Pathways to System Change: The Design of Multisite, Cross-Sector Initiatives

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Abstract

Over the past few years, there has been significant growth in the number of multi-site, cross-sector initiatives to improve communities and the lives of their residents. This report examines efforts by some of the nation's leading foundations and community development practitioners, providing a guide for funders as they consider launching similar initiatives as well as helpful lessons for others engaged in cross-sector work. Through a comprehensive literature review, interviews with key project evaluators and funders, a recap of a December 2014 roundtable discussion, and the authors' significant expertise, this report provides detailed descriptions of "what works" and "pitfalls" in its analysis of design elements and project parameters of both past and current multisite initiatives. It will hopefully prove useful to both public sector and private sector funders seeking to develop a multisite initiative focused on system change and cross-sector collaboration. In addition, the paper may provide insights in the design and implementation of place-based efforts for community development practitioners, financial institutions, and other institutions, such as healthcare payers, who are involved in site-specific initiatives seeking to improve the economic well-being of low-income residents.

About the Contributing Organizations

For 30 years, Mt. Auburn Associates has been a leader in the design, implementation, and evaluation of strategies to promote the economic well-being of individuals, communities, and regions. Mt. Auburn has developed a national reputation as an expert on the cutting edge of evaluation design, a thought leader in economic and workforce development, and innovator in the creative economy field. The firm provides a range of services from strategic planning, program design, and implementation, to large-scale, multiyear program evaluation. Mt. Auburn's work completing comprehensive strategic plans for communities throughout the Northeast provides the firm with a very strong understanding of the dynamics involved in developing and implementing plans that focus on the intersection of place, people, and jobs. In the past ten years, Mt. Auburn has turned its attention to learning and evaluation. The firm has undertaken numerous evaluations and field-building projects, including the evaluations of Round I of the Living Cities Integration Initiative; SkillWorks, a workforce development collaborative in Boston; and the Working Cities Challenge in Boston. Mt. Auburn Associates has also been a leader in defining and analyzing the creative economy at the state, regional, and city levels and in developing strategies for creative industry development and creative placemaking.

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation is the nation's largest philanthropy dedicated solely to health. Since 1972, we have worked to identify the most pressing health issues facing America. We believe that good health and health care are essential to the well-being and stability of our society and the vitality of our families and communities. Our work is guided by a fundamental premise: We are stewards of private funds that must be used in the public's interest. Together with our grantees and collaborators, we strive to bring about meaningful, lasting change—with the goal of building a Culture of Health that enables all in our diverse society to lead healthier lives, now and for generations to come. For more information, visit www.rwjf.org. Follow the Foundation on Twitter at www.rwjf.org/twitter or on Facebook at www.rwjf.org/facebook.

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Introduction

BACKGROUND

In its efforts to build a "culture of health" in America, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) has highlighted the importance of focusing on the places where people live, work, and play. Through its Commission to Build a Healthier America, RWJF called for working with the community development sector to ensure healthier neighborhoods:

"Creating healthier communities—and lives—requires considering the health impacts of all aspects of community development and revitalization. A broad range of sectors, including public health, health care, education, transportation, community planning, and business, must work together to achieve common goals."[1]

The Commission's January 2014 report, *Time to Act: Investing in the Health of Our Children and Communities,* included three recommendations in this area:

1. *Support and speed the integration of finance, health, and community development to revitalize neighborhoods and improve health.*

2. *Create incentives and performance measures to spur collaborative approaches to building healthy communities.*

3. *Replicate promising, integrated models for creating more resilient, healthier communities. Invest in innovation.*

In June 2014, the senior leadership of RWJF authorized exploration of a set of investments that would put these recommendations into practice. The investments would include support for cross-sector collaboratives working at the intersection of community development and health. As part of this exploration, RWJF sought to learn from the successes and missteps of other initiatives that have pursued cross-sector strategies to revitalize communities. Examples of recent multisite initiatives that have emerged in the last five years include:

- The Integration Initiative (Living Cities);

- Partners in Progress (Citi Foundation/Low Income Investment Fund);

- Working Cities Challenge (Federal Reserve Bank of Boston);

- The Way to Wellville (HICCup); and

- Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund (The Aspen Institute).

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[1] http://www.rwjf.org/en/about-rwjf/newsroom/newsroom-content/2014/01/commission-to-build-a-healthier-america-recommends-seismic-shift.html

A number of factors have shaped this new wave of complex community change initiatives:

- *An acknowledgment of the limited results achieved by the neighborhood-based comprehensive community initiatives implemented over the past two decades:* There is near consensus that the previous generation of community change initiatives failed to live up to the expectations.[2] In particular, while there are many examples of efforts resulting in new projects and programs, an increase in community development capacity, and changes in the way local stakeholders operate, these initiatives, especially those that focused on comprehensive community development strategies targeting low-income neighborhoods, were generally not able to produce evidence of a positive impact on population-level outcomes related to social and economic wellbeing. The result has been a rethinking of place-based anti-poverty strategies and a renewed interest in developing creative approaches to addressing the complex problems associated with poverty.[3]

- *Interest in collective impact:* The publication of John Kania and Mark Kramer's article "Collective Impact" in the Winter 2011 issue of the *Stanford Social Innovation Review*[4] generated substantial interest in the theory and practice of "collective impact," a model of cross-sector collaboration in which key stakeholders form a collaborative to solve a complex social problem through a coordinated, data-driven approach. The idea of collective impact has spread widely since its introduction, and many of the newer complex community change initiatives have adopted the collective impact framework, in whole or in part.

- *Interest in the relationship between community development and resident health:* There is growing evidence suggesting that the impact of a community's economic and social conditions on the health of residents of that community is greater than had previously been assumed. This has led to efforts to promote greater collaboration between those involved in community development and those involved in issues of health and wellness. The Healthy Communities Initiative, created by the San Francisco Federal Reserve Bank and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, has done much to promote the benefits of collaboration through its series of conferences and its publications.

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[2] Interviews conducted for this report as well as recent overviews of the history of community change initiatives, including *Voices from the Field III: Lessons and Challenges from Two Decades of Community Change Efforts,* provided the basis for this conclusion.

[3] See *Place-Based Initiatives in the Context of Public Policy and Markets*: *Moving to Higher Ground* (March 2015), edited by Elwood Hopkins and James Ferris, for a recent review in the United States. There is also growing interest internationally in the next stage of place-based work. See *Knowledge Review: Collective and Collaborative Place Based Initiatives, What Works, What Matters, Why, and Guidance for the Peter McKenzie Project* (June 2014), a recent review in New Zealand for the JR McKenzie Trust, and *The evidence: what we know about place-based approaches to support children's wellbeing* (November 2014), an Australian report produced by the Centre for Community Child Health.

[4] Kania, John, and Mark Kramer. "Collective Impact." *Stanford Social Innovation Review.* Winter 2011.

- *Focus on scale through system-oriented approaches:* Many funders now recognize that if they want to have impacts that go beyond the limited number of individuals served by the specific programs or projects that they fund, they need to think about changing the systems that impact people's lives. This had led to considerable interest in supporting initiatives that are seeking changes in public and private funding flows, broader policy shifts, and transformations in the ways that individuals and institutions conceptualize complex social problems and act to solve them.

As funders seek to design new initiatives to respond to these trends, it is critical that they take the findings from the existing literature on complex community change initiatives into account and learn from practitioners who have previously designed, implemented, or evaluated these initiatives.

Although there is an extensive literature on multisite community change initiatives, most papers focus on what occurs at the site level, not on how funders design initiatives. Although foundation staff and evaluators often learn a great deal over the course of an initiative about such topics as selecting sites, building site capacity, structuring grant timelines and planning periods, and building effective learning communities, for the most part this knowledge is not captured and shared. In addition, the existing literature does not focus directly on one of the key elements shared by many of the newer initiatives, a focus on changing systems rather than just developing new programs or building the capacity of existing ones.

