its comprehensive community-revitalization strategies, while ensuring that the learning was shared among local organizations and across key stakeholders within NeighborWorks itself. The Regional Foundation designed its initial grantmaking program with collaborative learning as its core, drawing on external partners to help grantees build capacity and to enhance overall learning. Large and small organizations

It is important that the commitment is sustained. NeighborWorks America incorporated outcome goals based on the aggregate community impact results into its public strategic plan, which is one approach to cementing long-term commitment and improving sustainability.

alike can incorporate the basic elements of collaborative learning into their grantmaking approach, with minor adjustments for scale. The following section describes those elements and provides examples.

Commit to a Vision

Funders must have a vision and a commitment to collaborative learning, recognizing that while returns from the investment will be small in the beginning, they will increase over time. For maximum benefit, staying the course means continuing to invest in capacity building and ongoing learning for a minimum of three to five years.

It is important that the commitment is sustained. NeighborWorks America incorporated outcome goals based on the aggregate community impact results into its public strategic plan, which is one approach to cementing long-term commitment and improving sustainability. The Regional Foundation's board expressed its continuing commitment to a collaborative learning approach when it accepted the results and recommendations from the 2014 Strategic Review.

Design for Learning

Aligning structural elements of the grant with overall learning objectives can facilitate and reinforce the emphasis on learning. Organizations

NeighborWorks, the Regional Foundation, Success Measures, the Reinvestment Fund, and Community Wealth Partners share a commitment to long-term investment in community change, participatory evaluation, a resident-driven approach to community development, and collaborative learning.

can accomplish this by incorporating the following into the grant structure:

- Create systems and processes that support and reinforce the importance of learning, and
- Be deliberate about asking for and using feedback.

The Regional Foundation structures its grantee reports and site visits as opportunities to encourage and reinforce the importance of learning. Lessons learned are captured in each report rather than at the end of the grant, so that they are recorded and remembered as they occur. Grantees describe the reports as very detailed and time consuming, but believe the effort is worthwhile because the depth of reporting encourages thinking and reflection. During site visits, grantees expect in-depth conversations about their work, including examples where the organization has excelled and where it has not been as successful. The foundation calls this “looking for outliers” — those exceptions that beg more conversation about why something worked exceptionally well and why something else did not. The ensuing discussion always ends

with this question: “What can the foundation do to help support you?”

NeighborWorks and Success Measures have incorporated regular feedback into the Community Impact Measurement Project. Regular check-ins with project participants are an integral component, with feedback reviewed in real time to adjust pacing, training, technical questions, and other challenges. After the first round of data collection, NeighborWorks interviewed executive directors to identify pain points and how the project could provide additional value to network organizations. Feedback systems are also an opportunity to reinforce trust by connecting changes in a program or process directly back to input from grantees or participants. NeighborWorks was able to strengthen trust by demonstrating its responsiveness to participant feedback from the first round of the Community Impact Measurement Project to changes made in the second round.

Choose the Right Partners and Build Trust Together

When choosing technical assistance partners, shared values and similar theories of change are important criteria. NeighborWorks, the Regional Foundation, Success Measures, the Reinvestment Fund, and Community Wealth Partners share a commitment to long-term investment in community change, participatory evaluation, a resident-driven approach to community development, and collaborative learning.

As with other kinds of collaboration, trust is essential for collaborative learning. All aspects of the grant and the grant relationship must be designed to build and reinforce trust, which leads to the kind of transparency and openness that allows grantees to feel comfortable sharing challenges along with successes. This is where learning occurs, as funder and grantee work together to develop a solution that may include an innovative approach, bringing more resources to the table, or adjusting priorities.

The Regional Foundation’s internal culture reflects the importance of trust building. By consistently and actively listening to and engaging

with grantees, foundation staff demonstrate that they are learners in real time from and with the grantees. Grant officers view themselves as resources to meet the needs of grantees and residents, rather than as compliance officers whose role is to monitor the terms of the grant. NeighborWorks' connection with its network of organizations is one of affiliation, cementing a relationship of trust that provides multiple avenues of support and interaction. This is grounded in a local relationship manager, who serves as a trusted advisor and liaison between the affiliate organizations and program initiatives within the national organization.

The structure of both the NeighborWorks and the Regional Foundation funding models, where there is significant investment in grantee organizations over the long term, is conducive to building trust. But this does not mean that funders making smaller investments over a shorter time frame cannot implement elements of collaborative learning. Funders with portfolios with a significant number of repeat grantees may already have the types of relationships with these grantees that are needed for collaboration. Other elements and activities designed to build trust can be incorporated into an existing program.

Expect Participation

Collaborative learning must include both an incentive and a commitment for all parties to participate in active learning. As the power entity in the relationship, the funder creates the environment within which the learning occurs and must set the expectation that the purpose of the evaluation, grantee convening, site visit, or other activity is learning and improvement.

The Regional Foundation does not deviate from the expectation that its staff and grantees must participate and actively contribute to learning opportunities. Completion of the door-to-door resident survey during the planning grant and at end of the implementation and renewal grants is also nonnegotiable. The survey process is time-consuming, resource intensive, and challenging. Because many of the benefits become most evident during the process or after completion, first-time grantees would probably not

Organizations with a program focus in community building and engagement, community stabilization, and community initiatives are encouraged to participate; other network organizations may elect to participate and will receive the same level of support.

elect to participate if given a choice. After the fact, however, almost all grantees agree that the survey experience was invaluable to building relationships with residents, identifying potential leaders, and understanding resident needs.

