
The American Communities Movement

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Across the United States, a number of community-based movements and local groups share complementary visions and approaches to community transformation. This article gives an overview of these movements and examines some of their common concerns. In 2000, the National Civic League and the Coalition for Healthier Cities and Communities received a grant from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation to evaluate the potential for convergence of these community movements into a “communities movement.” Although we found that it is too early to speak of the latter, a new stage in the development of community-based movements is emerging. The Communities Movement Project was designed as a series of five dialogues in locations around the country. The first stage was to convene an advisory council to frame the issues that would be discussed, choose the locations for the dialogues, and design a survey instrument for use in each dialogue. At the outset, we determined that we were interested in convening members of these community movements: Healthy Communities, Sustainable Communities, Community Building, Civic Democracy, Livable Communities, Safe Communities, and Smart Growth. There are other significant community-based movements, but this selection comprises a good sample of the movements that have been the most influential over the past decade. More information on each movement is found in this article.

The survey was designed to collect information from each organization on its main purpose, alignment with community-based movements, areas of emphasis, and underlying values. A copy of the survey is included as the Appendix to this article.

The survey asked respondents which, if any, of the seven movements their organization was most closely aligned with. (Respondents could also indicate another movement with which they identified, or report that their organization was not allied with any community-based movement.) Following that, respondents ranked their organization's five most important areas of emphasis from a list of twelve and ranked the importance of each of five values to their work.

The Dialogues

Daylong dialogues were held in Des Moines, Iowa; White River Junction, Vermont; Jacksonville, Florida; Salt Lake City, Utah; and Washington, D.C. For each dialogue except the one in Washington, we attempted to include “hidden leaders” in the community along with more easily identifiable members of established community movements. The Washington dialogue convened leaders of national movements to discuss the findings from the previous dialogues and to assess future directions. A standard format was followed for each of the other dialogues.

Early discussions among the convened group focused on the particular orientation of the participants and examined the degree to which they shared core values and principles. There was general agreement within all of the groups on the importance of a sense of community and the need to promote citizen involvement in decision making and develop leadership in the community. With this as a foundation, each dialogue focused on identifying locally shared priorities and the barriers that existed to pursuing their attainment. Next steps were discussed, and consideration was given to whether the participants might work together in the future. Each group was also asked about the potential its members saw for developing a communities movement. The outcome of each dialogue is summarized in the next section.

Des Moines, Iowa. The dialogue in Des Moines had the most local orientation, in that it included the fewest participants who identified with any of the nationally established community movements. Stakeholders from the public, private, and civic sectors were convened in a central-city neighborhood to focus on a few core issues of importance to the local community.

The primary topics were housing and children. One of those magical moments in this type of work happened during the course of this dialogue. After discussion within the group about shared community values, certain participants who had come to the meeting specifically to address other issues ended up forming a task force with the group to develop a community green space and resource area on a plot of vacant land. This subset of individuals, in concert with the others, transcended their particular interests to come together for a shared community purpose.

White River Junction, Vermont. The Vermont dialogue gave us our best opportunity to meet with professionals from the various community movements. The participants were from a four-state New England region, with many of them coming from New Hampshire and Vermont. The discussion about areas of common concern dealt with issues that were larger in scope than those of the other regional dialogues.

Much of the conversation centered on education and communication between community movements, social capital, systems and systems thinking, funding systems, and mechanisms of community-based projects. These issues may constitute a basis for convergence among the community movements. The

meeting also spotlighted inherent barriers at the state and federal levels that impede development of cross-sector, cross-movement work at the community level. Categorical funding structures and lack of funder emphasis on social capital or civic issues were also cited as obstacles to achieving more integrated community-based work.

Jacksonville, Florida. The Jacksonville area has one of the strongest traditions of communitywide, multisectoral collaboration in the United States. Although the participants in this discussion showed some interest in process issues pertaining to community-based movements and projects, they focused more directly on two specific issues germane to the area: regionalism and education. Participants assessed resources and challenges and proposed sets of potential strategies. The clearest message that emerged from this meeting was that a compelling community issue can be an effective catalyst for producing synergy among community movements.

