

**Defining Community Capacity:
A Framework and Implications from a
Comprehensive Community Initiative**

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade or so, there has been a significant renewed emphasis on community-based approaches to promoting social change and economic development, delivering services, and addressing the needs of people in poverty. In the urban context, “community” has generally referred to *neighborhood*—a geographically defined subarea of the city in which residents are presumed to share both spatial proximity and some degree of mutual circumstance, need, priorities, and access to the broader metropolitan area and the systems that have an impact on their lives. The current generation of these efforts, perhaps most clearly exemplified by a growing set of “comprehensive community initiatives” (CCIs) operating across the country, focuses in particular on notions of comprehensive development within neighborhoods and the importance of “community building” as both a means to neighborhood transformation and as a principal outcome goal. While much of the impetus for these efforts has come from the nonprofit sector and from foundations that have designed, catalyzed, and funded numerous initiatives to explore and promote community-building efforts in neighborhoods across the country, increasing interest can be seen in the public sector as well, from city- and state-driven initiatives to the enactment of the federal Empowerment Zone legislation in over 100 local communities.

Fundamentally, community building in these efforts concerns strengthening the *capacity* of communities to identify priorities and opportunities and to work to foster and sustain positive neighborhood change. The notion of community “capacity building” is both explicit and pervasive in the rhetoric that describes, the missions that guide, and, to a greater or lesser extent, the activities that embody these efforts. However, as with other vanguard terms used to catalyze and drive action in the field (“community,” “comprehensiveness,” “empowerment”), there is limited clarity about the meaning of “capacity” and “capacity building” at the neighborhood level. What, in concrete, operational terms, does community capacity mean? What are the components of community capacity within neighborhoods? How might these components be operationalized through planned efforts? In what ways can they be seen, measured, and understood in action?

This paper has three goals. First, it suggests a definitional framework for understanding community capacity. Second, it explores the attempt to operationalize a capacity-building agenda through the examination of two contrasting case studies.¹ Third, it suggests some preliminary conclusions about the possibilities and constraints of community capacity building through social-change efforts like CCIs.

¹ Empirically, efforts to build “community capacity” in urban neighborhoods focus on a range of strategies and operate under a number of different auspices, including CCIs, community development corporations, neighborhood associations, community-based service providers, and settlement houses. The two case studies at the center of this paper are both part of a multi-year, multi-site CCI.

DATA AND METHODS

The analysis presented in this paper is based on three principal sources: (1) a review of existing literature, (2) key-informant interviews with participants in the field, and (3) case-study data derived from an ongoing implementation study of a four-site, first-generation CCI. The literature review included both applied research and academic literature from a number of disciplines on defining capacity and on community structure and functioning, as well as program literature that describes the intent, structure, and activities of particular community-building efforts (including CCIs, CDCs, settlement houses, empowerment zones, and municipal efforts at building participatory neighborhood-based governance mechanisms). Key-informant interviews were conducted in two stages. The first round focused on individuals with a broad purview of the field and the ways in which community capacity-building efforts are being operationalized.

These included foundation representatives, government officials, academics, and community-development practitioners. The second round looked more closely at how these concepts are operationalized in specific instances by focusing on individuals directly engaged in efforts whose goals are explicitly defined as relating to building “community capacity.” These were largely directors of community-based organizations or initiatives. Case-study data is based on the analysis of site-produced documentation and on extensive field research that includes both observation and extended qualitative interviews with a panel of respondents, including virtually all initiative participants and key informants in each site not directly connected to the initiative.² Data from each of these sources have been coded and entered into text database programs and analyzed based on a qualitative scheme derived deductively from initial research questions and refined through an inductive analysis of observations and interview data.

² Case-study data is drawn from research conducted as part of a long-term implementation study of the Neighborhood and Family Initiative conducted by the Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago. For a more detailed analysis of the initiative’s unfolding over time, see Chaskin (1992), Chaskin and Ogletree (1993), Chaskin and Joseph (1995), and Chaskin, Chipenda-Dansokho and Joseph (1997).

COMMUNITY CAPACITY AND CAPACITY BUILDING: A DEFINITIONAL FRAMEWORK

The word capacity denotes both the idea of *containing* (holding, storing) and the notion of *ability* (of mind, of action). Applied to communities, the notion implies the existence within them of particular capabilities, faculties, or powers to *do* certain things. These capabilities may have an impact on a number of aspects of community functioning, but in the context of community building are all concerned with ways to help promote or sustain the well-being of the community and its components (individuals, informal groups, organizations, social interactions, the physical environment). Community capacity defines, in a general way, communities that “work”; it is what makes well-functioning communities function well. Although at a fundamental level the abilities that define community capacity are contained within the neighborhood, they must also incorporate connections to and commerce with the larger systems of which it is a part.

To date, there are relatively few—and all fairly recent—attempts to explicitly conceptualize community capacity in the literature. Some definitions of capacity that relate to communities and community building focus on the existence of commitment, skills, resources, and problem-solving abilities, often connected to either a particular program or institution (e.g., Meyer, 1994). Others emphasize the participation of individual community members in a process of relationship-building, community planning, decision making, and action (e.g., Gittell et al., 1995; Eichler, & Hoffman, n.d.). Some treatments have developed the concept to be applied relatively narrowly within particular fields, for example, relating to public health (e.g., Freudenberg et al., 1995) or to the productive and organizational capacities of community development organizations (e.g., Glickman & Servon, 1997). Others, building from the literature of related constructs such as community competence and empowerment, tend to define the concept generally, for example, as “the community’s ability to pursue its chosen purposes and course of action” (Fawcett et al., 1995, p. 682), or as the aggregate of individual and community-level “endowments” in interaction with conditions in the environment that impede or promote success (Jackson et al., 1997). Still others treat community capacity as a set of specified “assets” that exist within communities’ individual members, local associations, and institutions (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993).

In addition to the (relatively sparse) literature explicitly focused on the notion of community capacity, there is substantial literature that is relevant for developing an understanding of community capacity by providing insight into its likely components and the relationships among them. The definitional framework presented here draws from both sets of literature, as well as from the perspectives of respondents in the field, to provide a more comprehensive definition of the phenomenon of community capacity and capacity building as a whole, to identify its components and the relationships among them, and to provide an organizational schema through which to examine attempts to build community capacity on the ground. The intent of this exercise is to clarify the meaning of community capacity as it is used in the field in order to promote a more effective use of the notion to guide policy and programmatic action and to consider ways to identify, measure, and evaluate progress toward the creation of community capacity and its effects.

A Definition and Framework

As a starting point, I suggest the following summary definition:

Community capacity is the interaction of human, organizational, and social capital existing within a given community that can be leveraged to solve collective problems and improve or maintain the well-being of a given community. It may operate through informal social processes and/or organized efforts by individuals, organizations, and the networks of association among them and between them and the broader systems of which the community is a part.

The framework proposed goes beyond the definition of community capacity itself, incorporating in addition components that speak to intentional attempts to *build* community capacity, the influence of context, and suppositions about community-level outcomes. The first three dimensions concern community capacity *per se*. The first describes the *fundamental characteristics* of communities with capacity; the second identifies the *levels of social interaction* within which capacity is embedded in a community and through which it may be actively engaged, supported, or built; and the third concerns the particular *functions* of community capacity once it is engaged. The fourth dimension speaks to capacity building, focusing on the *strategies* that may be consciously developed to promote particular kinds of community capacity toward the accomplishment of particular kinds of community outcomes. The fifth and sixth dimensions describe influences and effects. The fifth concerns *conditioning influences* that have an influence on community capacity, either contributing to or inhibiting its existence or attempts to build it; the sixth pertains to *community-level outcomes* beyond those associated with community capacity itself.

Dimension One: Fundamental Characteristics

What does a community “with capacity” look like? Part of the challenge here concerns the many ways in which community itself is defined and the range of goods it is expected to provide (Chaskin, 1997; Sampson, 1999). Even within the focus of geographically defined communities (leaving aside professional, ethnic, or other communities of interest), local communities are identified and bounded in a number of different ways and are presumed to be endowed with a wide array of attributes. They are seen as functional units for the delivery (and sometimes production) of goods and services; as the nexus of interpersonal networks; as political units around which collective action may be mobilized; as affective units of identity and belonging for residents.

In fact, local communities (neighborhoods, in cities) are defined, experienced, and used differently by different people. Further, they are differentially endowed with types and levels of resources—services, physical infrastructure, housing, jobs, education, income—that can be drawn on by its residents, and this differentiation often corresponds with the nature of residential segregation across communities by race and class (see, e.g., Jargowsky, 1997; Massey & Eggers, 1990; Massey & Denton, 1993).

While treatments of community often stress affective aspects of community solidarity, given the increased mobility of the population over the lifecourse and the availability of transportation and

technology that allows easy communication across large distances, most intimate ties tend no longer to be bound to the local neighborhood (Freudenberg, 1986; Wellman, 1979). More casual and instrumental ties continue to operate at the local level, however, though these are experienced differently by different people. Individuals who are more affluent and more highly integrated into the larger society (due to age, education, employment, and marital status) are also less dependent on the local community for the provision of many of their basic daily needs. For those less affluent and less well-integrated (e.g., children, women with young children, the elderly, people of color) the neighborhood is likely to be a more important source of goods and services, as well as the locus of a smaller set of instrumental, more frequently engaged relationships (Lee & Campbell, 1993; Campbell & Lee, 1992; Lee et al., 1991). Where the necessary facilities, institutions, and services are not available, however, or where there are serious barriers to engaging in networks of relationships within the neighborhood due, for example, to fear of crime and victimization, residents who can, may seek to concentrate activity and connections beyond rather than within the neighborhood (Furstenberg, 1993).

Given this differentiation in neighborhood use and experience, can one think generically about community capacity? Will a community that “works” look the same in the suburbs as in the city, among the affluent as among the poor, in heterogeneous contexts as in homogeneous ones, or across neighborhoods dominated by different racial and ethnic groups?