This paper seeks to address these gaps. While primarily intended to address the specific needs of RWJF and its potential partners as they design a new initiative, this paper will hopefully prove useful to both public sector and private sector funders seeking to develop a multisite initiative focused on system change and cross-sector collaboration. In addition, the paper may provide insights in the design and implementation of place-based efforts for community development practitioners, financial institutions, and other institutions, such as healthcare payers, who are involved in site-specific initiatives seeking to improve the economic well-being of low-income residents.

METHODS

The findings in this paper are based on several forms of research:

1. *Review of the literature:* The authors conducted a literature review that covered the following areas:

- Evaluations and analysis of multisite initiatives that focus on cross-sector partnerships and system change. (See following table.)

Multisite Initiatives Reviewed for this Paper				
	Cross-Sector Initiatives: Multi-Issue	**Cross-Sector Initiatives: Place-Based Culture of Health**	**Cross-Sector Initiatives: Education and Workforce**	**Comprehensive Community Initiatives**
National or Multistate Scale	• Living Cities: The Integration Initiative • Citi Foundation/Low Income Investment Fund: Partners in Progress • HUD: Sustainable Communities	• HICCup: The Way to Wellville • Kaiser Permanente: Community Health Initiatives • GlaxoSmithKline: GSK IMPACT Grants • Robert Wood Johnson Foundation: Urban Health Initiative	• The Aspen Institute: Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund • Lumina Foundation: Community Partnership for Attainment • Gates Foundation: Communities Learning in Partnership • Annie E. Casey Foundation: Jobs Initiative	• Annie E. Casey Foundation: Making Connections
City, County, Region, or State Scale	• Federal Reserve Bank of Boston: Working Cities Challenge • King County/The Seattle Foundation: Communities of Opportunity	• The California Endowment: Building Healthy Communities • The Colorado Trust: Colorado Healthy Communities Initiative		• Skillman Foundation: Good Neighborhoods Initiative/Good Schools Initiative • John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation and LISC/Chicago: New Communities Program

- Evaluations and descriptions of other funder efforts to support networks and system change. (See table.)

Other System Change Initiatives: Networks	
Networks focused on learning and shared principles and structures	• StriveTogether: Cradle to Career Network • Tamarack: Vibrant Communities Canada - Cities Reducing Poverty
System change initiatives based on building broad networks of organizations focused on the same outcome	• Garfield Foundation: RE-AMP Network • BUILD Initiative
System change through network building at the site level	• The James Irvine Foundation: New Leadership Network • Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust: Healthy Places NC

- Studies and papers by practitioners and academics about lessons learned on the design and management of multisite initiatives and on defining and evaluating system change. (See bibliography.)

2. *Interviews with evaluators and funders:* The authors of this paper conducted 21 interviews with individuals who have been involved in the planning, implementation, or evaluation of multisite initiatives, particularly initiatives with a systems focus, a focus on the relationship between community conditions and health, or with a collective impact frame. (See attachment for list of those interviewed.)

3. *Roundtable on "Pathways to System Change":* The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco convened a meeting of experts involved in the design and implementation of multisite initiatives on December 12, 2014. They provided participants with a white paper prepared by Mt. Auburn Associates that summarized the initial findings based on the literature review and interviews. A facilitated discussion elicited comments and insights from those attending. (See attachment for list of those attending the roundtable.)

4. *Reflection on the authors' own experiences:* The authors of this paper led an evaluation of the first round of the Living Cities Integration Initiative and are currently leading the evaluation of the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston's Working Cities Challenge. These initiatives are place-based, involve supporting cross-sector collaboratives, and are focused on system change.

FRAMING THE RESEARCH

This paper seeks to inform the work of funders who are considering the design of a multisite initiative as well as other practitioners in the field. However, the lens is primarily from the point of view of the funder. The framework developed for the research focuses on some of the overarching choices that funders need to make when designing an initiative. The first section of this paper looks at these broad, initiative-level design issues such as selecting the sites, phasing the work, and structuring an evaluation. However, many of the factors that define the work in communities, e.g., the places that are targeted, the strategies that are developed, the individuals and organizations that are included in the work, and the decision-making structures that are used, are usually determined at least in part by the communities in which the funders are investing. The second section of this paper looks beyond overarching initiative structure to consider issues related to how funders work in partnership with sites to make these decisions and to steer the progress of local efforts as they unfold. The following illustration captures the design issues that will be addressed at both the initiative and the site levels.

Initiative Level

Site Level

Initiative Design
- Goals and strategic focus
- Approach to scale
- Selecting sites
- Phasing the work
- Building site capacity
- Evaluation and learning
- Managing the Initiative

TARGET: Population-Level Outcomes Related to Culture of Health

"Where" are the geographic boundaries?
- Neighborhood, city, county, region, state

"What" are they working on?
- Planning
- Implementation

"How" is the work undertaken?
- Cross-sector partnerships
- Networks

"Who" is doing the work?
- Leadership
- Community engagement

Initiative Design

Many of the factors that determine whether or not a multisite initiative is successful are already in place when local work begins. However, while many funders spend significant time considering the issues of "site readiness," there is often insufficient focus on what the authors of a case study of the Skillman Foundation's Detroit Works for Kids initiative refer to as "foundation readiness." According to the authors of this paper, in addition to considering the readiness of sites, a funder *"might also consider whether its own structure, leadership, staff roles, internal systems, and culture make it ready for the role it has envisioned for itself as sponsor."*[5] Similarly, in their paper for the Annie E. Casey Foundation that looked at 11 comprehensive community initiatives, Tina Trent and David Chavis emphasized the need for foundations to clearly communicate their motivations and expectations and devote the time and resources required to ensure that sites have access to all the necessary ingredients for success.[6]

The following section does not consider every aspect of "foundation readiness," but it does identify and discuss some of the major strategic decisions that need to be made in the design phase of any multisite initiative. These are:

1. Articulating goals, assumptions, and a general framework for the initiative.

2. Developing an approach to achieving scale.

3. Deciding on site selection process and criteria.

4. Considering the phasing of the funding.

5. Creating strategies for enhancing site capacity.

6. Developing an approach to monitoring and evaluation.

7. Managing the initiative.

As funders think through each of these issues, they also need to ensure that they have the financial resources, staffing structure, and internal systems in place to implement the initiative that they are planning. This type of organizational capacity is a critical component of foundation readiness, but it is not the focus of this paper.

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[5] Brown, Prudence, Marie Colombo, and Della M. Hughes. "Foundation Readiness for Community Transformation: Learning in Real Time." *The Foundation Review*, 2009, 125-34.

[6] Trent, Tina R., and David M. Chavis. "Scope, Scale, and Sustainability: What It Takes to Create Lasting Community Change." *The Foundation Review*, 2009, 96-114.

ARTICULATING GOALS, ASSUMPTIONS, AND THEORIES THAT UNDERLIE THE WORK

Clearly, many aspects of the design of an initiative should accord with the funders' goals and their theory about how their interventions will lead to achieving those goals. However, although funders are often very directive about making sure that their grantees have clarity about their desired results, their assumptions, and their theory of change, many do not start their own work with the same level of discipline.

There is no one right way to develop or articulate an initiative's goals or its approach to achieving them. While logic models and theories of change are the tools most often used to achieve clarity, what is important is not the particular method so much as the thinking and discussion that drives it. A good process usually involves articulating why the funder is undertaking the initiative, what the funder hopes to achieve, what interventions the funder believes could help it achieve the desired results, and why the funder believes that these interventions are the appropriate pathway. Without this thinking, it would be difficult to design a cohesive initiative and even more difficult to communicate expectations to the sites involved in the initiative.

Some multisite initiatives involve multiple funders. In these cases, it is even more important for all involved to be clear and open about their goals and the assumptions that are driving their thinking.