Salt Lake City, Utah. The county around Salt Lake City contains almost half the population of the state of Utah. There are a large number of community-based groups across the area, but little collaboration across jurisdictional lines. The Salt Lake City dialogue was an interesting contrast to the one in Jacksonville. Participants were drawn from the region around the city; most of them worked with nonprofits and government agencies broadly focused on improving the quality of life within local communities. Yet there were few significant examples of cross-sector endeavors among these groups, although there was great interest in moving in that direction. Understandably, this dialogue focused primarily on process issues related to collaborative community-based approaches.

The discussion did not move to concrete community issues as in Jacksonville. But the experience of being together and identifying similarities did create a lot of positive energy and plans for follow-up meetings.

Washington, D.C. Attendees of the Washington meeting were primarily locally based representatives of national organizations and agencies that concentrate on community-based activity and citizen involvement. We presented our preliminary evaluations of the prior dialogues to this group for discussion.

Two significant issues emerged. There is no evidence of an all-encompassing communities movement, and many questioned what the utility of such a structure would be. Most participants did agree, however, that there are a set of underlying values, tools, and goals that the community movements share and that integration among the movements could serve to maximize resources and enhance the impact of community transformation projects. The other issue concerned the importance of the civic sector in communities—that notional place where dialogue and deliberation occur, where trust is built, and where the foundation for community problem solving is developed. There was general agreement that a viable civic sector is essential for the work of each

community movement. Enhancing the civic sector can increase the impact of community movements and their attendant projects and initiatives.

Observations on the Seven Movements

The survey results on identification with community movements were interesting. Some respondents indicated affiliation with each of the seven. Responses from affiliates of particular community-based movements showed considerable consistency across the community dialogues. But interesting nuances were evident that differed from general descriptions of the movements in the literature or input from the national leaders of those movements who were on the advisory council. The survey sample was too small to afford conclusive information, but the results are nonetheless suggestive. Here are brief summaries of some of the highlights.

The Healthy Community Movement. Respondents who identified most closely with the healthy community movement ranked physical health, mental health, and public health higher than the other movements and gave lower emphasis to developing a sense of community. This supports the observation that even though the healthy community movement attempts to model health in a broad sense, its roots in the traditional health sector are very much evident. Compared to respondents who most closely identified with the community building movement, those identifying with the healthy community movement placed more emphasis on human flourishing and less emphasis on justice. The community building movement has a similar process approach to community transformation. These differences in emphasis help confirm the impression that the healthy community movement tends to focus on issues of greater interest to the middle class and does not connect as deeply to justice-related themes that more directly affect other sectors of the community.

The Sustainable Community Movement. Respondents who self-identified with the sustainable community movement ranked human and natural ecologies and the interconnection of personal, community, and environmental flourishing as their most important areas of emphasis. They were the only ones to score concern for nonhuman life in the top five. The national leadership of this movement has voiced concern about perhaps needing to integrate notions pertaining to the quality of human life and community more fully within their conception of a sustainable community. However, in our survey the sustainable community respondents ranked the importance of a shared sense of community as their second highest category, as did respondents associated with two of the other movements.

The Community Building Movement. Respondents identifying with the community building movement ranked the importance of a sense of community higher than did any other group. They also gave a high ranking to safety, possibly reflecting the fact that the community building movement tends to concentrate on relatively impoverished socioeconomic areas, which may have

a more pronounced concern with safety. The community building respondents rated justice as their highest value, as did the civic democracy and safe community respondents. The community building movement respondents gave a higher ranking to spiritual concerns than any other movement, with healthy community respondents being a distant second.

The Livable Community Movement. Survey responses by individuals identifying with the livable community movement reflected the architect and city planner orientation of this movement. They ranked the built environment and economic growth and development as their most important areas of emphasis. Yet livable community respondents also ranked the importance of civility and civil discourse as third in importance, higher than any other group for this variable.