Within the context of community capacity-building efforts, the neighborhoods defined tend to be poor, largely communities of color, with clearly identifiable “assets” on which to draw. The intent is to build on those assets in order to support a process of development that improves the quality of life of the community’s residents and fosters the sustainable well-being of its families, children, and institutions. Given the relative importance of these neighborhoods in the daily lives of their residents and the relative paucity (which is not to say absence) of individual resources within them, community capacity here tends to involve a more intensive and ongoing engagement with local resources—resident volunteers, relationships, institutions, organizations—than might be the case in more affluent communities where individuals are more mobile and have a greater array of personal resources to seek out the satisfaction of their needs in the larger marketplace. In the latter case, community capacity may be seen to be largely “latent” in the individuals and normative institutions that exist, occasionally roused to action in response to particular threats or emerging needs.

Given this orientation, and based on the interpretations of our key informants and the implications of the literature on community functioning and social capital, the current framework suggests four fundamental characteristics of community capacity: (1) a sense of community; (2) a level of commitment among community members; (3) mechanisms of problem solving; and (4) access to resources. Different communities may have different levels of each, and most communities will have some positive level of all four. Although the existence of these characteristics is a matter of degree, there are likely threshold levels along the continuum that are necessary in order for the community to accomplish certain specific ends.

The first characteristic is the existence of a *sense of community*, a degree of connectedness among members and a recognition of mutuality of circumstance. One component of a sense of

community may be the existence of a threshold level of collectively held values, norms, and vision. It may include both an affective dimension (including the existence of a sense of trust, “ownership,” belonging, and recognized mutuality) and a cognitive dimension (including the ways in which community members ascribe meaning to their membership in the group) (see, e.g., McMillian & Chavis, 1986). However, while often described in affective terms, a sense of community that characterizes neighborhoods “that work” may also be based largely on instrumental values—the recognition of shared circumstance based on investment (for example, in housing stock) or use (for example, of a neighborhood school or park)—that allow people to come together in ways that support a common good (Crenshaw & St. John, 1989; Guest & Lee, 1983; Suttles, 1972).

The second characteristic of a community with capacity is the existence of a level of *commitment* on the part of particular individuals, groups, or organizations that take responsibility for what happens in the community and that invest time, energy, and other resources in promoting its well being. There are thus two essential aspects of this characteristic: (1) the existence of community members who see themselves as “stakeholders” in the collective well-being of the neighborhood (or who see their self-interest as tied to that of the neighborhood as a whole) and (2) their willingness to perform actively in that role. In the words of one respondent:

I think there’s a difference between being a resident and being an active resident... [People] have to be willing to invest themselves in some activity beyond just living from day to day. They’ve got to be willing to volunteer. They’ve got to be willing to help their neighbors. It could be as simple as helping your neighbor, as simple as helping an elderly person with their groceries or something. There’s a sense then of community at that point that we’re all in it together.

Individual residents are one source of this commitment, and those who participate in this way are generally a minority of the residents, often of somewhat higher socioeconomic status than much of the neighborhood, and often in response to some immediate issue, conflict, or crisis (Berry et al., 1993; Crenson, 1983). But the commitment to act may also be institutionalized within local organizations, which act as mechanisms for resident mobilization; as mediating institutions for linking residents with the broader systems of decision making, production, and provision; and as organized resources for the local production of public goods and services (see, e.g., Logan & Rabrenovic, 1990; Williams, 1988; Knoke & Wood, 1981; Berger & Neuhaus, 1977).

Third, a community with capacity will have *mechanisms for problem-solving* through which commitment can be translated into action. The ability to address issues, identify priorities, and solve problems is an important component of virtually all definitions of capacity relating to community, and was the element of community capacity most often stressed by respondents:

I see a community’s capacity as its own ability to take charge of and make decisions about what happens in the life of neighbors and residents in a community. In particular, in terms of people’s own ability to impact funders, policy-makers, as a collective group and not just individually.

In the same way that commitment is resident in both individuals and institutions, there are a number of possible mechanisms—both formal and informal—through which a community may identify and address problems or pursue collective goals. Such mechanisms may include individual community members (e.g., a neighbor who routinely calls the alderman to identify gaps in service or organizes fellow residents around a clean-up or voter-registration drive); voluntary associations and neighborhood organizations (see, e.g., Knoke, 1990; Mesch & Schwirian, 1996); structured planning and implementation mechanisms provided by community-initiative governance bodies (see, e.g., Giles, 1993); structured group processes for conflict resolution (see, e.g., Dodson et al., n.d.; Thomas et al., 1988; Carlson, 1988); and informal interactions among neighbors who get together to address commonly identified concerns.

The final characteristic of a community with capacity is access to resources (economic, human, physical, political) beyond the neighborhood. Two emphases regarding resources should be highlighted here. First is that both internal and external resources exist and are required; second is that the types of resources to which access is necessary are varied. Neighborhoods are embedded and intimately tied to the broader socioeconomic systems of the metropolis and region, and their ability to achieve and maintain stability and economic well-being is largely dependent on policy being made and implemented beyond their borders and on the nature of macrostructural changes in the metropolitan area as a whole, such as changes in economic opportunities for income generation and neighborhood sorting processes such as discrimination in housing markets (see, e.g., Jargowsky, 1997). Within neighborhoods, however, there are numerous resources, provided by the skills and knowledge of individual residents, the commitment and activities of neighborhood associations, and the facilities and services of local institutions, that contribute to a community's capacity to address concerns and support the healthy functioning of its children and families (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993).

Dimension Two: Levels of Social Agency

Where does community capacity reside and how is it engaged? As suggested in the brief discussion above, community capacity is engaged through some combination of three levels of social interaction: the individual, organizations, and networks of association. These levels may be points of entry for planned intervention (e.g., through training or leadership development, organizational development, or community organizing) or may be seen as the levels at which certain social resources exist and certain social processes are engaged by community actors in the course of their lives and work. They are illustrative of the existence or building of *community* capacity only insofar as they can be connected to a collective agenda or the realization of collective well-being at the community level.

The *individual* level concerns the skills, knowledge, and resources of individual residents in the community. Such attributes have been referred to as “human capital,” and investments in increasing the human capital of individuals can have significant influence in their ability to garner resources and improve their economic well-being (Becker, 1975). The existence within communities of human capital among its residents contributes to community capacity through its availability as a collective resource and through specific, individual contributions.

The level of *organizations* focuses on organized collectivities, including community-based organizations (service providers, businesses, development organizations), local branches of larger institutions (banks, schools, major retail establishments) and smaller, organized groups (neighborhood associations, social clubs, tenants, and homeowners' associations). Community capacity at this level might be reflected in the ability of such collectivities to carry out their functions responsively, effectively, and efficiently as part of the larger system of actors and processes to which they are connected, within and beyond the community. Appropriate criteria for measuring organizational capacity—the ability of an organization to effectively accomplish its goals—may vary significantly from organization to organization depending on the nature of its work (Scott, 1992). To the extent that organizations can be seen as a component of and mechanism for creating community capacity, such criteria are likely to go beyond a simple accounting of production outputs to incorporate issues of constituent representation, political influence, and the ability to engage in instrumental, interorganizational relationships (see, e.g., Glickman & Servon, 1997).

Networks of association concerns social structure—networks of relationships among individuals and organizations or other collectivities. Among individuals, the existence of networks of positive social relations among actors that provide a context of trust and support and represent access to resources (information, connections, money) is known as “social capital” (Putnam, 1993; Coleman, 1988). Within a community system, the notion of social capital can be extended to organizations operating as “nodes” within structural space (Laumann, Galaskiewicz, & Marsden, 1978), in which an infrastructure of instrumental relations (which can take several forms) provides individual organizations with greater access to resources and a socially defined context that informs the decision making within organizations and structures relations among them (Powell & Friedkin, 1987; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). While human capital and organizational capacities exist within individual nodes of a social system, social capital and its counterpart among organizations are collective phenomena, inherent in the structure of relations within the system.

The shape and extent of social networks that contribute to community capacity include both horizontal ties within the community and vertical ties to actors in the broader political, social, and economic environment (Warren, 1978). Network ties differ in scope, strength, function, and use (Mitchell, 1969) and are not evenly distributed among actors in a system. While multiple “strong ties” may be evidence of greater social cohesion in a community, “weak ties”—less intimate and intense relationships that tend to act as a bridge between actors whose social network ties do not significantly overlap—are instrumental in connecting the community to other sources of information, resources, and influence (Granovetter, 1973). People or organizations who operate at the point of connection among different networks are able to wield significant influence and power within the community; as brokers within the system, they are better able to negotiate transactions because they have greater access to timely information as well as greater control over information and opportunities as they arise (Burt, 1992; Knoke, 1990; Laumann, Galaskiewicz, & Marsden, 1978).

Dimension 3: Functions of Community Capacity

The functional dimension of the framework concerns the question “capacity for what?” It speaks to the *intent* of engaging (or building) particular capacities through particular levels of social interaction. Community capacity may be engaged—through the efforts of individuals, organizations, and/or informal relations within networks of association—to perform normative functions of promoting shared values, socializing the young, or providing mechanisms of informal social control, or may be directed toward more specialized functions. Often, while ultimately striving for the former, community-capacity building efforts will focus largely on the latter, attempting, for example, to build a local capacity for planning and governance, for the production of particular goods and services (such as housing or job training and placement), or for the ability to inform, organize, and mobilize residents toward collective action. Building capacity for these particular functions is meant to lead to two kinds of community-level outcomes: an increase in sustainable community capacity overall (and the characteristics of community that exemplify it), and the achievement of particular goals, such as better services, greater influence on public policy decision making, or greater residential stability.