What Works

- developing a theory of change or outcome map early in the initiative design process to ensure clarity about assumptions, goals, and interventions;

- encouraging honest reflection on the types of outcomes anticipated by funders beyond the site-specific outcomes;

- ensuring that goals and anticipated outcomes are realistic given the timeframe of the proposed initiative and the resources allocated to it;

- embracing emergence and being open to pivoting by changing the theories as learning occurs throughout the implementation process;

- involving board members in the planning process to ensure that they fully understand the anticipated outcomes of the initiative and have realistic expectations about the time and resources needed to achieve those outcomes; and

- testing all design elements to ensure they are aligned with the theory of change.

Pitfalls

- paying insufficient attention to funder readiness to undertake the initiative;

- treating resource allocations and staff capacity as issues separate from design rather than as fundamental constraints that affect every design element of an initiative;

- designing an initiative that seeks to engender long-term transformational change, but focusing on interim outcomes that emphasize short-term, direct impact on individuals;

- totally ignoring the theory of change or logic model once it is developed or not revising and refining it to reflect emergent learning as the initiative evolves; and

- not using available studies and evidence to design the initiative theory.

APPROACH TO SCALE

There is general recognition within the philanthropic world that despite growing endowments, there simply are not enough philanthropic funds to solve today's social challenges. To maximize their impact, initiatives are often designed with a goal that immediate investments will ultimately deliver improved outcomes for more than the individuals directly touched by the initiative. While many initiatives share the common goal of affecting a larger population than the initial funding might directly reach, initiatives diverge in their approach. Two general types of approaches emerge to achieve scale: replication and system change.

The replication approach to achieving scale focuses on service delivery as the primary means of improving outcomes. An initiative funds local stakeholders to develop a project, program, or set of services to address an identified problem. The piloted services may, for example, be more intensive, comprehensive, more data-driven, or employ a new innovative method. The initiative's funding of the innovation is intended to prove, on a small scale, that the approach yields superior outcomes to previous service models. After the model is proven, the intent is that the pilot will be expanded as other neighborhoods or communities replicate the model in hopes of also achieving similar outcomes. Ultimately, the original initiative achieves a scale of impact beyond its original investment through repeated implementation of the improved service delivery model.

An alternative approach to achieving scale has gained additional adherents in more recent initiatives—system change. Initiatives that emphasize system change focus less on directly changing the services as the first step to achieving better results, instead focusing on the underlying causes that yield the current outcomes. The difference between a replication approach and a system change approach could be illustrated as the difference between an initiative that funds innovative pilot programs serving a small subset of ex-offenders with the intention of disseminating best practices from the pilots for future replication versus an initiative that seeks to change the underlying employment and housing policies that pose obstacles when all ex-offenders re-enter society.

Replication	System Change
• **Identify problem** • **Test novel approach to addressing problem** • **Demonstrate local success**: best practice in a program, innovative pilot, demonstrable outcomes for narrowly defined geography or population • **Disseminate approach** • **Replicate approach and expand** the number positively impacted	• **Diagnose underlying system causes of problem** • Pursue strategies that **impact the policies and practices** that impact the systemic barriers • **Recalibrate based on assessment of progress** • **Adapt to changing context** • **Institutionalize** policy and practice changes

In system change efforts, an important first step is diagnosing the underlying system causes producing the current results. Strategies are then designed to attack the root causes of the problem. Depending on the diagnosis of the problem or the hypothesis of how to address the problem, varying system change approaches may be pursued.

System change approaches can be loosely grouped into two buckets: system dynamics and policy and practice. System dynamics focuses on building and deepening relationships among key actors and organizations; changing beliefs, values, or priorities among individuals and organizations; altering power structures and processes for decision-making; and, at its grandest scale, changing community-wide cultural beliefs or norms.

System Dynamics
- Relationships among agencies and orgs
- Beliefs, values, mindset
- Power/decision-making
- Culture
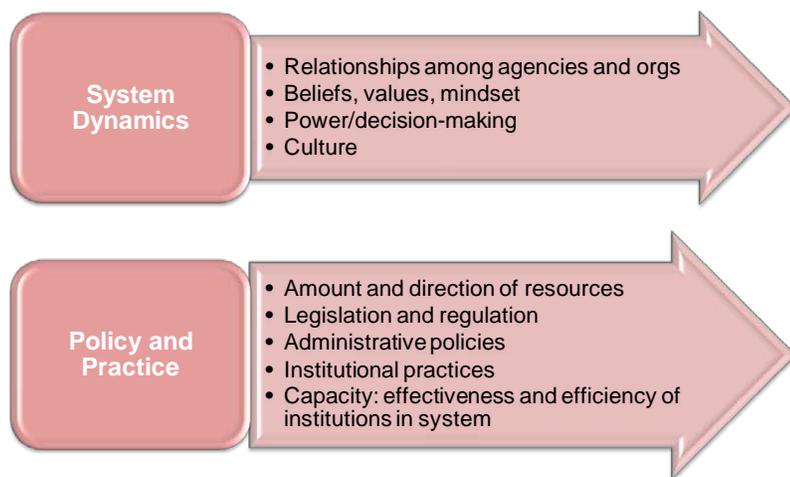
Changes in system dynamics can be codified or institutionalized through changed policies and practices. These types of changes may be seen as legislative, administrative, or institutional policies, regulations, or resource allocation. This can also be manifested in the efficiency and effectiveness of institutions operating within the system.

Policy and Practice
- Amount and direction of resources
- Legislation and regulation
- Administrative policies
- Institutional practices
- Capacity: effectiveness and efficiency of institutions in system

Not only can system change strategies vary on the degree to which they emphasize system dynamics or policy and practice, they can also vary on the extent to which they are focusing on system change at a micro versus macro level. Using the example of policies affecting ex-offenders mentioned previously, a community could pursue a macro system strategy such as a Ban the Box campaign, a public advocacy effort to persuade organizations and employers to remove the criminal-history

question from applications forms, or a community could work closely with a couple of major employers to review which positions can be filled by individuals with a criminal background and change hiring practices to open new opportunities as an initial step. Both represent system change approaches but at different levels.

Civic Infrastructure

A formally named system (e.g., housing, economic development)

Collective "table" of institutions

Informal partnerships among institutions

Organization
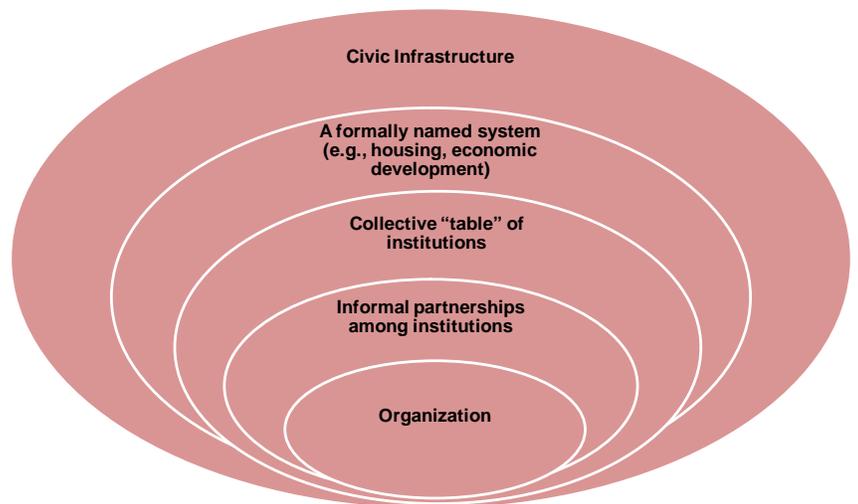
Initiatives may choose to progress from micro to macro approaches or envision a dynamic model in which changes at one level influence changes at others (larger or smaller).