The Civic Democracy Movement. The civic democracy movement understandably ranked political and democratic processes as their most important area of emphasis, followed by organizational infrastructure. This movement is deeply committed to institutional and process aspects of community functioning, and it recognizes the importance of a shared purpose of community. Civic democracy respondents strongly emphasized the importance of basic survival and sustainability; social justice; and higher levels of human, community, and environmental flourishing, demonstrating a broad spectrum of concern grounded in basic themes of survival and justice.

The Safe Community Movement. The safe community movement is probably less well organized at the national level than most of the other community movements. Survey results indicated that respondents identifying with this movement viewed safety and physical health as their highest concerns. They also ranked basic sustainability and social justice along with higher levels of human, community, and environmental flourishing as their most important underlying values.

The Smart Growth Movement. Respondents identifying with the smart growth movement were most concerned with economic development, organizational infrastructure, the built environment, and political infrastructure. Along with adherents from the sustainable and livable community movements, smart growth movement respondents ranked environmental concerns highly. There are many similarities between the smart growth and the livable community movements, as both share emphasis on environmental sustainability and economic development.

Common Themes Among the Community Movements

By using surveys and facilitating dialogues, we were able to get a detailed sense of the concerns of community movement participants in different parts of the country. As a prelude to assessing the potential for convergence among these movements, it is essential that we have a clear understanding of the values and areas of emphasis that underlie and orient these community

movements. Our observations on the content and process themes that define these movements are presented here.

Content Themes. It should come as no surprise that a shared *sense of community* was the most frequently cited area of emphasis among the community-based movements. This category was ranked in the top three by representatives of all of the movements except the livable community and smart growth groups. All of the dialogues that we convened confirm the importance of this focal point. Similarly, the emphasis given to the civic sector in the Washington meeting complements this community orientation.

We asked people in the dialogues about their *sense of the natural environment* and feelings about the interconnection of personal, community, and environmental flourishing. There was general acknowledgment of the importance of ecological sensitivity, but no group other than the sustainability group ranked human and natural ecologies in its top four categories of importance. Livable community and smart growth respondents listed the category as fifth in their order of concerns. Representatives of the sustainability movement on the advisory council said they viewed the environment as being interconnected with human ecology and spirituality. Interestingly, sustainability movement representatives in the community dialogues ranked the importance of a sense of community higher than the healthy community people did.

Social justice is at least an implicit theme in all of the community-based movements. Ensuring that the full diversity of the community is included in deliberation, collaboration, and decision making is a shared concern of all of these movements. The community building movement has perhaps the strongest social justice orientation, as it primarily targets the needs and interests of residents in lower-income urban areas. The sustainability movement was the only group to rank a concern for nonhuman life in its top ten concerns, ranking it fifth. Theirs was the only group to rank environmental justice highly. For the handful of attendees at the dialogues who indicated that they identified with movements other than those listed, nonhuman life was their highest concern; they ranked environmental justice, a shared sense of community, and social justice themes highly as well.

The final content theme is *process as substance*. On the whole, these groups are committed to the process of community building in terms of supporting ongoing dialogue, implementing continuous feedback loops, and practicing inclusive collaboration and decision making. In this sense, there is widespread awareness of the importance of civic infrastructure and the civic health of the community. Given the centrality of these issues to the civic democracy movement, this movement could play a vital role in developing a broader communities movement.

Operational and Process Themes. The first operational and process theme is *inclusive, ongoing, value-based dialogue*. From a process perspective, the ideal approach for most community-based groups is to include all stakeholders in a deliberative process conducted in terms of shared vision and values

rather than on the basis of power or interests. This approach is intended to elicit a sense of the common good. The importance given to deliberative democracy in the community dialogues underscores this preference. Some groups, such as the sustainability movement, may sometimes put more emphasis on pursuing a principled agenda than on modeling inclusive collaboration and dialogue in the community. Others, such as the civic democracy and healthy community movements, see inclusive community collaboration and dialogue as fundamental to everything they do.

Experienced practitioners among the participants in the dialogues well understand the need to use *indicators* in their work to get their initiatives funded. Measurement tools such as indicators are needed to assess progress and to lay the foundation for consistent and intelligent policy design. Creation of community-based, community-owned indicators can be an important means of empowering citizens through giving them information about conditions that affect their lives. The process of designing community-based indicators can also increase citizen participation in developing public policy.