Dimension 4: Strategies for Building Community Capacity

This strategic dimension concerns the *means* through which community capacity is intentionally built or engaged, that is, the ways in which planned interventions attempt to leverage activity at one or more levels of engagement (dimension 2) to accomplish one or more defined functions (dimension 3) toward the building of characteristics of community capacity (dimension 1) or other associated outcome goals (better services, greater economic well being, etc.). Community capacity-building efforts tend to focus on some combination of four major strategic areas: leadership development, community organizing, organizational development, and fostering collaborative relations among organizations. Often, these broad strategies are brought together under the umbrella of a local governance mechanism that guides initiative planning and implementation, and that tends to take on the more expansive role of speaking for and acting on behalf of the neighborhood more broadly (Chaskin and Garg 1997). Within these broader strategic thrusts, efforts may focus on programmatic approaches (job training and placement, structuring access to financial opportunities) or more procedural ones (voter registration, block-club organizing). They may also operate through any of a number of instrumentalities, including informal social processes (such as voluntary self-help networks); organized, community-based programs and processes (such as the work of community-based organizations and associations); and formal, targeted initiatives and programmatic efforts (such as externally catalyzed community-building initiatives).

Dimension 5: Conditioning Influences

What factors influence the existence or engagement of community capacity? This dimension concerns those *mediating circumstances* that may be facilitating or inhibiting influences on the existence or ability to build community capacity.

For example, while a sense of community may be both a “cause and effect” of local action within neighborhoods, supporting the greater active commitment of residents to participate in problem-solving activities and seek out and apply resources to the collective good (Chavis &

Wandersman, 1990), there are clear contributing factors that either support or thwart the possibility of creating it. In particular, residential stability increases acquaintance networks that support a sense of social cohesion and the likelihood of participation in local activities (Sampson, 1988, 1991). In addition, the existence of informal mechanisms of social control and a threshold level of a sense of safety, again connected to stability and existence of viable social networks, provide a framework within which a sense of community can more easily be fostered (Sampson, 1999; Bursik & Grasmick, 1993; Skogan, 1986). The necessity of “safe space” or a “system of safety” within communities was often cited by respondents as fundamental to promoting or inhibiting the growth or engagement of community capacity. In the words of one:

To the extent that people feel unsafe—they become imprisoned in their homes and will not let anyone else in their home—that sense of personal safety or that threat to personal safety is a disconnection from everybody else. At the same time, if you have no safe space because schools are closed at three o'clock and recreation centers are non-existent—so there are no places for people to congregate to get to know each other, to discuss, to exchange, to argue, to debate—I think those things militate against your helping a low-capacity community move toward [becoming] an enhanced capacity community.

Similarly, macrostructural forces, such as the structure of economic opportunity at the regional level and the influences of migration, racial and economic segregation, and the unequal distribution of resources and influence across communities, may constrain a community’s ability to organize effectively or gain access to resources from the systems that are to serve and support it (see, e.g., Jargowsky, 1997; Teitz, 1989). Alternatively, positive changes in these influences may provide particular opportunities, at particular points in time, to take advantage of resources that were not previously available.

Dimension 6: Outcomes

The final dimension of the framework concerns the posited additional outcomes (beyond the creation of an enhanced community capacity) that might be sought in any community-building effort. The kinds of outcomes looked for are likely to be connected to the functions of community capacity that exist or are being built. Thus, if an effort is focusing on a strategy of organizational development to enhance the ability of CBOs to produce particular goods and services for the community (e.g., housing, job training, etc.), then the outcomes looked for include both an increased community capacity in the form of mechanisms for problem solving and other outcomes such as the availability of better services and greater residential stability.

Relationships Among Dimensions of the Framework

The framework should be seen as dynamic, in which the broad dimensions relate to each other in particular ways and in which particular components may have a differential effect on one another (see Figure 1). (The table and figures follow the References.) Thus, the characteristics of community capacity operate through engagement at one or more levels of social interaction. For example, a “sense of community” may be engendered through the interaction of residents in informal networks, as well as at the institutional level through the work of schools, community

organizations, or businesses providing facilities and opportunities, and sponsoring activities that promote interaction and exchange.

Similarly, action at these levels of social interaction is engaged for particular functions, drawing on community capacity for particular reasons. If community capacity is sought for purposes of advocacy—for example, organizing the collective voice and will of the community to influence public policy around a particular issue—then mechanisms for problem solving that draw on the commitment of community members and a recognition of mutual circumstance (dimension 1) may be engaged through the involvement of individuals, organizations, and networks of association (dimension 2) toward that end. Engaging community capacity for this particular function may in turn both enhance and sustain the community's ongoing capacity in this regard, and may lead to other outcomes, such as influence on decision making around the distribution of public resources that affect the community.

Exercising community capacity toward particular ends may be a conscious effort, entailing the strategic intervention of actors (dimension 4) within the community, beyond it, or both in combination. Again, strategies may build on or catalyze activities through various levels of social agency, and may seek both to draw on existing capacities and to build them. Thus—keeping with the advocacy function—political mobilization strategies and grassroots organizing may be among the strategic actions taken (by a local organization, an individual, an initiative) to draw on and increase the community's capacity for successfully influencing policy on a particular issue.

Finally, contextual factors may condition (promote or constrain) both the existence of various aspects of community capacity and its engagement. Again, staying with the above example, the existence of a threshold level of safety within the neighborhood and of a degree of residential stability and density of acquaintance that promotes knowledge, trust, and social interaction among residents is likely to support both a sense of community among residents and their access to mechanisms of problem solving at different levels of interaction (networks of association, organizations). These factors facilitate the likely success of mobilization strategies that in turn promote the possibility of successful advocacy, assuming sufficient access to resources within the neighborhood and beyond it in the systems it seeks to affect.

BUILDING COMMUNITY CAPACITY: ONE INITIATIVE, TWO APPROACHES

Having presented a framework for defining and exploring attempts to build community capacity through planned change efforts, I now turn to two contrasting empirical examples within a single multisite project, the Neighborhood and Family Initiative (NFI). Launched by the Ford Foundation in 1990, NFI is one of the oldest of the current generation of CCIs.³ Like other efforts in the field, NFI is characterized by four basic components: (1) the identification of a *geographically defined target area* (a “neighborhood” or “community”); (2) a focus on *comprehensive development*, including an attempt to link economic, physical, and social development activities; (3) support for a process of *strategic planning* based on a recognition of community assets and available resources as well as needs; and (4) an insistence on *community participation* in the governance of planning and implementing development activities at the local level.⁴

The Neighborhood and Family Initiative was given a similar form in each of four participant sites (Detroit, Hartford, Memphis, and Milwaukee). In each city, a community foundation was chosen as the local fiscal agent, and was charged with the identification of a target neighborhood, the hiring of a staff director, and the creation of a neighborhood collaborative. In turn, the collaboratives were charged with identifying neighborhood needs and their connections to one another, and with developing strategies to address these needs. The membership of each of the four collaboratives was structured to include residents of the target neighborhood, neighborhood business owners and professionals, and representatives from the city’s public, private, and non-profit sectors. The notion was that by bringing together a wide range of participants with different experiences, different fields of expertise, and different access to resources, all around the same table and on “equal footing,” the group would be able to catalyze broad-based and sustainable neighborhood change that was both grounded in the needs and priorities of its residents and connected to the broader systems that have an impact on its operation. The intent was to promote an ongoing capacity within the neighborhood for governance, planning, implementation, and informed interaction with actors and resources beyond the neighborhood.

How such a capacity would ultimately be organized and sustained was not prescribed at the outset. One option was for the collaborative—the governance body that lies at the center of the initiative across sites—to “work itself out of a job,” leaving in place either a set of new, independent organizations to carry out components of the collaborative’s strategic plan, or a

³ Evaluating the success of CCIs is fraught with difficulty (see, e.g., Connell et al., 1995), and although NFI does not represent an unequivocally clear model of successful capacity building, it provides a useful example for the current purposes. In addition to being among the oldest, it is among the most thoroughly documented of the initiatives in the field. As a four-site demonstration, it has provided the field with emerging operational tensions and lessons that can be recognized to a large extent in similar efforts, and has informed strategic changes in some of the newer initiatives now underway. Further, the fundamental contrast in approaches provided by the two sites reviewed here provide a particularly good comparison of efforts operating in different local contexts but within many of the same assumptions and constraints provided by the national initiative.

⁴ For an overview of the field of CCIs, see, Kubisch et al., 1997; Stone, ed., 1996; Eisen, 1993; Jenny, 1993; and Fishman & Phillips, 1993.

more connected network of stronger, already existing organizations and associations. Another option was to institutionalize the long-term presence of the collaborative through its formal incorporation as a nonprofit organization. Regardless of the ultimate organizational choice for sustaining community capacity over time, all four collaboratives engaged in the range of broad strategic thrusts described above, but each has placed a relatively greater emphasis on one or another of them as central to its approach.

The two cases to be examined here represent the clearest extremes provided by the initiative. One site (Milwaukee) has chosen to retain the collaborative as an unincorporated body operating under the umbrella of the community foundation, and has focused most concretely on the creation and support of new organizations in the neighborhood that largely will represent the community's ongoing capacity to solve problems and produce particular kinds of goods and services. The other site (Hartford) has chosen to incorporate itself as a nonprofit community organization and has focused largely on organizing strategies. It has attempted to create resident associational networks, a network of instrumental relations among community-based organizations, and structured relations between the two.⁵ Before exploring these strategic approaches further and the possibilities and constraints for community capacity building that they suggest, I present a brief overview of the neighborhoods and the local initiatives.

Comparing Contexts: Neighborhoods and Local Initiative Characteristics

The two neighborhoods in which the Milwaukee and Hartford NFI is unfolding have both significant similarities and important differences. Both are urban, principally residential neighborhoods located in close proximity to the city's downtown. Both are largely poor communities, but contain within them active commercial strips and a combination of rental housing and owner-occupied units, most in smaller structures (of ten units or less). Both are communities of color that experienced similar patterns of migration, economic transformation, and disinvestment in the second half of this century, including violent turmoil in the 1960s. Both are primarily African American, with a sizeable minority of Latinos in each, and both exist within cities in which the population is largely segregated by race, with blacks concentrated in the poorer, northern portions of the city. In Hartford, the black population includes a substantial number of West Indian/Caribbeans. (A table of comparative demographics follows the References.)