Advantages and Challenges of Scaling through Replication Versus System Change

In designing initiatives that aspire to reach a scale of outcomes beyond the direct beneficiaries of funded grants, funders need to weigh carefully the advantages and challenges of scaling through replication versus scaling through system change. Replication can be appealing because it often starts with pilot programs that can get off the ground quickly and be refined in real time based on early measurements of progress. The pilot programmatic investments can also be appealing when initiative staff are compelled to demonstrate progress to philanthropic leadership—service delivery outcomes are frequently more tangible and measurable than system change approaches. Lastly, replication may feel less risky. Even if the pilots never achieve scale, the initiative is likely to make a demonstrable difference in the lives of at least a small group of pilot participants.

Replication approaches may be quick to get off the ground and are likely to achieve at least some level of outcomes, but many initiatives struggle to translate individual pilot success into outcomes at a larger scale. While a model may be replicated from one location to another, differing contexts make it more challenging to reproduce the same results. For instance, organizational capacity, individual leadership, and the level of resourcing may all be difficult to replicate. There is frequently a question of who will underwrite the replication effort. Philanthropic initiatives are often most interested in proving the pilot with the hope that public sector support will advance the replication. While that certainly can happen, as can be seen in the Department of Education's Promise Neighborhoods initiative that was inspired by the Harlem Children's Zone, it is more common that pilot initiatives lack the broader support needed to scale the initiative to reach a broad population. Finally, replication-based scale efforts are likely to hit a ceiling of impact without more attention to the root causes of the problem. Continuing with the example of the program serving ex-offenders, no matter what the service delivery model used, it will be a challenge to move the needle on re-entry outcomes

for ex-offenders as long as system barriers like ineligibility for government benefits or educational grants, inability to vote, and exclusion from public housing remain in place.

	Replication	System Change
Benefits	• **Tangible**—you can often see evidence of progress • **Faster start up**—rapid prototyping, small-scale testing • **High probability** of making a difference for some	• **Enduring**—sustainability less likely to require ongoing funding • Often **more resilient** in face of changing context/dynamics • Early changes are likely to **reach a larger population**
Challenges	• Differences in context make it **difficult to reproduce results** • **Difficult to sustain**—takes continuing energy and resources to replicate • Often reaches **a ceiling of impact** if not intentionally addressing root causes	• **Difficult to prioritize** multiple root causes to address • **System mapping takes time** prior to action • **Hard to predict the course of change**—much will be emergent • Often requires **collective action—which can be challenging to sustain** • **Harder to measure** results

Initiatives that focus on system change, such as the Living Cities Integration Initiative and the Working Cities Challenge, offer tremendous potential in that system change outcomes often affect a larger population and are often quite enduring. The system change outcomes do not require ongoing funding to sustain benefits nor are they likely to be as dependent on a unique set of dynamics that could derail the scaling process (such as the exit of a visionary leader).

On the other hand, even when initiatives pursue micro levels of system change, it can be difficult to define and measure results for a specific population in a timely manner. Unlike replication, which can easily start with a pilot that carefully tests its innovation on a targeted population, system change approaches are often more diffuse, reaching a wider pool of beneficiaries though with varying intensity of impact. Systems are so complex and dynamic that it can be difficult to predict the effectiveness or the range of consequences a particular strategy may yield, so assessments of progress and recalibration are important. Changes in the system can be institutionalized through policies, practices, and altered resource flows to assure that improved outcomes are sustained beyond the initiative's initial investment.

What Works

• making the desired scale of outcomes a central focus of the initiative;

• developing an explicit and realistic theory of change that maps the pathway from initiative investments to the desired scale of impact;

- analyzing the breadth versus the depth of impact, sometimes referred to as "population dose," which examines the reach of strategy relative to size of target population as well as the level of impact likely to be seen on those reached by the strategy; and

- supporting local system change efforts at the initiative level—advance research and analysis to understand the systems in which the initiative will intervene, and provide ongoing technical assistance and guidance to support system thinking as well as design thinking.

Pitfalls

- lacking an explicit or plausible theory to achieve scale;

- having an incomplete understanding of the factors leading to a pilot project's success or failure;

- taking on too many systems at once;

- expecting sites to quickly grasp systems thinking and readily identify system leverage points without significant support;

- limiting thinking about system change to a focus on public policy; and

- being impatient for results given the longer timeframe needed to achieve system outcomes.

SITE SELECTION

In one of the only papers entirely focused on site selection in community change initiatives, Robert Giloth of the Annie E. Casey Foundation noted, *"The importance of site selection for social demonstrations is conveyed in the folk wisdom that, no matter the demonstration design or aspiration, site selection is the decisive factor in determining ultimate success."*[7]

Thus, one of the most critical elements in the design of an initiative is careful thought to choosing the most effective set of sites given funders' goals and anticipated outcomes. There are three related issues in thinking about site selection:

1. How should the site selection process be designed?

2. In selecting sites, how will the funder address the tradeoffs between setting criteria based upon need vs. criteria based upon readiness?

3. What areas of commonality are important across sites to achieve the initiative's broader outcomes?

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[7] Giloth, Robert, and Colin Austin. "The Perils of Site Selection: Reflections on Picking Demonstration Places," in *Mistakes to Success: Learning and Adapting When Things Go Wrong*. New York: IUniverse, 2010.

The Site Selection Process

In terms of site selection methods, the two most common methods for selecting sites are to either issue a broad request for proposals (RFP) that is open to all grantees who fulfill certain requirements, or to first undertake some type of vetting process and then invite a select group of potential grantees to submit first a letter of interest (LOI) and then a full proposal.

Recently, there have also been a number of "contests" or "challenges" where a funder lays out a set of criteria and sites compete for "prizes," which might involve participation in the initiative or varied levels of funding. (See sidebar on the Working Cities Challenge.)

In some initiatives, such as the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Making Connections initiative, the funder invited a number of sites to participate in a planning period during which sites were supported through various forms of learning and capacity building. In the case of Making Connections, sites that met certain benchmarks during this period were awarded implementation grants and invited to participate in the initiative. This approach emerged through careful analysis of Casey's previous site selection processes. In an internal Casey working paper on site selection, it concluded that selecting sites should be *"less like a contest and more like a courtship."[8]*

Finally, some funders go through a process in which they look for sites that fit their criteria, do some type of vetting process often involving time-intensive site visits and interviews, and then invite sites to be part of the initiative. Living Cities recently used this process in the selection of its second cohort of sites for The Integration Initiative, and the Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust also used this process for its Healthy Places NC initiative.

> **Using a Competition Model:**
> **Site Selection in the Working Cities Challenge**
>
> In May 2013, the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston (Boston Fed) formally launched the Working Cities Challenge (WCC), an effort to encourage and support leaders from the business, government, philanthropic, and nonprofit sectors within smaller cities in Massachusetts to work collaboratively on innovative strategies that have the potential to produce large-scale results for low-income residents in their communities. To achieve its ambitious vision, the Boston Fed designed a competitive process in which small cities across Massachusetts would compete for grants to either seed or implement activities aligned with WCC goals. The WCC invited all 20 Working Cities that met its eligibility requirements to apply for the grant funds. The selection of the six winning cities was made by a jury of external, unbiased experts.
>
> The WCC has issued a total of $1.8 million in grants to six Working Cities. Given that it was structured as a contest, the grant awards varied in size and included four implementation grants ranging in size from $700,000 to $225,000 over a three-year period, and two $100,000 one-year seed grants. The jury selected the following cities to receive WCC grant funds: Chelsea, Fitchburg, Holyoke, Lawrence, Salem, and Somerville.
>
> http://www.bostonfed.org/WorkingCities/

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[8] **CASEY DISPATCH —** *Opportunities, Challenges, and Lessons from Making Connections.* Internal working paper cited with permission from Annie E. Casey Foundation.