NeighborWorks uses a slightly different approach to participation in the Community Impact Measurement Project. Organizations with a program focus in community building and engagement, community stabilization, and community initiatives are encouraged to participate; other network organizations may elect to participate and will receive the same level of support. Participation in technical assistance, training, and peer sharing is voluntary and is seen as an indicator that these activities add value for grantees.

Provide Resources

Monetary support designated for learning is essential. NeighborWorks makes sustained, long-term, flexible organization-level operating and capital investment in network organizations, supplemented by support for targeted projects like Community Impact Measurement. Each network organization receives the same amount for the project; although the use is discretionary, most use the funds for project expenses.

After the first round of the community evaluation, NeighborWorks learned that the structure

More important than achieving a “successful” outcome is that organizations learn from the experience and use the knowledge to continue to progress. NeighborWorks similarly precludes the use of Community Impact Measurement results in organizational performance assessment.

organizations to use common measurement tools so that the results can be aggregated. But individual organizations are also encouraged to add their own survey questions, with the assistance of a Success Measures consultant who can ensure that the new content brings the same rigor and focus as the common set. Similarly, Regional Foundation grantees are supported in building out evaluations and learning processes for other aspects of the neighborhood plans.

While both NeighborWorks and the foundation allow some flexibility in the resident survey protocol, being flexible does not mean that rigorous standards and expectations are relaxed. Methods do matter, but there are also circumstances where reflective dialogue and adjustment are appropriate. For example, as long as random sampling is preserved, an organization may combine door-to-door with online methods, or mail data-collection tools to multifamily properties with limited internet access.

Flexibility is particularly critical in a long-term investment scenario, because local environments are dynamic. An example is adjusting milestones and outcomes when housing-market conditions change, an investor in a project pulls out, or a new opportunity consistent with the overall plan objective presents itself.

Focus on Progress

Both the foundation and NeighborWorks work with organizations to identify challenges or shortcomings to improve performance, rather than punitively withdrawing support and resources that might be needed to address those challenges. Continued financial support of Regional Foundation grantees is tied to performance against specific milestones and activities, but it is not tied to reaching specific outcomes from those activities. More important than achieving a “successful” outcome is that organizations learn from the experience and use the knowledge to continue to progress. NeighborWorks similarly precludes the use of Community Impact Measurement results in organizational performance assessment.

for providing support also matters. Providing a larger portion of resources at the start of the project and being clear on the timing and amount of additional funding was important to ensure organizations felt they could fully engage.

The foundation’s support also includes a designated amount for implementing the resident survey; the costs of all other learning activities, including technical assistance, coaching, and peer learning, are paid directly by the foundation. The foundation anticipates that 10 percent to 15 percent of its total annual grant support will be for learning, which includes technical assistance, grantee convenings, peer-to-peer visits, and access to data systems. While the level of overall grant support diminishes over time, support for learning continues at the same level throughout the continuum of grants.

Embrace Flexibility

Flexibility helps to keep the ownership and focus of the learning at the local level. Circumstances and conditions differ across communities, and program structure should provide room for all stakeholders to answer questions that are important to their individual objectives while simultaneously providing for shared learning. For example, NeighborWorks requires network

Moreover, neither organization will compare grantees to each other or to an aggregate in any reporting. Both NeighborWorks and the foundation are committed to confidentiality and will not share any results without grantee consent. To violate any of these protocols would be a serious breach of trust with grantees.

Conclusion

The long-term approach to collaborative learning explored in this article is a result of and a benefit from the structure of the relationships that the Wells Fargo Regional Foundation and NeighborWorks America have with the organizations in their respective portfolio or network. The choice is strategic and a prominent part of each organization's structure. While some elements of the model presented here might be specific to the longer-term funding or partner relationships discussed, the overall tenets of collaborative learning are generally applicable. It is possible for organizations to incorporate learning values into grant structures and interpersonal interactions, and to develop a cohort of grantees to begin learning together.

It is also a misconception that collaborative learning requires an internal infrastructure, such as an evaluation or learning department or a learning officer. The approach can be implemented at any scale, with the same principles applied to an individual program officer or to a large foundation. In fact, a smaller foundation or single program officer may have more flexibility to respond quickly to opportunities or make changes in its approach than a larger organization with a more public strategy. What is necessary for collaborative learning to be successful, in addition to the elements discussed in this article, is an underlying commitment to acting in ways that demonstrate respect for the expertise and experience of grantee organizations and the people they serve.

Organizations interested in integrating collaborative learning into grantmaking should keep the following in mind:

- Start small, experiment, evaluate, and adjust. Don't let fear of the unknown stand

in the way of considering collaborative learning for your organization.

- Provide resources and open doors. Learning is a journey that funder and grantee make together, and the funder's role is to facilitate reaching the destination.
- Create an environment for learning that encourages and celebrates curiosity and camaraderie. Learning should be fun and, ultimately, very satisfying.

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