Both neighborhoods are fairly well defined geographically, and are relatively well known as neighborhoods by name. Upper Albany, the neighborhood in which NFI is sited in Hartford, is one of seventeen neighborhoods defined by the city in the 1970s that are codified on city maps and used as a basis for data collection and planning by the city of Hartford. While Milwaukee has not formally mapped neighborhoods to such an extent, the Harambee neighborhood has a

⁵ Obviously, I am using the approaches represented by these two sites as ideal types. Both sites have focused in addition on leadership-development activities, and each has engaged in varying levels of the strategic approach that best exemplifies the other. For example, the organizations created in Milwaukee will become a part of a broader organizational infrastructure that seeks to support instrumental networks of association among organizations, and the collaborative has engaged in some door-to-door neighborhood outreach activities to foster greater involvement in its planning and programs. In Hartford, the incorporation of the collaborative as an independent nonprofit is at the core of its activities, providing the organizational foundation for its organizing activities.

distinct identity reaching back at least to the early 1970s, and its boundaries are generally recognized (by city hall and others) as those defined by the Harambee Ombudsman Project, Inc. (HOPI), a long-standing CBO in the area. Harambee is larger than Upper Albany, both in terms of area and population, as is the city of which it is a part. Organizationally, both neighborhoods are home to a range of neighborhood-based and neighborhood serving-organizations, including several local providers of social services, a major health-care clinic, and several schools. Harambee has a somewhat richer organizational infrastructure, perhaps largely due to its size, and includes a CDC, a small-business incubator, and a greater number of both public and private schools. In addition to formal community-based organizations, Upper Albany houses a number of ethnically oriented social clubs, which—while located in the neighborhood—serve segments of the West Indian/Caribbean population of the city as a whole, largely organized around the islands from which various subpopulations originate. While Harambee has a broad-based CBO that has historically focused on organizing and advocacy activities on behalf of the neighborhood for several decades (though it was relatively weak at the time of NFI’s inception), the counterpart organization that had existed in Upper Albany folded before 1980.

Milwaukee and Hartford operate under different forms of local government (mayor-council and council-manager, respectively), and have different structures for electoral representation, with councilmembers serving as at-large representatives in Hartford and providing geographic representation within a system of aldermanic wards in Milwaukee. Beyond formal representation, both cities have similar mechanisms through which they relate to neighborhoods as units, engaging in particular negotiated relationships with certain CBOs that act, in given instances, as neighborhood representatives or lead agencies for initiatives or funding under particular programs. Economically, while both neighborhoods have commercial assets, Harambee is located near abandoned industrial sites that have been the target of revitalization under NFI; the major industry in Hartford is insurance, though many of the larger companies have engaged in dramatic downsizing and relocation in recent years. Hartford is also the state capital.

As with the other NFI sites, the Milwaukee and Hartford sites exhibit certain local variations on the fundamental structure provided by the national initiative. While the collaboratives were initially structured based on the same guidelines regarding participation, the Milwaukee collaborative has had a consistently higher proportion of neighborhood residents as part of its membership and a greater number of neighborhood professionals (or “bridge people”) that lived in the neighborhood.⁶ Hartford began with a greater number of bridge people, most of whom live

⁶ Selection of collaborative members was guided by a matrix that defined three categories of participants: “grassroots” residents, “bridge” people, and “resource” people. Grassroots residents are residents of the target neighborhood who have been recruited for their experience in and knowledge of the neighborhood, and bring the perspective of the “unaffiliated” citizen. Because the NFI communities are socioeconomically disadvantaged, grassroots participants are predominantly low-income residents. Bridge people are professionals or business people, who may work and/or live in the neighborhood, and whose professional affiliation and experience connect them (and through them, the collaborative) to neighborhood resources and provide links to the broader community. Resource people are non-residents whose principal purpose is to bring their knowledge, perspectives, connections, and access to resources to the target neighborhood. They come from the public, private, and non-profit sectors, and need not be (but often are) drawn from the highest planes of their organization’s hierarchy.

in a more middle-class black neighborhood adjacent to Upper Albany, but has in recent years focused on increasing its resident participation on the collaborative. Both sites have retained the involvement of representatives of city government and major local nonprofits, but of the two only the Milwaukee collaborative has for most of its existence maintained corporate participation in collaborative governance. The local intermediary and fiscal agent in each of these sites (in contrast to the other two NFI sites) is a well-established and financially strong community foundation, each of which has had some history and experience with neighborhood grantmaking and neighborhood development issues. Staff leadership for the initiative has until recently been consistently (and to a large extent successfully) provided by a single foundation program officer in Milwaukee; in Hartford, there has been significant staff turnover over the years, and staff leadership has moved from being placed under the auspices of the foundation to the auspices of the now incorporated collaborative. Programmatically, while each collaborative has supported projects across a range of substantive areas—housing, social service provision, leadership development, economic development—each has maintained a relatively distinct strategic focus and has largely concentrated its efforts accordingly. The Milwaukee collaborative has organized around the fundamental goal of providing “livable wages” for Harambee families through employment and economic development, and has sought to accomplish this mainly through seeding and supporting the establishment of new community-based organizations that would spearhead activities in those areas. In Hartford, in contrast, the collaborative has had a less steadfast focus and has shifted its emphasis from time to time. Community organizing has been a constant component of its work and has ultimately emerged as its central focus, with an emphasis on both resident organizing and building collaborative relationships among organizations and between the neighborhood and local government.

Milwaukee: Building Institutions

Although there has been programmatic activity in Milwaukee that focuses on leadership, outreach, and organizing outside of an institutional framework, the main thrust of strategic activity toward the creation of long-term community capacity in the Harambee neighborhood has focused on the creation, strengthening, and support of community-based institutions. In part, this has included incorporating the participation of existing organizations into the collaborative governance process and providing resources (through funding or by facilitating networks of connections) that would enhance these organizations’ ability to operate effectively. Thus, the major existing neighborhood organizations—service providers, CDCs, HOPI—take part in initiative planning through their representatives on the collaborative and act in their traditional provisionary roles to support and enhance implementation of planned projects, utilizing the additional resources (and, sometimes, additional relationships) made available through their connection with NFI. For example, Inner City Redevelopment Corporation (ICRC), a neighborhood CDC whose director was one of the original members of the collaborative, was able to gain access to program related investment (PRI) monies available through NFI to fund implementation of a housing project supported by the collaborative, and through its participation renewed (and strengthened) its relationship with local corporations.

Beyond the participation of existing organizations on the collaborative and as implementers of collaborative-sponsored projects, NFI in Milwaukee has focused much of its energy on creating new organizations to fill particular roles not adequately provided for by the organizational

infrastructure that was in place at the initiative's inception. Two new organizations represent the initiative's most concrete achievements in this regard. One is a collaborative organization created to spearhead and manage the revitalization of an industrial park on the edge of the Harambee neighborhood; the other is a community financial institution, originally created to house a revolving loan fund to support neighborhood business development, and later expanded to include a focus on housing and job training and placement in the health field as well as economic and mixed-use physical development.

The Northeast Milwaukee Industrial Development Corporation (NMIDC)

NMIDC is a collaborative organization formed by five partner organizations, including two CDCs (ICRC and ESHAC, an organization based in adjacent Riverwest), HOPI, the Riverworks Industrial Council (an organization of manufacturers), and NFI. While these organizations have come together formally to create NMIDC (their participation on its board is mandated by the organization's bylaws), collaborative relations among them extend beyond this, since there is interlocking board membership as well among each of the CDCs, HOPI, and NFI.

NMIDC was formed to plan and manage the industrial revitalization of the northeast corridor that lies adjacent to the Harambee neighborhood. In partnership with Wispark, the real-estate subsidiary of Wisconsin Electric and Power, the organization purchased about thirty-two acres of land in this corridor from the Chrysler Corporation in order to develop the property to support a mix of light manufacturing, service, and commercial businesses. The purchase was supported by a \$250,000 grant and tax-incremental financing from the city, a \$200,000 Seedco loan from the NFI PRI fund, and a \$250,000 loan from Wispark.⁷ The Wispark loan was guaranteed by NFI and the Milwaukee Foundation. Since its founding in 1992, NMIDC has sold a majority of this acreage to a number of businesses, including Builder's Square, a home-improvement retail outlet that built a large hardware store on the property and, per a first-source hiring agreement it signed with NMIDC, hired 60 percent of its 115 workers through a neighborhood employment service run by ESHAC, one of the NMIDC partners. In addition, at least eight new manufacturing firms, creating at least seventy-one jobs since 1994, began operating in Riverworks. Efforts to improve properties have included tree planting and graffiti removal by NMIDC, and street and sidewalk repairs and general landscaping by the city.

NMIDC has also created a number of support services for Riverworks's businesses and neighborhood residents. Business-assistance activities have included the provision of a security patrol and the establishment of the Riverworks Industrial Council, a membership organization of thirty companies in the industrial park that has to date focused on human-resource issues. NMIDC runs a Learning Center that offers remedial math, writing, and computer skills classes to train Riverworks employees. In its first year of operation, the Learning Center trained 100 students from twenty companies. NMIDC also developed (and later spun off) the Teaching Factory, an independent, nonprofit organization committed to upgrading the technical capacities

⁷ As part of its support for the initiative, the Ford Foundation created a PRI loan pool for use by the NFI sites to support particular development projects in their neighborhoods. Seedco, a national intermediary that provides PRI loans and technical assistance around financing and development, manages this fund and provides assistance to the sites and to loan recipients.

of Wisconsin's metal-working firms, retaining workers in advanced technologies, and creating high-wage, high-skill jobs. In partnership with ESHAC, a local nonprofit housing-development organization and one of the coalition organizations that created NMIDC, NMIDC has established an employment service that in three years of operation has placed 260 Harambee or Riverwest residents in jobs throughout the Milwaukee area.⁸ Finally, NMIDC developed a school-to-work program that attempts to link local firms with two schools in preparing better-qualified potential employees.