Competitive, open processes are often appropriate if there are goals related to creating momentum in the field around certain approaches or strategies. On the other hand, if the funder has a primary interest in generating new evidence and learning, selecting sites directly through a more resource-intensive, hands-on process may be more appropriate.

One of the downsides of RFPs and contests is that those not selected often feel like their time was wasted. This is particularly a problem when the application process itself is burdensome, such as when it requires engagement from a broad set of community actors. On the other hand, there is some evidence that even sites that are not grant recipients are able to build upon the momentum and relationships built during the application process, and they are able to achieve some of the intended outcomes even if not selected.

Need Versus Readiness

In terms of the characteristics of sites selected, there is a tradeoff that is at play in almost all initiatives between "need" and "readiness." The main tension is that sites with the greatest need also often have more limited capacity to write grant proposals and to plan or implement the type of work that funders want to see.

A number of the initiatives focused on the social determinants of health selected sites based solely or primarily on an evaluation of need. For example, for the King County Communities of Opportunity Initiative, health data and other socioeconomic indicators were used to identify communities within the county that had some of the most challenging economic, social, and health conditions. Healthy Places NC similarly focused on counties with significant need. (See sidebar.) In contrast, most comprehensive community initiatives placed a higher priority on readiness and were seeking sites that had at least some level of capacity and/or pre-existing activities that would make them more likely to succeed in the work.

> **Balancing Need and Readiness:**
> **Healthy Places North Carolina**
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> Healthy Places NC is a $100 million, 10-year initiative of the Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust launched in the spring of 2012. The initiative's approach to community change emphasizes networks and emergence.
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> The site selection process was an iterative process that balanced both need and capacity. The Trust started by narrowing its list of potential sites to what are called "Tier 1" counties in North Carolina, the 40 most economically distressed counties in the state. From this list, it ruled out some counties as being either too small or having too much conflict. In addition, the Trust looked at health outcomes in these counties to note ones that had some population level-health indicators that were higher than would be expected, indicating the possibility that something positive was occurring.
>
> By the end of this process, the Trust had a list of eight potential counties. It then sent its program officers to these counties for months to meet with key people. Their role was to broker new relationships and connections across each county. Based upon the findings of the program officers, the Trust invited the first three counties to participate in 2012, and later invited another three to join.
>
> In discussing their site selection strategy, Trust staff noted that they saw it not as a competitive process but as a partnership that was presented as an invitation. They intentionally went into communities that were not the "usual suspects" and that were not usually competitive in traditional grantmaking processes.

Often, while funders set out clear criteria related to "readiness" in their selection of sites, other considerations lead them to make choices that do not fit their own requirements. For example, in both the Living Cities Integration Initiative and the Casey Jobs Initiative, sites were selected even though they did not meet the capacity thresholds developed for the initiative because funders felt compelled to choose some sites with significant needs or that met other funder-related priorities. These sites ended up having somewhat limited success.[9] A study for the Annie E. Casey Foundation that looked at findings on 11 comprehensive community initiatives concluded, "*Inclusion of sites based on arbitrary political or geographical considerations is almost always counterproductive…because they're not fully ready, these sites require a disproportionate amount of resources and attention and this diversion of critical resources undermines the success of other sites.*"[10]

Areas of Commonality

The other significant design consideration in choosing a portfolio of sites is consideration of the major defining elements of the sites being selected. In past initiatives, the sites targeted have been defined by type of community (e.g., small cities), by the targeted population (e.g., disengaged youth), by "how" the work will be undertaken (e.g., collective impact table), by the strategic focus (e.g., small business development), or by the problem definition (e.g., access to jobs).

Having sites that share a common focus on a system or problem definition is helpful in terms of organizing sites, providing technical assistance, and evaluating outcomes. Because of these advantages, several initiatives have taken this approach when choosing a portfolio of sites with whom to work. For example, the Lumina Foundation's Community Partnership for Attainment focuses on postsecondary success, and the sites in the Casey Jobs Initiative were all involved in linking low-income, low-skilled individuals to quality jobs in the region. While the strategies and approaches that are developed to achieve the vision may differ, the commonalities in terms of what the sites are working on allow for greater cross-site learning and can also lead to new field learning about the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches to similar problems.

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[9] Mt. Auburn Associates, Inc. *The Integration Initiative Final Outcome Report,* October 2014; and Giloth, Robert, and Colin Austin. *Mistakes to Success: Learning and Adapting When Things Go Wrong*. New York: IUniverse, 2010.

[10]Trent, Tina R., and David M. Chavis. "Scope, Scale, and Sustainability: What It Takes to Create Lasting Community Change." *The Foundation Review*, 2009, 96-114.

Even if the funders decide on a cohort working on similar goals or systems, they should still consider whether they want the sites to be diverse along other dimensions. For example, some funders that are focused on field learning might select a set of sites that represents a diversity of characteristics (e.g., rural and urban, low capacity and high capacity, weak market and strong market, etc.) so that they can better understand some of the contextual factors that may influence outcomes. On the other hand, they may want to ensure commonalities along these dimensions so that they can more rigorously test some hypotheses.

Some of the cross-site initiatives reviewed for this paper chose a set of sites that were working on very different systems or problems. In these initiatives, what the members of the cohort had in common may have been their commitment to a particular approach that the funder was promoting. For example, Partners in Progress, an initiative of the Citi Foundation and the Low Income Investment Fund, is supporting the work of 13 organizations around the country as "*part of an effort to transform the field of community development by advancing the community 'quarterback' model,*" which

> **Designing a Cohesive Portfolio of Sites:**
> **The Annie E. Casey Jobs Initiative**
>
> In the design of the Jobs Initiative, the Annie E. Casey Foundation constructed a cohort of sites with a number of similarities. Most importantly, all of the sites were seeking to link low-income residents to quality jobs by doing work that involved the workforce development system. In addition, the initiative's designers wanted the sites to be located in similar types of communities, with similar capacities and approaches to workforce development. Specifically, they only included sites in midsized cities that already had some experience working on employment-related efforts that shared some of the principles that Casey had set out for the initiative. To ensure that it got the cohort it wanted, Casey decided on an invitation-only competition for an 18-month planning process to 11 sites, and eventually selected six sites for the implementation phase.

"*leverages the capacity of high-performing local organizations to lead and coordinate across sectors and stakeholders to achieve shared goals.*"[11] The Living Cities Integration Initiative and the Boston Federal Reserve Bank Working Cities Challenge have defined their cohorts primarily in terms of *how* the sites would work rather than on *what* the sites would work. In both of these initiatives, the sites being funded are addressing very different systems and may be working on a wide range of strategies including workforce development, transit-oriented development, public health, small business development, or neighborhood revitalization. What is similar across the sites is that they are taking a collective impact approach to achieving system change within their communities.

There are three issues with a group of sites working on very different problems and addressing different systems. First, this arrangement requires that initiative staff customize technical assistance and other support to the unique context, goals, and strategies of each site. This

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[11]http://www.liifund.org/news/post/citi-foundation-and-low-income-investment-fund-launch-nationwide-partners-in-progress-initiative/

often requires additional staff time. Second, having sites that are working in very different areas makes it difficult to evaluate particular strategies and interventions and to identify "evidence" for the field. While learning can focus on "how" they are working, the differences in context can make it difficult to turn specific findings into general conclusions. Finally, many of the benefits of cross-site learning and sharing are more challenging when sites are working in many different systems.