Participants agreed on the importance of laying the groundwork for *public policy* development. As community decision making moves beyond particular concerns and interest-based activism, there is growing recognition of the need to enhance the civic sector within communities. An increased level of citizen involvement is needed to shape the broader community agenda. In some areas, particularly Jacksonville, structures, tools, and processes are in place to facilitate such involvement.

Community-based groups all need a basic level of *organizational competency* to pursue the goals for which they were created. To maintain themselves and expand their impact, this basic level must be enhanced. Among the most important competencies required are fundraising and sustainability strategies, a capacity to be inclusive and engage major stakeholders, the ability to develop goals and strategies for the long run, and the determination to overcome political and bureaucratic barriers.

Is There a Communities Movement? Could There Be?

This project began out of an interest in assessing the prospects for building a communities movement. We have determined that there are a large number of common and complementary substantive and operational themes among community-based movements. In all of our dialogues, participants were struck by their interconnection, the number of shared or similar values and priorities, and the common interest in broader community transformation. By contrast, there was not much evidence of collaboration among the various community-based movements.

On the neighborhood level, the people in Des Moines had little awareness of the presence of these movements in their own community, yet almost all of them saw that their own priorities were closely aligned with those of at least

one of the major movements. In Jacksonville, however, there is such a strong collaborative tradition that it was really a matter of common sense for everyone to be drawn together in convening and collaborating capacities.

The most sophisticated and experienced group of practitioners participating in this project were those gathered in White River Junction. Yet they did not have much experience in linking and collaborating with other movements, and because of their wide dispersal over a multistate region they did not think there was much potential for collaborative follow-up among the dialogue participants. In Salt Lake City, it was uniformly expressed that there has been increasingly more communication and collaboration among community-based groups in the Salt Lake Valley over the last ten years. However, collaboration and activity across jurisdictional lines was the exception rather than the rule. In sum, we would have to conclude that there is not even what one might loosely call a communities movement.

Still, there is no question that the substantive and operational themes of the major community-based movements are similar or complementary. All these movements share an interest in community transformation. Although the environmental and sustainability theme is not a core part of most of these movements, our conversations in the dialogues reflected general appreciation for the importance of both human and environmental sustainability. Clearly, themes such as a sense of community, social justice, process as substance, indicator development, and public policy formation are areas of mutual interest among the movements and could be the basis for some degree of convergence.

There was not much interest among the various movements in merging their agendas and identities. Nonetheless, an enormous amount of untapped potential exists for the various community-based movements to learn from one another and collaborate. No one, including the advisory council members and the participants in the Washington meeting, was aware of any convening force for bringing distinct but complementary groups together for broader collaboration, on a regional or national level. Yet there was virtually unanimous enthusiasm for an integrative communities movement, that is, one that links existing groups in complementary ways to achieve more fundamental community transformation and promote greater awareness of the interconnections among personal, community, and environmental well being.

Next Steps for a Communities Movement

It is unclear whether an authentic communities movement will be produced by the convergence among movements. But steps can be taken to promote an integrative vision and develop the institutional capacity for greater collaborative efforts.

Integrative Vision. Although there may be a motivation for some groups or movements to merge into something more encompassing, most of the

community-based movements seem deeply invested in their particular agenda. But if the emphasis is on integration rather than merger, each group can maintain its identity while collaborating with others. This approach may require a different conception of what a communities movement could be—something that has more of a spontaneous, organic, and fluid character than something that is marked by organizational rigidity. The points of convergence raised in this article may offer a basis for conversation among the national leadership of the main community movements to pursue more specific strategies for integration.

The Next Stage of the Civic Sector. Throughout this article, reference has been made to the critical importance of the civic sector for all of the community-based movements. In traditional terms, we think of the civic sector as comprising those places where people connect and become involved, through a variety of activities, in their neighborhood, church, association, and other organizations. The civic sector nurtures issue-based activism around areas such as health care, education, housing, economic development, and environmental protection.