Martin Luther King Economic Development Corporation (MLKEDC)

The second new organization created in connection with NFI in Milwaukee began as a community financial institution. Its mission was to encourage investment in businesses and housing in the Harambee neighborhood, and its principal strategy was to manage a revolving loan fund that would make venture capital available to residents and local businessmen for whom traditional lending institutions were not a viable option. Applicants to the loan fund must be residents of the Harambee neighborhood or own a business located (or willing to relocate) in the neighborhood. Since it was capitalized in 1994 with \$200,000 from the collaborative, the loan fund has focused on business incubation rather than housing, operating a business-development loan fund that offers loans of between \$10,000 and \$250,000, and a microenterprise loan fund for self-employed, small-business owners that offers loans of between \$1,000 and \$10,000.⁹ These loans have generally been targeted as start-up or equipment funds for a variety of small businesses.

In addition to providing loans, MLKEDC provides some training and support to applicants who are turned down for funding, including referrals to other local agencies that provide business planning, accounting, or other financial services. The organization has also expanded its activities to develop a housing plan for the neighborhood and to run MORE (Maximizing Opportunities in a Restructuring Economy), a job-training and placement program that targets the health-care industry. Early tasks in the implementation of the project included developing a procedures manual, developing a recruitment strategy, designing a remedial education program, and identifying referral services. In 1997, MORE signed an exclusive contract with Covenant Health Care systems, the second-largest employer in the state of Wisconsin, for the placement of MORE students. In addition to these efforts, MLKEDC is exploring a number of business-development opportunities in partnership with other groups and organizations. One such effort is known as the Cluster Project, an effort to take advantage of Business Improvement District (BID) funds available from the city to revitalize commercial and residential properties in a defined portion of the neighborhood, which may be implemented through a partnership of several local organizations and the city. The organization has leveraged funding from a variety of sources to support this range of activities.

⁸ The employment service was discontinued in 1997 due to insufficient funding.

⁹ In addition to its initial capitalization by the collaborative, MLKEDC has access to a separate pool of \$500,000 in Grow America Funds, as well as to the NFI PRI fund managed by Seedco for the national initiative. Grow America is a subsidiary of the National Development Council, a national not-for-profit economic and housing development finance company.

While NMIDC was formed largely as an “organization of organizations,” MLKEDC was created with the notion of being resident-driven, and with a focus on building the skills of community members to engage in decision making and planning around, in particular, financial activities in the neighborhood. Both the MLKEDC board and its loan-fund committee—which makes decisions on loans to be granted—are required by the organization’s bylaws to have at least 51 percent neighborhood resident membership. The same is true of the MORE steering committee, now operating under MLKEDC, and significant time and technical assistance resources were spent training NFI loan-fund committee members, steering committee members, and members of the board of the emerging organization who did not have a background in banking and finance.

Building Institutions and Building Capacity

While the proximate goals of NFI in Milwaukee that led to its principal strategy of institutional development concerned increased income for Harambee residents, behind this lies a broader goal of creating a sustainable community capacity to plan for, implement, and maintain the means for a higher quality of life for the members of the community. In what ways, and to what extent, can the institution-building agenda in which the Milwaukee NFI engaged be seen as promoting a broader community capacity? In the words of one respondent:

You can look at it two different ways . . . One of the ways that you can look at building capacity is helping out those organizations that provide direct services to the community; and whether that’s computers, or making sure that there’s staff, or that organizational structure is in place, doing some organizational planning, board training, staff training, or in providing funds for additional staff . . . The other obvious way is just direct service to individuals that live in the community . . . Leadership building, the empowerment that NFI can provide would be sort of a second example of how community capacity is built.

Figure 2 (the table and figures follow the References) illustrates the principal community capacity-building approach taken by NFI in Milwaukee, reorganizing the initial framework to lead with strategy. The main focus of NFI’s capacity-building effort in Milwaukee is organizational.¹⁰ The strategy operates principally through formal organizations, which are the mechanisms of change that drive the community-building agenda to the greatest extent, and through them, relationships among organizations (one facet of associational action) are fostered. Individuals are engaged both as participants in the planning and governance processes and as recipients of services, and capacity building at this level focuses on both instrumental skills to support employment and the opportunity for civic engagement. The principal functions of these activities are to create both a productive capacity within the neighborhood for the generation of

¹⁰ The intent of Milwaukee’s NFI has been both to build individual leadership and organizational capacity within the neighborhood, but in practice the organizational strategy has become ascendant. Within this organizational framework, there has been a focus on leadership development through the engagement of residents in the planning and implementation process, particularly on the collaborative and the board and committees of MLKEDC. In addition, NFI in Milwaukee has supported some outreach activity, including door-to-door information dissemination and recruitment activities and neighborhood meetings and festivals, and has held leadership development classes for residents and members of the larger community. These activities have been largely (though not completely) unconnected to the organizational strategies that form the central core of its strategy.

jobs and economic opportunity (performed by given CBOs) and a capacity for planning and governance around particular issues (job creation and access, service provision, housing and physical development), engaged in through organizational processes and contributed to by neighborhood residents who serve on the boards and as advisors to the process. The presumed outcome of this strategy is both a community with greater capacity, here largely through strengthened mechanisms of problem solving and greater access to resources (funding, jobs) provided by the network of new and strengthened CBOs, and a set of objective “other outcomes,” including better services and a higher proportion of neighborhood residents earning a liveable wage. Contextual influences that played a role include the availability of industrial-zoned land and a convergence of interests around it, the absence of financial support for small businesses, and changes in the structure and requirements of welfare support and in the allocation of public funding for local organizations.

Although one can follow the causal assumptions of this approach toward an expected set of ends, the implementation of such a theory of change is complicated, nonlinear, and fraught with tensions. Two issues are worth highlighting here. The first concerns a tension between organizational and community capacity, and the relationship between neighborhood interests and organizational operations. NMIDC, for example, is essentially a coalition organization in which “local residents are represented by the community organizations on the Board of Directors” (NMIDC, 1997). The organization is focused principally on creating employment opportunities for residents, not facilitating resident involvement in organizational decision making or neighborhood mobilization. As stated by one respondent:

[The residents] don't know us. The businesses know us, but the business owners don't live here. They live out in Mequon, and they only come here [during the day]. So I don't think the neighborhood knows us. The Learning Center and the Employment Program are the two things that link us to the neighborhood . . . We're in the neighborhood, we're right here. People should be able to come in. We don't have that relationship with the neighborhood. And we need it.

This lack of connection has consequences for the organization's role and stature in the community:

In the general public, there is a lack of understanding about what NMIDC actually does, and therefore the organization is sometimes unfairly judged for not accomplishing something it never set out to do . . . NMIDC's role is not to be the first point of contact for community residents. The role of NMIDC is not to mobilize the potential employees. The community groups, especially those represented on the Board, should be serving as the feeder organizations, as the link between the community and NMIDC (NMIDC, 1997).

The capacity building supported by the organization is thus generated largely at the organizational level (by promoting business development and supporting the work of member organizations) and at the individual level (by increasing the skills and opportunities of residents to find and retain jobs).

The issue of community connection and “embeddedness” exists with the other CBOs in the neighborhood, and with the collaborative itself. The tendency of participatory organizations in general to formalize processes and structures over time and become increasingly bureaucratic and less participatory in their operation is well documented (see, e.g., Cnaan, 1991; Milofsky, 1988; Powell & Friedkin, 1987; Knoke & Wood, 1981). How much participation (and of what sort) is necessary to promote a meaningful connection between an organization and its constituency is unclear. Indeed, it is unclear how much is even possible, given the costs (time, energy, money, reputation) that may accrue to both the organization and the potential participants, and the lack of clarity (and often faith) on the part of many residents regarding likely benefits.

The second issue worth highlighting here concerns relationships among organizations, and the costs and incentives for organizational collaboration on behalf of the community. In Milwaukee, the tension has arisen in connection with the relationship between the NFI collaborative and the organizations it helped create, between NFI and existing organizations, and among organizations both old and new. The creation of the collaborative itself, for example, raised a number of questions about turf, role, responsibility, and relative legitimacy given the existence of historically active CBOs such as HOPI:

It has given the illusion or impression that there is a new Harambee organization apart from the Ombudsman. There's this Harambee collaborative, and they've got money and they've got this and they've got that. And that's not good, although it's true. It has created a schism. Harambee collaborative will be meeting upstairs in the same building and people don't know which meeting to attend, where to go, this type of thing.

Similarly, the process of organizational collaboration has required participant organizations to share not just resources, but decision-making responsibility and recognition for achievements. While recognizing important instances where such collaboration has redounded to the benefit of the neighborhood and the participating organizations, the compromises involved have sometimes proved difficult.

Hartford: Building Relationships

While NFI in Milwaukee focused largely on the creation and support of formal organizations as mechanisms for problem solving and providers of particular goods and services for the neighborhood, the collaborative in Hartford focused primarily on establishing itself as a single, broad-based CBO that would operate largely as the nexus of organizing activities among residents in the neighborhood and among other CBOs in the north end of Hartford. There are three principal components to this strategy: (1) organizing a network of block clubs; (2) engaging with a state-sponsored neighborhood planning process; and (3) linking with other north-end CBOs in a broader revitalization process.

Organizing Block Clubs

The centerpiece of the Upper Albany Neighborhood Collaborative's (UANC) organizing efforts is its intent to organize all twenty-seven neighborhood blocks into block clubs. Block clubs are seen as the "building blocks" of community action, and the mechanisms through which resident commitment, connection, and associational action can be fostered. They serve largely as block-watch groups for crime prevention and reporting, but also focus on infrastructure and social issues when they arise, and are an increasing presence in the operation of the collaborative and in city-neighborhood negotiations. The ultimate goal is to form a neighborhood-wide network of block clubs, formally linked to the collaborative through a standing committee of UANC—the Collaborative-Community Council (the Council)—which is comprised of representatives of each neighborhood block club and serves to facilitate communication and joint planning among the block clubs and between them and UANC.