What Works

- avoiding an overly political site selection process by enlisting a third party, such as an outside "jury" of experts, to review proposals, assess site capacity, and make funding recommendations or by empowering staff to make decisions with limited intervention by board members or other parties that may have the potential of making decisions that do not conform to the agreed upon criteria;

- selecting sites based upon the learning orientation, adaptive skills of core leadership, and level of trust amongst stakeholders, not just existing organizational capacity;

- undertaking sufficient due diligence, such as multiday site visits and team interviews, which verifies that a proposal was not the result of skilled grant writing but represents a true reflection of the community's commitment and capacity;

- developing a plan for preventing or managing negative fallout from sites that compete for a grant or other award and do not succeed;

- hosting convenings before the applications are due that focus on some of the core concepts of the initiative and providing a time for potential applicants to assess whether the "fit" is right for them;

- avoiding communities with hurdles that are insurmountable in the short-term, such as high levels of distrust between key stakeholders, entrenched "gatekeepers" who oppose the changes sought by the initiative, or general unwillingness to alter the status quo;

- embedding staff or working intensively with an intermediary if a funder wants to ensure that it works with some communities that may have significant needs, but limited capacity;

- being clear about what the commonalities are of the cohort and supporting cross-site learning and networking that builds on these commonalities; and

- choosing a cohort that is focused on the same systems if the interest is in field learning and building evidence about what works.

Pitfalls

- instituting a competitive application process without understanding that it may skew the initiative toward high-capacity sites where the potential for augmenting impact beyond what is already happening is lower;

- unintentionally leaving out low-income communities and communities of color by creating a selection process that values capacity but not need;

- setting up a process that favors high-need communities without recognizing that funder staff or an outside intermediary will need to be deeply engaged to ensure success;

- selecting communities in crisis, with a culture of scarcity; and

- emphasizing cross-site sharing and networking when the sites do not have much in common.

PHASING THE WORK

Many multisite initiatives have developed some structure for phasing their grantmaking, often including some type of planning phase followed by an implementation phase. In some initiatives, the planning phase has a set timeframe, most commonly one year. In others, the planning phase is more fluid and involves deep funder engagement in the work.

There are also design choices related to the transition between the planning phase and the implementation phase. In some cases, all of the sites that were initially selected and want to continue go on to implementation. Commonly, a second selection process is designed in which only certain sites that reach specific benchmarks of progress are able to continue on to implementation and access the larger pools of grant funding associated with it.

The length and type of planning period in an initiative is related to the site selection process. If sites are selected on the basis of need, it is likely that the time period required for planning would be significantly longer than in the initiatives where "readiness" is one of the primary selection criteria.

Beyond the timing of the planning phase, what sites work on during this period also varies significantly across initiatives. Some efforts focus more on the process (community engagement, building networks, structuring the collaborative), while others focus more on the strategic content (problem definition, system mapping, plan development). Funders sometimes require that sites use a specific framework or set of tools during this period.

What Works

- scheduling sufficient time for internal planning even before the site planning period;

- providing sites with expertise, specialized learning resources, or a research-informed framework to help them understand the system on which they are planning to focus and to develop their strategies;

- balancing doing, learning, and process—sometimes "quick wins" (or other concrete actions) can help maintain momentum in the work;

- recognizing variation in the amount of planning time sites need, and developing a system for tracking their progress (such as regular site reports or phone calls);

- transitioning from one phase to the next based on meeting clearly specified benchmarks rather than set periods of time;

- encouraging sites to use the planning period as a time to engage the community; and

- being flexible and extending the planning phase as needed, on a site-by-site basis.

Clarity of Expectations During a Planning Phase:
The Communities Learning In Partnership (CLIP)
Planning Phase*

CLIP, part of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation Postsecondary Success strategy, is seeking to accelerate efforts to increase attainment of postsecondary degrees or credentials by low-income students in its selected communities. The initiative has a strong focus on supporting efforts that involve community collaboratives seeking system change in their communities involving both policy and practice changes. The National League of Cities' Institute for Youth, Education, and Families serves as the managing intermediary for the initiative. The initiative was designed to include a nine-month planning phase and a three-year implementation period.

Seven communities were selected to receive $250,000 for a nine-month planning phase. This phase involved identifying and engaging the appropriate partners for the work, developing a governance structure for the work, developing a theory of change, creating the data infrastructure that would be needed to track their work, and developing a three-year implementation plan. The initiative designers were very clear about the specific outcomes that were expected during this phase and the indicators that would be used to assess whether these outcomes were achieved. After a rigorous review process, four of the sites were then selected to go on to receive annual grants of $1 million for three years.

An evaluation of the planning phase completed by the OMG Center for Collaborative Learning found that it was important to have a neutral lead organization during the planning period; that developing a shared system change framework for the initiative was helpful; and that providing clarity about the transition from planning to implementation was important.

*Based on *Communities Learning in Partnership Planning Phase Evaluation Report: Critical Lessons Learned and Catalyzing Factors for Success*. September 2010. OMG Center for Collaborative Learning for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

Pitfalls

- requiring too much of sites during planning—for example, asking them to focus on system understanding, strategy development, and process simultaneously;

- having a planning phase that is too long, resulting in the loss of momentum and engagement;

- not providing sites with field research and evidence that could be helpful during the planning process;

- pushing sites to develop strategies without first gaining an adequate understanding of the problems and systems on which they are focusing; and

- asking sites to go through a very prescribed planning process with a set of specific tools, without spending time to help them gain an understanding of what is expected of them and why or allowing them to adapt the tools to fit their specific needs.

ENHANCING CAPACITY

Almost all multisite initiatives have some approach to enhancing site capacity and providing technical assistance. Examples of commonly used strategies include convening cross-site learning communities; supporting a defined technical assistance team; providing funds for site-driven, customized assistance; and investing in leadership training or coaching.

In some initiatives, the funder fully embeds staff at the sites, providing ongoing training, support, and other forms of capacity enhancement. For example, to run the Building Healthy Communities initiative, The California Endowment hired a local program manager for each of the initiative's 14 sites. These managers serve as site liaison, adviser, and grantmaker, but they also directly involve themselves in the work of the sites by helping them bring in partners, develop strategies, maintain relationships, and leverage outside resources.

Another common method for providing technical assistance is to work with one or more intermediaries who play an intensive technical assistance and/or coaching role. (See sidebar.) For example, in the Colorado Trust's Colorado Healthy

> **Working with an Intermediary: MDC and the Partners for Postsecondary Success Initiative**
>
> The Partners for Postsecondary Success is a three-year demonstration initiative "'to build community partnerships that significantly raise the number of low-income young adults completing postsecondary credentials relevant to living wage work." The initiative is funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Charlotte, Raleigh, Amarillo, and Brownsville, received planning grants of up to $100,000, and three of these cities also received implementation grants of up to $1.3 million.
>
> MDC of North Carolina was funded by Gates as an intermediary to provide the coaching and support to the partnerships. MDC provided coaches to the sites, worked with sites on the capacities they thought were needed (including how to create and sustain cross-sector partnerships), organized an annual Learning Institute, and also had staff from the sites participate in the MDC Fellows Program.

Communities Initiative, which was carried out in the 1990s, the National Civic League helped to facilitate the planning process in each of the communities selected to participate.

Providing sites with resources for them to purchase the technical assistance that they feel they need is another way funders provide support. Sometimes sites are given a fixed budget for technical assistance—in the case of the Partners in Progress, each site was provided with $10,000 to pay for technical assistance services that it identified. In the Living Cities Integration Initiative, there was no predetermined mechanism for technical assistance resources, but sites were able to request supplemental funds for specific, real-time needs.

Another capacity-building tool that many of the multisite initiatives use is learning communities. (See sidebar.) Learning communities and other similar convenings are used as a means of providing sites with exposure to national expertise in areas in which they are working, promoting cross-site learning, as well as providing time for those involved in the site work to work with and build their own teams.