Over the course of this project, we have come to realize that something new is beginning to emerge in communities across the United States. We call this the next stage of the civic sector, and it is the product of the community movements themselves. More sophisticated organizational capacities are emerging from the smaller civic forums and informal civic practices and habits that exist in communities. This development generates enhanced information and more stable processes and structures; perhaps most important, it also creates a neutral space for deliberation on critical community issues. The next stage of the civic sector is informed by the values and tools of the community movements, such as the deliberative practices of civic democracy, indicator development from the sustainability movement, equity from community builders, and the visioning and convening tools of the healthy community movement.

Jacksonville Community Council Incorporated (JCCI) is perhaps the best illustration of this next stage. JCCI is a 501(c)(3) established in 1975 through support of the chamber of commerce. Over the years, it has developed the capacity to convene citizens across sectors, inform them with relevant indicators and data, and engage them in studying critical community issues and developing action plans to improve the overall quality of life in Jacksonville. JCCI has figured out how to give civic participation an impact on public policy and has provided an ongoing structure to do so. (The article by David Swain in this issue is a detailed account of JCCI and its history and activities.) Other organizations such as the Boulder, Colorado, County Civic Forum, which evolved from a healthy communities initiative; Innovation Partnerships of Portland, Oregon, a 501(c)(3) that was catalyzed by the mayor and local business leaders; and Vision 2020 of Greater Lafayette, Indiana, a newly formed entity that has evolved from a community visioning and strategic

planning project, have separately and organically developed similar sets of capacities and roles in varying degrees with individual nuances.

From what we've seen so far, organizations that constitute the next stage of the civic sector will create neutral spaces for public deliberation, produce good information on community issues, lead planning activities that result in action, and amplify citizen voices at the public policy level. We will continue to study this phenomenon to determine how and why it emerges, what its level of impact is, and whether it can be catalyzed and replicated in other settings. Future articles in this journal will develop theoretical and conceptual analyses of this next stage of the civic sector.

In several of our community movement discussions, we heard that nationally based movements don't really matter at the local level. People care about issues and not movements. It is possible that the next stage of the civic sector will combine the values and tools of national movements with the energy of citizens engaged with the critical issues affecting their communities to create a dynamic entity that fulfills a new and much needed role in today's society.

Appendix: Questionnaire for Regional Meeting

Main Purpose of Your Organization

On the back of this sheet, in just a few sentences write the name, location, and main mission and types of activity of the community-based organization which you represent. If you are involved with several organizations, describe the one with which you most closely identify and answer below accordingly.

Community-Based Movement Alignment

Check the community-based movement with which your organization is most closely aligned or identifies:

- Healthy communities
- Community building
- Sustainable communities (natural environmental emphasis)
- Livable communities (emphasis on built environment)
- Civic democracy
- Safe communities
- Economic development and growth
- No connection or identification with any community-based movement
- Other community-based movement (designate): _____

The following areas and levels are not comprehensive and the rankings are not precise, but your filling out the following will help provide a general sense of how various community based organizations and movements that will be represented at this and other regional meetings compare to one another with regard to selected indicators.

Areas of Emphasis of Your Organization

Check the areas of emphasis that are explicitly important to your organization and then rank in order the top five areas that you have checked, with 1 being the highest.

Check Rank

- | | | |
|--------------------------|-------|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | _____ | Physical health |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | _____ | Safety |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | _____ | Mental and psychological well-being |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | _____ | Healthy organizational infrastructure in the community (civil society) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | _____ | Shared sense of community and purpose |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | _____ | Healthy political and democratic processes |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | _____ | Civility and civil discourse |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | _____ | Healthy economic development and growth |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | _____ | Flourishing nonhuman life |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | _____ | Flourishing human and natural ecologies |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | _____ | Well-designed man-made environments |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | _____ | Interconnected individual, community, and environmental flourishing |

Underlying Values of Your Organization

Rank from 1 to 4, with 1 being most important, the values of your organization:

Rank

- | | |
|-------|---|
| _____ | Basic sustainability for future generations |
| _____ | Equity and social justice |
| _____ | Higher levels of human, community, and environmental prosperity |
| _____ | Spiritual concerns |
| _____ | Other: _____ |

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