With some core exceptions, block-club formation has been uneven, and there is no consensus on how many clubs exist and are active. Thirty-four people representing seventeen neighborhood streets were identified by the UANC outreach specialist as block club leaders by 1995, and by the fall of 1996, fifteen to twenty people were reported to attend Council meetings on a regular basis, and six residents involved in the block clubs had become members of the UANC board. Activities organized with the block clubs have included participating in a farming cooperative that produces food for lower-income and elderly Hartford residents, advocating for improved neighborhood lighting as a deterrent to crime, installing smoke detectors in the houses of the elderly residents, posting block watch and "Welcome to Upper Albany" signs, and advocating for the placement of a police substation in the neighborhood. As important to the purpose of the block clubs as connecting residents to resources and supporting particular projects is fostering a general process of interaction among neighbors. One resident suggests that such a process is

one way to make sure that the residents here can take advantage of the training that they say they were going to offer or the buying of houses that they say they were going to offer. And the people come to something on a regular basis—it's better than just putting out sporadic calls, you know, "come, we want to talk to you." But if there are regular meetings and regular gatherings, people get to know one another. I lived here for twenty years, I didn't know anybody until I got involved in this. You know, people on my street, I used to see them, but now I know their names, you know, you have smiles and nods and all of the contact that goes on. I know people far better and people are more interactive than they ever were.

Block clubs also participate in a citywide police department initiative that supports the formation of neighborhood "problem-solving committees" (PSCs) to work with the police to address issues of concern to residents, particularly public safety issues. Indeed, it is through the Upper Albany PSC that the block clubs tend to engage in their most effective advocacy. In the words of one respondent:

The Problem Solving Committee are the most confrontational people and they take over the problem. They put together the meeting to call the police chief in. They put together

a meeting to call the water company in, and they just jumped all over them. These are the people who are willing to spend the time that even block club captains need to step up to, that kind of commitment . . . I got a block captain who will bring her baby out in the rain, that is the type of commitment that these people have.

While the Council and the PSC are two separate committees of residents—the former organized by UANC and a formal part of its governance structure and the latter an informal committee convened specifically as a forum for communication of grievances to the city—there is significant overlap in their membership, and UANC staff has a working relationship with each group.

Neighborhood Revitalization Zone (NRZ)

The second component of UANC’s organizing strategy is its involvement in establishing and providing staff support for Upper Albany’s Neighborhood Revitalization Zone (NRZ). NRZs in Connecticut were catalyzed by a federal initiative and passed into law by state legislation. Under the program, the city of Hartford assigned a neighborhood planner to each of the city’s seventeen neighborhoods to provide information and assist in the development of NRZs. It ultimately designated twenty-eight NRZs and invited residents and other local stakeholders in these zones to form committees that would present a strategic plan recommending action by city government on a number of fronts, including economic development, housing, education, land use and management, safety, and recreation, as well as to make recommendations regarding governance issues such as conflict resolution, neighborhood outreach, and decision making. “Stakeholders” eligible to participate in the NRZ process include people who live, work, or own property in the zone, or who represent organizations that provide services there. At least 51 percent of the planning committee must be neighborhood residents, and all recommendations of the committee must be ratified by the city council for action.

The NRZ Planning Committee is an informal collaborative body established without core funding or operational support from the city. In an attempt to fill this gap, UANC has positioned itself to play a central facilitating role in the NRZ planning process, providing staff support and coordination for the effort and offering itself as a “resource center” for the effort.

Linking with Other Organizations

In addition to block-level organizing among residents and involvement in the NRZ process, UANC has also developed working relationships with several neighborhood institutions, including the public schools and local social service agencies. Rather than engaging in service delivery or development activities directly, UANC has tended to support (largely through modest grants) programs to be implemented through other local organizations. Perhaps more significant, however, has been its involvement in a newly established collaboration of CBOs in the set of neighborhoods that comprise the North End of Hartford. This collaboration, known as the North Hartford Initiative (NHI), was launched by the Hartford Urban League (the offices of which are in Upper Albany and a representative from which has consistently been on the UANC board) in collaboration with the city. Initially known as the Tri-Neighborhood Revitalization Initiative, it began largely as an effort to identify and coordinate neighborhood revitalization projects being undertaken by the city, state, private business, and community groups and organizations in three

north-end neighborhoods (Asylum Hill, Upper Albany, and Clay Arsenal). Through coordinating efforts, the initiative hoped to improve infrastructure in the target areas, promote job creation, and increase property revenues. The effort has evolved to include the major CBOs from all five of north Hartford's predominantly black neighborhoods, and in addition to being seen as a way to leverage resources and broaden partnerships for the achievement of specific economic development projects, is seen as a way to increase the political influence of these neighborhoods on city policy, attempting to match the role and influence of a long-established south-end organization. One respondent put it clearly:

Who is the community? Hartford is the community. Right now, Hartford is the community. The north end needs help. The south end has the mayor, it has half of the city council people living down there. They have their help. The north end does not have help. The south end has a large agency that does a lot of things. The north end doesn't. What we need to do is we need to organize ourselves through NHI . . . If we do these partnerships like the south end has, we can actually better ourselves.

Building Relationships and Building Capacity

As in Milwaukee, the strategies UANC engaged in are meant to represent steps toward a greater, sustainable community capacity. Here, the outcome goals are less clearly stated, and the explicit emphasis is placed less on a productive capacity centered on creating jobs and providing services and more on a planning and advocacy capacity centered largely on associational action supported by the work of local organizations. Referring again to the framework, organizing strategies operating largely through networks of association (drawing on and attempting to build relations among individuals in the neighborhood and CBOs in the north end) seek to build a capacity for planning, information dissemination, and advocacy toward both broad community-change goals (increasing resident commitment and engagement, strengthening indigenous problem-solving mechanisms, creating greater access to resources beyond the neighborhood) and particular outcomes, such as greater influence on public policy and, through that, greater economic opportunity for neighborhood residents and better and more responsive services. Figure 3 illustrates the capacity-building approach taken in Hartford. (The table and figures follow the References.)

Also similar to the process in Milwaukee are the complications that arise in attempting to translate the strategic model into action in the world. The focus on associational action and the overlap among associational groups that are a part of the process have created complex dynamics around issues of representation, legitimacy, and goal orientations and have highlighted challenges in engaging and maintaining commitment and participation on the part of residents.

The focus on block-club formation and their incorporation into the governance of UANC, for example, speaks to the organization's interest in becoming a grounded, neighborhood organization in which residents constitute the members of the organization as well as the constituency it seeks to represent. It also has involved a trade-off in which efficiency and organizational protocol are frequently disrupted by demands to clarify, explain, and reorient decision making and activity for the benefit of a growing, shifting, increasingly vocal

neighborhood constituency. Open meetings of the organization's board have entailed periodic challenges about issues ranging from the adequacy of neighborhood representation on the board to organizational decisions about staffing to the need to improve communications between UANC and other committees, organizations, and residents at large.

Similarly, the concurrent activities of the several mechanisms for community input and planning and the overlap of membership among them creates ambiguity about role and relationship, connection and coordination. At a meeting of the UANC board, for example, a member of the neighborhood's PSC put her committee forward in a "watch dog" role with regard to UANC. One respondent described the problem with reference to the NRZ:

The big picture is the strategic plan for the neighborhood; we've got economic development as well as education and all of that. Whereas the block captains have primarily been focusing on issues of the street, you know. At least the block captains know on the block captain level they need to buy into the big picture in order for it to be conveyed to the individual block clubs. If the block captains don't buy into it then the people won't buy it, that's for sure. It's been very difficult and complicated to explain the NRZ process to the average Joe. It has caused confusion in all of the different circles in the committee. It has been more or less overlapping of some of the committees and [UANC] being in the middle, it kind of made some people dizzy.

Within the context of concurrent processes and overlapping agendas, UANC staff has played a critical brokering role. Occupying a network position of significant structural autonomy,¹¹ the executive director, in particular, has acted in many cases as a gatekeeper among networks of association that have not yet been generalized among a broader body of participants or communicated to them through information exchange. Because of this, however, many of the participants are unaware of what each of the different groups are doing or how (and the extent to which) the several circles of associational activity around neighborhood change work together.

¹¹ An actor with structural autonomy is positioned to broker and make use of information and resources by maintaining relationships with actors who represent access to other clusters of social actors (beyond the relations maintained by members of the component networks among which s/he is brokering) and the information, resources, and opportunities they represent (Burt, 1992).

**EMERGING ISSUES AND NEXT STEPS:
POSSIBILITIES AND CONSTRAINTS FOR BUILDING COMMUNITY CAPACITY**

The community-building agenda that drives CCIs and many other neighborhood-based efforts focuses largely on drawing from and strengthening a community-level “capacity” to support and sustain it. Such a capacity is typically referred to in quite general ways and serves as an evocative conceptual banner behind which community-building activities can advance. In order for such a concept to provide useful guidance for informing such action, however, or for understanding its effects, it is necessary to unpack the broadly stated idea into components that can be analyzed (individually and in relation to one another) and acted on.

The definitional framework and brief case-study examples presented in this paper attempt to contribute to such a task. Within the same broad initiative structure, collaboratives in two different neighborhoods took fundamentally different paths as their principal strategic thrusts, and each has generated different kinds of outcomes. In Milwaukee, the focus on organizational development and organizational collaborations has facilitated the leveraging of resources and of activity toward business development, job training and placement, and physical development of commercial and industrial properties in (or on the border of) the neighborhood, and has fostered job provision and entrepreneurial opportunity for neighborhood residents. In Hartford, the focus on associational action has led to a degree of resident mobilization around planning, has supported resident advocacy around quality-of-life issues, and has begun to link the neighborhood with other north-end neighborhoods, again largely for planning and advocacy purposes. In both cases, the concerted effort at community building represented by the initiative has helped catalyze other activity in the neighborhood and a greater focus on neighborhood issues by local government.

The case studies also highlight a number of complications to the definition of an unambiguous notion of community capacity and to translating such a notion into action on the ground. Some of these issues are operational, concerning the constraints of initiative structure or organizational functioning. Others are more fundamental to the notion of defining and acting on a broad community capacity-building agenda.

Operational Issues

Operational issues that complicate the translation of broad notions of community capacity building into actionable steps include staff leadership, funding constraints, and the difficulty of crafting collaborative arrangements.