Finally, some initiatives, particularly federally funded ones, involve a "pool" of technical assistance providers that sites can tap into during the course of the work. For example, as part of its Sustainable Communities program, HUD used a $10 million allocation for capacity-building support to fund a confederation of organizations that came together and developed tailored technical assistance offerings. This network of providers proved to be an important element of the initiative—one HUD official involved in the program called it "one of the unanticipated gems of our capacity building initiative."[12]

Creating a Learning Network:
The Integration Initiative (TII) Learning Communities

During the first phase of its Integration Initiative, Living Cities ran 10 cross-site learning communities with the five sites that were part of TII. These learning communities usually involved two days of learning sessions for an eight- to 10-member team of high-level representatives from each of the five sites. Most of the learning communities also included a "pullout day" that focused more intensely on a particular type of strategy or on an issue that sites were dealing with in their work.

TII site team members generally considered the learning communities they attended to be a time of focused, productive work that assisted in accelerating their progress. In particular, participants valued the one-day pullout sessions on anchor institutions, small business strategies, and data.

The learning communities also had work sessions related to adaptive leadership and complex systems, which built upon each other, adding to their strength. These sessions created mutual understanding and shared language amongst team members. Many of those interviewed felt this training was useful to their work back home.

Another benefit of the learning communities was in building relationships across the sites. As a result of relationship building, initiative directors increasingly turned to one another for support and counsel outside of Living Cities-organized interactions. In some cases, they even organized learning-oriented visits to each other's cities.

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[12] Interview with Dwayne Marsh, Senior Advisor, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, November 2014.

What Works

- organizing learning communities that emphasize team building and cross-site learning;

- engaging the sites in the design of learning communities and involving them in leading some of the learning activities;

- having a specific and consistent team from each site that attends each of the learning communities over the life of initiative;

- offering a menu of technical assistance that is flexible enough to meet the needs of every site;

- providing sites with access to specialized expertise, not just generic support;

- engaging high-capacity organizations with deep understanding of the systems being targeted as intermediaries or learning partners;

- carefully considering what types of expertise the funder or intermediary can offer the sites directly, and what support should be outsourced;

- providing flexible funding for site-driven technical assistance; and

- supporting coaches or "critical friends," chosen by the sites, to provide formative feedback and advice throughout the initiative.

Pitfalls

- having a changing cast of representatives attending learning communities or capacity-building activities over the course of the initiative;

- using traditional formats for convenings involving panels of outside experts and practitioners with limited conversations and engagement by the stakeholders from the sites;

- providing standardized assistance when the most urgent needs are specific to each site;

- providing insufficient initiative resources to the site capacity-building function; and

- imposing technical assistance providers on sites without their complete buy-in.

TRACKING PROGRESS

Most multisite initiatives place a high value on learning from the work. This learning has multiple dimensions. First, there is interest in learning about how the work is progressing so that revisions can be made to the initiative design in order to increase the likelihood that outcomes will be achieved. Second, funders are hoping to learn about what works through their involvement with the sites in order to inform their own grantmaking. And, finally, many funders want the learning from their investments to influence the field. This influence is part of the strategic approach to achieving scale. The expectation is that the work they are funding in sites will not only yield outcomes in these places, but will also provide new evidence about what works in addressing complex social problems and may uncover larger policy or system issues that other communities can apply.

Beyond the learning, there is also an interest by funders in holding both sites and themselves accountable for the outcomes that they have set out to achieve through the initiative. Some of the larger comprehensive community initiatives have devoted a considerable amount of time and financial resources in seeking to identify the outcomes of the work. For example, the Annie E. Casey Foundation spent considerable resources on a complex evaluation of the outcomes of its Making Connections initiative. (See sidebar.)

Monitoring and evaluation is the process that is used both to support

The Difficulty of Measuring Population-Level Outcomes in Ambitious Place-Based Initiatives: The Making Connections Evaluation

The Annie E. Casey Foundation's Making Connections initiative was a 10-year, $500 million initiative launched in 1999. The evaluation of the initiative was grand in scope, ambitious, and costly. Its story, which was recounted in Leila Fiester's paper, *Measuring Change While Changing Measures: Learning in, and From, the Evaluation of Making Connections*, holds many lessons for funders and evaluators, especially around the area of data.

The Making Connections evaluation was designed to be a "work in progress" that would be responsive to the initiative's shifting learning needs. As a result, it was very complex, with many moving parts. The largest of these moving parts was a $23 million cross-site survey, conducted in three waves across the 10 years of the initiative. The survey was meant to be a central pillar of the evaluation— previous initiatives that had set goals related to changes in population-level outcomes encountered problems when it came to measurement due to issues like resident mobility, and the Casey Foundation was willing to invest in overcoming these problems.

There had been a strong commitment to rigor in the design of the survey tool. The survey measured population-level change and was designed around an assumption that the site work would have a measurable impact on outcomes at the neighborhood level within 10 years. But as the work began to progress, at a slower pace and a smaller scale than was originally expected, it became clear that this assumption had been unrealistic. In the end, the survey was able to shed a great deal of light on neighborhood conditions and has been useful to researchers trying to understand the dynamics of low-income urban neighborhoods, but it played little part in the evaluation. The case of the Making Connections survey shows that in an initiative with "lots of moving parts," even with a significant investment in evaluation resources, demonstrating impact in a rigorous way is extremely difficult.

the learning as well as to address accountability. As part of the initiative design process, funders need to consider what role monitoring and evaluation will play in the initiative. This requires thinking through what questions they are seeking to answer and how to structure the evaluation.

Types of Evaluation

In the past, most foundations, public agencies, and nonprofits categorized evaluations into two buckets. The first, formative evaluations, are generally defined as "process"-oriented and are used to assess the strengths and weaknesses of a program and propose changes that could improve effectiveness. The second, summative evaluations, focus on the outcomes of an intervention and usually take as a given the design and implementation.

The evaluation field has come to recognize that the strict lines between organizational development and formal evaluation have become increasingly blurred. Moreover, the distinction between formative and summative evaluations is no longer adequate for organizations that are in a continuous learning mode. In response, experts have now articulated an approach to evaluation that is in greater alignment with the goals and structure of initiatives that have a strong system focus—the term used in the field is "developmental evaluation," which is defined as follows:

"Developmental evaluation refers to long-term, partnering relationships between evaluators and those engaged in innovative initiatives and development. Developmental evaluation processes include asking evaluative questions and gathering information to provide feedback and support developmental decision-making and course corrections along the emergent path. The evaluator is part of a team whose members collaborate to conceptualize, design, and test new approaches in a long-term, ongoing process of continuous improvement, adaptation, and intentional change."[13]

Some funders have gone in a different direction and are turning away from comprehensive outcome evaluations or developmental evaluations and are engaging diarists and documenters to tell the story of the work at the sites. For example, in the Partners in Progress initiative, Citi Foundation commissioned a consultant to play the role of documentarian for the initiative, while the Annie E. Casey Foundation, in its Making Connections initiative, in addition to the evaluator, hired diarists to report on how the site work evolved.

There have also been a growing number of evaluations that are seeking to capture the complex system change associated with this work and track the policy, practice, and funding flows that have emerged. The use of social network analysis is one tool that a number of multisite

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[13]Patton, M.Q. (2006) "Evaluation for the Way We Work." *The Nonprofit Quarterly*. Vol. 13 (1): 28-33. Retrieved via http://www.scribd.com/doc/8233067/Michael-Quinn-Patton-Developmental-Evaluation-2006

initiatives have used for capturing changes in system relationships, boundaries, and perspectives.[14]

One important lesson that has emerged from system change evaluations is that if the goal of an effort is transformative change, a full accounting of whether the initiative is successful requires embracing emergence and the longer timeframes needed to assess results. A report by Patricia Auspos and Anne Kubish that reviewed the past 15 years of experience in evaluating community change initiatives concludes, "*The field needs to develop a different mind-set to accommodate the long-term nature of the community change process, including strategies for drawing on the experience of initiatives in their later stages in order to assess the impact and sustainability of these change efforts.*"[15]

While community-building initiatives in the past have not been able to clearly demonstrate an impact on population-level outcomes during the timeframe of the initiative, looked at over a longer timeframe many unanticipated outcomes are often identified. For example, in the late 1990s, a team of researchers associated with Brandeis University went back to look at some of the long-term impacts of past comprehensive community change initiatives. These researchers found that there were some emergent and positive outcomes that had not been anticipated by the initiatives' participants or evaluators and that only became visible years after the efforts had officially ended. In *Change that Abides*, a 2001 publication that summarizes the study's findings, the researchers concluded that *"the most meaningful results many not be reducible to a simple, short-term assessment."*[16, 17]

Evaluation Structure

Beyond deciding on the evaluation questions and the type of evaluation, funders need to consider how they will structure a multisite evaluation. Amongst the many choices that need to be considered, funders need to decide whether they want to have both local site evaluators as well as a national evaluator responsible for looking across all of the sites. If they are considering having local evaluators, there are a number of additional choices that need to be made: should sites be required to pay for or contribute to the costs of the local evaluation; should sites have total control over who is selected to do the local evaluation or should the funder and/or the national evaluator participate in this process; if there is both a national and local evaluator, how should their roles be differentiated; and does a "local" evaluator have to be based at the site or be very familiar with local conditions?