Staff

The role of staff leadership is critical in catalyzing, organizing, facilitating, and managing both a range of activities and a range of constituencies. Staff plays a central brokering role among members of the collaborative, other organizations, funders, and local government, and needs to be able to communicate with and balance among the expectations of each. Much relies, therefore, on the organizational and communication skills and political acumen of staff, and their ability to be seen both as supportive facilitators of community planning activities and as

legitimate players in the local (and sometimes national) political and organizational field. In NFI, the role of staff is complicated by the organizational ambiguity of the collaboratives. In Milwaukee, the initiative's director sits at the community foundation facilitating a process spearheaded by an informal collaborative body, and only recently has the staff of UANC been clearly defined and free to act as an executive director of an autonomous non-profit organization.

Staff with the breadth of skills required are not only difficult to find, but difficult to keep. In Milwaukee, much of the success of the organizational capacity building has been due to the existence, for much of the initiative, of skilled, stable staff leadership both at the collaborative and at most of its partner organizations. In Hartford, in contrast, significant staff turnover has impeded progress, and each new director is challenged with the task of insinuating him/herself into an ongoing process and taking leadership without being perceived as taking over.

Funding Constraints

Another operational issue concerns the structure of funding and funding requirements. Like many CCIs, participants in NFI are required to plan for long-term change within the constraints of short-term grant periods. Despite a consistent verbal commitment by the Ford Foundation for long-term support (and although Ford has a clear institutional history of providing long-term support for community-development efforts), the strategy of supporting site activities through successive, short-term grants has supported a sense of uncertainty as to how to engage in long-term planning. Paradoxically, the existence of operational support for an initiative not housed within a functioning nonprofit and given without matching requirements or concerted technical assistance on leveraging additional resources may have muted sites' efforts and success in finding other sources of operating and program support. Where such additional funding has been found, it comes with its own requirements and limitations, demanding the organizational capacity on the part of the collaboratives or CBOs to negotiate among and piece them together toward identified ends. In some cases, the availability of such funding has driven program decisions, with opportunity leading the way over planning.

Collaboration

Organizational collaboration is both an acknowledged need on the part of participants and, often, a requirement on the part of funders. In NFI, the neighborhood collaboratives themselves were created by virtue of Ford Foundation funding, and within each site further collaborative arrangements have been forged around given issues. These range from formal collaborative organizations such as NMIDC, to limited partnerships around particular projects, to more informal sharing of information, staff, space, and activities. While there are clear incentives to engaging in collaboration, there are also a range of costs that need to be negotiated among collaborators and that require their coming to terms with partners' specified roles and responsibilities, the creation of new or the acknowledgment of multiple mechanisms of accountability, the development of consensus around resource allocation, and consideration of potentially different ways of acknowledging contribution and credit for collaboratively pursued activities. Much of the calculation for determining when collaboration is viable may be seen within a transaction-cost framework, defined by Williamson (1981) as characterized by three critical dimensions—uncertainty, frequency, and asset specificity. *Uncertainty* refers to the complexity of market circumstance and the difficulty of predicting outcomes based on those

circumstances; *frequency* refers to the extent to which given transactions are recurrent; *asset specificity* concerns the degree to which “investments are specialized to a particular transaction” (Williamson, 1981, p. 555). However, transactions are also embedded in social relations (Granovetter, 1985), and it is largely the nature and history of such relations, and the degree to which they can instill trust and cooperation rather than mistrust and competition that will make meaningful collaboration possible. In the nonprofit context, and in community-based efforts in particular, the social embeddedness of community processes and organizations is critical, and the calculation of incentives and costs for collaboration is often complicated by multiple goals, ambiguity around “bottom line” objectives, and the dynamics of the representational and participatory aspects of these efforts.

Participation, Legitimacy, and Community Consensus

Beyond these important operational issues, a more fundamental complication concerns the assumption of consensus, or the possibility of consensus, among community actors around a common agenda. Communities are not unitary collectivities; they contain a diversity of people, organizations, relationships, and interests that may or may not converge around a given issue at a given time. Within CCIs, the problem of creating and acting on a community consensus is often made more difficult by the breadth of the agenda, the ambiguity of roles and expectations, and the tension between incentives and costs for participating.

Much of the difficulty in evaluating and applying participatory strategies lies in a number of ambiguities about what constitutes “legitimate” participation, why it should be engaged, and what can be expected from it. What is needed and what is possible differs by point of view. Often, local agencies and organizations are the dominant representatives of the community on the governance bodies of CCIs and other efforts, and most such efforts succeed in engaging only a small set of residents (usually those already most involved in neighborhood affairs) in the process. This is due in part to the difficulty of incorporating meaningful participation while showing tangible results, the ambiguous incentive structure for resident participation, and the fact that in many ways greater participation is not necessary for the effort to be seen as legitimately acting on the community’s behalf. Legitimacy is always open to question, but it is often enough to present reasonable evidence of connection to be treated by funders and local government as a (or even, at a given point in time or for a given issue, *the*) legitimate neighborhood actor.

Even within the more circumscribed group that might be directly engaged in a community-building effort, consensus may not be easy to forge, and the interests of some community actors may be in conflict with the interests—real or perceived—of others. A simple question of parking permits, for example, may have residents (who want parking reserved for them) and local businesses (who want parking available to customers) at opposite sides of an issue. Similarly, low-income residents who want to be able to stay in the neighborhood may be in conflict with middle-class residents who want to attract higher-income population to settle there. Residents who participate in the governance of these efforts often begin with the disadvantage of being a relatively small proportion of the group, less comfortable with the established mode of planning and decision making, and less confident of their knowledge and contribution than professionals who sit in similar capacities on several boards and committees. In NFI, at least at the level of

collaborative operations, there is evidence of the relative benefit of having a larger proportion of resident involvement that includes an engaged core of professionals who both work in *and* are residents of the neighborhood. This dual connection provides a combination of expertise and legitimacy unmatched by other participants, and offers one mechanism for translating between “grassroots” and professional perspectives. In contrast, where such “bridge people” are connected only by professional ties to the neighborhood, residents often see their contributions as reflections of their agency’s agenda rather than as contributions grounded in an understanding of neighborhood needs and priorities.

Yet a lack of consensus (or even conflict) is not necessarily a barrier to community capacity. Indeed, it may provide a catalyst to action that can engage capacity (for planning, advocacy, information dissemination, implementation) within the community. Such capacity is not necessarily evenly distributed or equitably representative, however, and points to what Crenson, in talking about the ability of neighborhoods to engage in informal political action, has described as a potential dilemma of neighborhood politics:

The neighborhood’s capacity for informal public service and its propensity for factional conflict both seem to be associated with the same feature: the presence of relatively rich people in a relatively poor neighborhood (Crenson, 1983, p. 196).

Similarly, formal organizations—service providers, CDCs, schools, government agencies—tend to serve as a proxy for resident voice and participation, often speak and act on behalf of somewhat different constituencies, have differing relationships with those constituencies, and have unequal levels of connection, influence, and access to resources from one another. These fundamental complications speak to a need to support public discourse, grounded organizing, and ongoing outreach and communication.

Conclusion

Community capacity tends to be spoken of as a unitary thing; a generalized characteristic of the neighborhood as a social system. But it resides in a community’s individuals, formal organizations and associations, and the relational networks among them and linking them to the broader systems of which they are a part. Building community capacity must therefore focus on these components. This is essentially the approach espoused by Kretzmann and McKnight (1993), who suggest that community development begin with assessing the assets of individuals, neighborhood groups, and local institutions in a community and engaging in a process of *connection*, organizing and orchestrating instrumental links among them.

The strength of these components is likely to differ across communities, and will not be evenly distributed within them. The definition of community capacity should not assume consensus, but should take into account diversity of capacity and interest, and include mechanisms that allow competing claims to negotiate with one another.

Beyond the question of who—who is the “community” when we talk about community capacity, and who decides—there are questions of expectations, influences, and measurement. Part of the

rationale for a focus on building community capacity concerns expectations of greater responsiveness, fairness, democracy, efficiency, and cost. How much of the capacity-building agenda is susceptible to the influence of planned change efforts? And how much of what *is* susceptible can be addressed at the community level? Building organizations and enhancing their capacity to engage in development activities is in some ways a more straightforward endeavor than incorporating such an organizational capacity into a broader context of *community* capacity, developing engaged leadership for the same purposes, or strengthening networks of association toward social capital development.

Within a community, a focus on strengthening networks of association among individuals is most likely to succeed when targeting instrumental issues to foster communication and mobilize participation. A focus on trying to create *intimate* ties is likely to be misguided; one can't legislate friendship, though it is possible to work on structural barriers to social-capital production by focusing on such issues as residential stability (e.g., through home-ownership and tenant management programs), safety (through community policing and other efforts), and physical revitalization efforts that promote social interaction and a sense of safety (Sampson, 1999). Similarly, it is possible to strengthen networks of association among organizations by developing instrumental partnerships and interlocking board memberships that connect neighborhood organizations both to one another and to institutions (local government, nonprofits, and corporations) beyond the neighborhood. Successfully building community capacity within a neighborhood may thus increase that neighborhood's ability to produce certain public goods locally, connect residents and organizations to opportunity and resources, and enhance the influence of community actors on public policy, service delivery, and development activities driven by exogenous actors.

But there are some macro-level structural issues that are not susceptible to micro-level change strategies, and that require policy changes at the metropolitan, state, or federal levels to affect broader issues of racial and economic segregation, to reduce the concentration of poverty, and to foster equity of educational and economic opportunity (see, e.g., Jargowsky, 1997). Finally, there is the question of measurement: How might one measure community capacity in itself and the impact it may have on other aspects of community functioning? Because communities are open systems, community capacity is multifaceted, and efforts to build it are complex and often characterized by broadly stated, multiple, and changing objectives, there is a significant challenge to implementing research strategies that can capture the process and outcomes of community capacity building. Such work should build from the specified components of a definitional framework and be tailored to understand its implementation in particular interventions and the specific objectives they have defined.

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Table 1. Comparative demographics for Upper Albany and the City of Hartford; Harambee and the City of Milwaukee, 1990

| | Upper Albany | Hartford | Harambee | Milwaukee |
|-----------------------------|---------------------|-----------------|-----------------|------------------|
| Population | 9,665 | 139,739 | 21,522 | 628,088 |
| White | 1.1% | 30.5% | 11.4% | 60.7% |
| Black | 82.3% | 35.3% | 83.2% | 30.2% |
| Hispanic | 15.5% | 31.6% | 6.8% | 6.3% |
| Age | | | | |
| 17 and under | 31.4% | 27.5% | 39.3% | 28.9% |
| 65 and over | 6.4% | 9.9% | 7.8% | 12.4% |
| Income | | | | |
| Median household | \$19,626 | \$22,140 | \$12,759 | \$23,627 |
| Living Below Poverty | 29.1% | 27.5% | 49.0% | 22.2% |
| Labor force status | | | | |
| Persons 16+ | 62.2% | 73.1% | 65.3% | 75.1% |
| In labor force | 63.0% | 60.4% | 52.7% | 64.0% |
| Employed | 88.0% | 92.2% | 78.5% | 90.9% |
| Unemployed | 12.0% | 7.7% | 21.6% | 8.9% |
| Ed. Attainment | | | | |
| Persons 25+ | 49.6% | 57.6% | 50.0% | 60.6% |
| High school+ | 54.7% | 59.4% | 40.7% | 71.5% |
| Bachelors+ | 3.8% | 14.4% | 5.6% | 14.8% |
| Housing | | | | |
| Occupied units | 91.8% | 91.7% | 88.7% | 94.4% |
| Vacant units | 8.2% | 8.2% | 11.3% | 5.4% |
| Owner-occupied | 20.4% | 23.6% | 26.8% | 44.8% |

| | | | | |
|---------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| 1-unit structures | 6.4% | 16.3% | 29.8% | 41.8% |
| 2-9 units/structure | 71.2% | 49.5% | 52.2% | 39.1% |
| 10+ units/structure | 21.4% | 32.9% | 14.6% | 16.7% |
| Same res. in 1985 | 45.8% | 44.9% | 47.3% | 46.1% |

Figure 1
A Relational Framework for Understanding
Community Capacity and Capacity Building

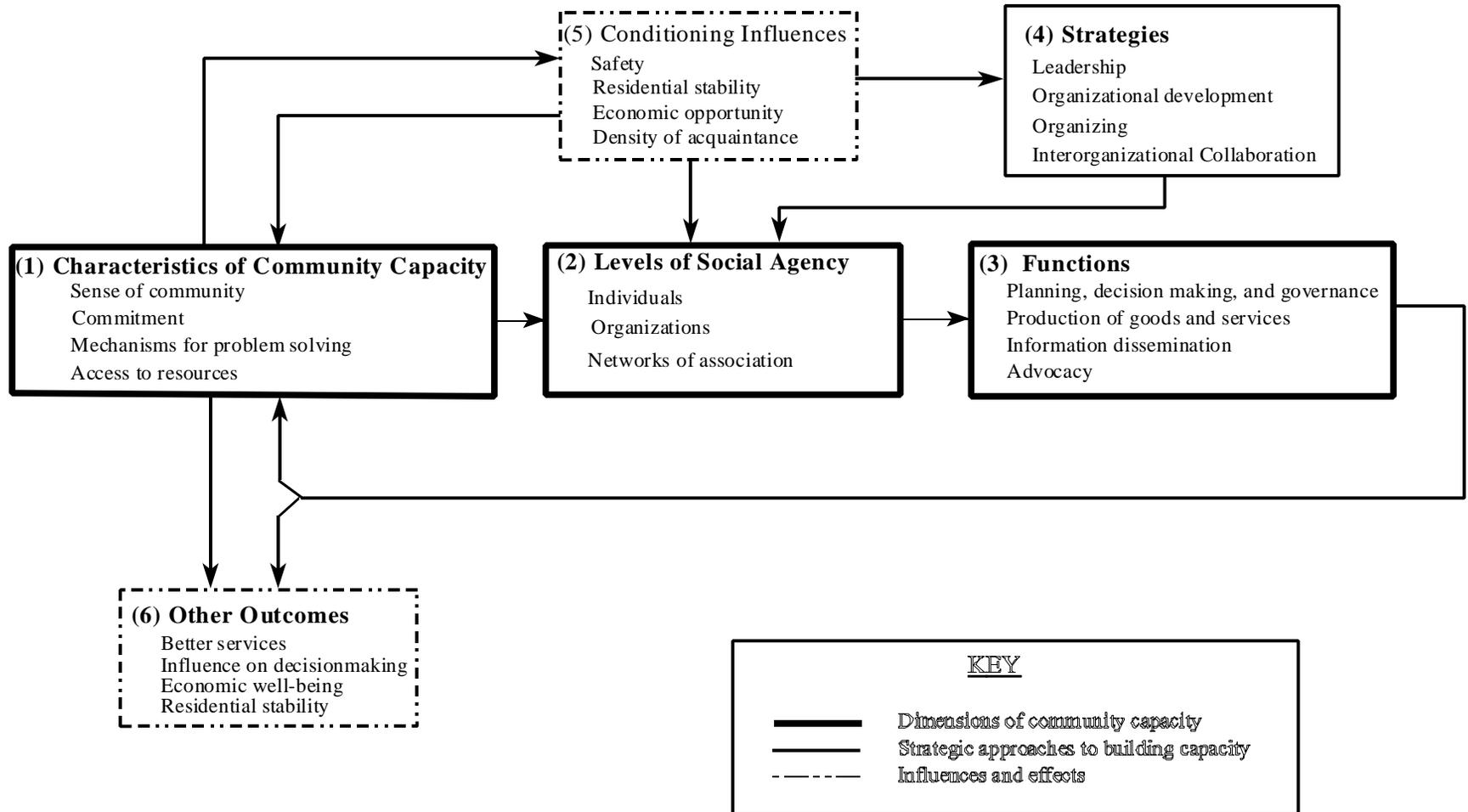


Figure 2
NFI in Milwaukee
Building Community Capacity

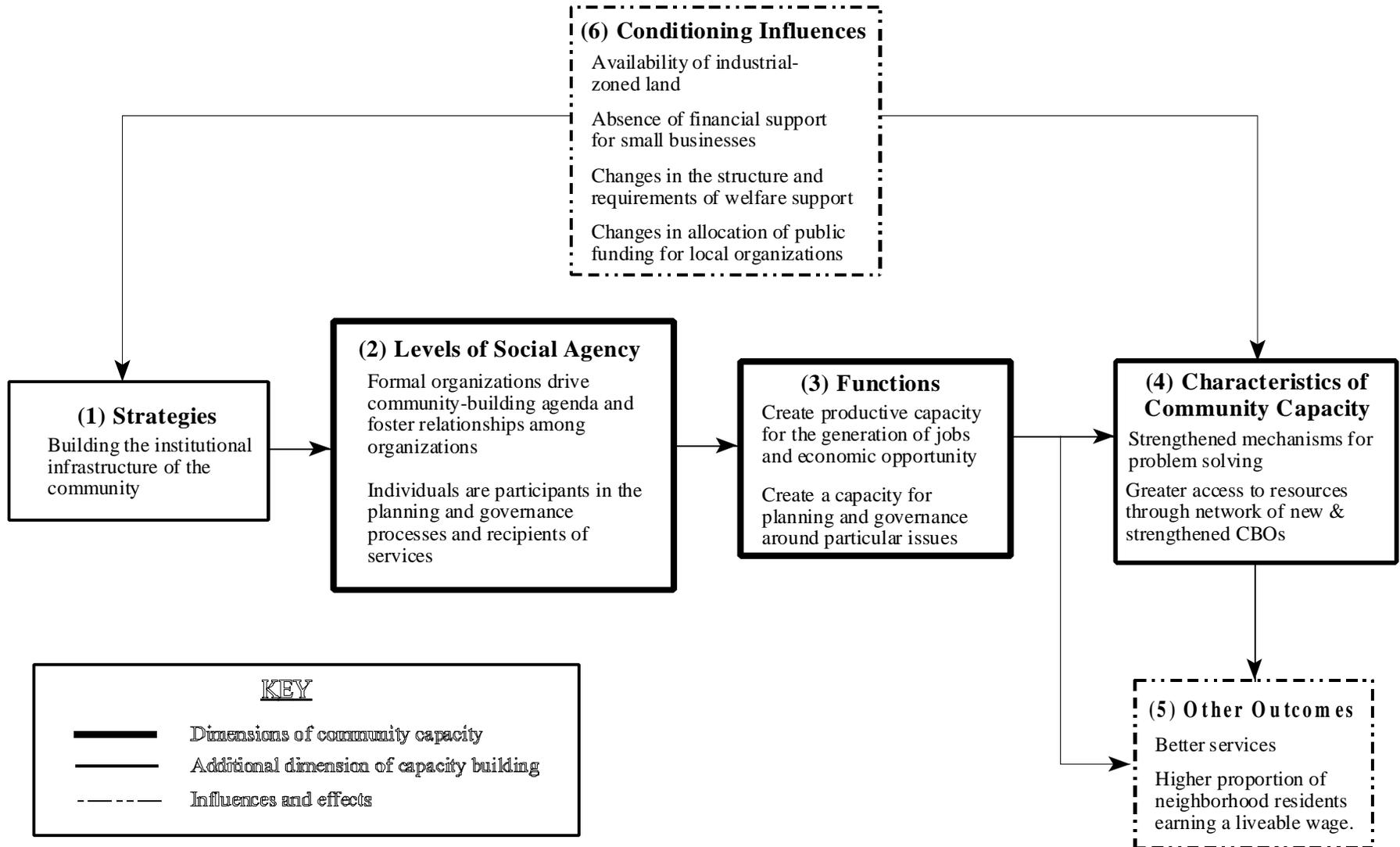


Figure 3
NFI in Hartford
Building Community Capacity