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[14] Mt. Auburn Associates, Inc., *The Integration Initiative Midterm Outcome Report*. October 2012.

[15] Auspos, P. and Kubisch, A. (2004). *Building Knowledge About Community Change: Moving Beyond Evaluations.* Washington, D.C.: The Aspen Institute, Roundtable on Community Change.

[16] *Change That Abides: A Retrospective Look at Five Community and Family-Strengthening Projects, and Their Enduring Results.* Center for Youth and Communities, Brandeis University, Heller Graduate School (2001).

[17] Hahn, Andrew, et al. *A Guide for Grantmakers on the Long-Term Dividends of Philanthropic Initiatives in Support of Families and Neighborhoods.* Brandeis University Center for Human Resources/Institute for Sustainable Development, 1998.

What Works

- involving evaluators very early in the design process, prior to the selection of the sites;

- using evaluators whose expertise aligns with the type of learning envisioned for the initiative;

- supporting approaches that recognize complexity of the data systems needed to track results;

- using developmental evaluation for complex initiatives involving system change to ensure that unexpected and emergent outcomes are captured as well as the projected ones;

- achieving clarity on initiative learning goals with alignment to data and evaluation;

- being open to learning from failures as well as from successes and being nimble enough to pivot based upon the learning;

- setting realistic outcome expectations and developing relevant interim system change outcomes;

- creating mechanisms to ensure that sites find value in evaluation and consider learning to be part of their work;

- ensuring that there is coordination and a shared framework amongst national and local evaluators; and

- committing to the long-term nature of this work and designing an evaluation that aligns with this timeframe.

Pitfalls

- assuming that indicators developed to measure long-term outcomes will be useful for measuring performance in the short-term;

- reaching conclusions based on changes across a short period of time when a theory of change anticipates outcomes over a 10- or 20-year timeframe, and system change may lead to slow initial results but rapidly accelerating results in the longer-term;

- paying insufficient attention to the many logistical and philosophical challenges associated with data collection, reporting, and interpretation;

- using community indicators that are unlikely to be driven by the initiative's work as the outcomes being tracked;

- burdening sites with multiple levels of uncoordinated evaluation and learning activities; and

- allowing sites to select local evaluators without sufficient capacity and understanding of the roles of evaluation in the initiative.

MANAGEMENT STRUCTURE

As funders think through the design issues discussed in this paper, they need to ensure that they have the financial resources, staffing structure, and governance structure in place to implement the initiative that they are planning. There are many management functions that funders need to consider for an initiative to be successful. These functions include grantmaking and fiscal oversight, grant monitoring, site selection, strategic site support, communications, and evaluation and knowledge capture.

In considering how to support these functions, funders need to decide which of these functions they will undertake through their own internal staffing and management structures and which, if any, functions they will outsource to other consultants or intermediaries. While this process is complex when one funder is involved, issues of initiative management and governance are even more challenging when multiple funders are supporting a multifaceted cross-site initiative.

Individual Funder

Foundations have used many different management structures in the implementation of an initiative:

1. *Centralized, internal staffing:* In this model, foundation staff undertake most, if not all, of the functions other than evaluation. This includes site selection, all aspects of fiscal management and grant monitoring, regular interaction with the sites, and designing and managing the capacity-building and learning activities. Both the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston in the Working Cities Challenge and Living Cities in its Integration Initiative primarily used their own staff to manage the work and used individual consultants as staff extenders.

2. *Embedded staffing*:   In some initiatives, such as Healthy Places NC, the funder has either repurposed existing staff or hired and trained new staff to work very closely with each site, with staff often based in the community that receives funding.

3. *Intermediary management:* Many foundations partner with an intermediary organization that is responsible for most aspects of implementation, including site selection, grantmaking, fiscal management, grant monitoring, site relations, and designing and implementing capacity-building and learning activities.   This was the case, for example, in the Urban Health Initiative of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

4. *Mixed management:* Perhaps the most common way that an individual funder staffs and manages a multisite initiative is to use its own staff to oversee the entire initiative, including site selection and grant management, but to use outside consultants or intermediaries for

key functions such as providing technical assistance, designing and facilitating learning communities, and implementing capacity-building and learning activities. The previous section on capacity building provides examples of the use of intermediaries for this set of functions. When funders use this approach, the intermediary is often seen as a consultant or another "grantee" rather than a full partner in the work.

In a number of the multisite initiatives reviewed for this paper (e.g., The Urban Health Initiative of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the MacArthur Foundation's New Communities Program), an individual funder made the decision to assign most, if not all, of the functions to an outside intermediary. Prue Brown's paper, *The Experience of an Intermediary in a Complex Initiative: The Urban Health Initiative's National Program Office*, provides a detailed overview of RWJF's approach to managing initiatives through a National Program Office rather than internally, and includes a helpful list of key questions for foundations and intermediaries to address at the outset of an initiative. [18] Peter Szanton's paper, *Toward More Effective Use of Intermediaries*, while not specifically about cross-site initiatives, also provides a useful analysis of the challenges and benefits associated with working through intermediaries.[19] According to Prue Brown's paper, funders may choose to contract with intermediaries for several different reasons:

- avoiding costs associated with recruiting and hiring new staff members;

- gaining access to specialized forms of expertise that would otherwise be unavailable;

- being able to move into new fields where the funder lacks relationships and credibility;

- making the funding process more efficient and flexible by transferring responsibilities to an entity where decisions are subject to fewer constraints; and

- adding "distance" between the sites and the funder to make conflict over funding decisions, capacity deficiencies, or politically controversial activities less likely.

The California Endowment in Building Healthy Communities, the Annie E. Casey Foundation in its Making Connections initiative, and the Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust in Healthy Places NC all used the approach of having embedded staff working at the individual sites. *Redefining Expectations for Place-Based Philanthropy,* an article based on a midcourse review of Building Healthy Communities, discussed the benefits and challenges of this approach. The article noted that while embedded staff can be critical to building trust between the funder and the sites, *"helping staff members juggle the responsibility of grant maker and the increased responsibilities inherent with an embedded role in communities continues to be a challenge."*

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[18]Brown, P. (Updated March 2005). *The Experience of an Intermediary in a Complex Initiative: The Urban Health Initiative's National Program Office*. Lessons Learned from an Ambitious Community Change Effort: A series of occasional papers. UHI.

[19]Szanton, P. *Toward More Effective Use Of Intermediaries*. New York: The Foundation Center, 2003. Print. Practice Matters: The Improving Philanthropy Project.

The authors wrote that it was critical for The California Endowment leaders to consider *"whether their internal structures and processes create the conditions for program staff to thrive in both roles."*[20]

Whether managing the initiative internally or through an intermediary, those interviewed for this paper reported that the full cost to the funder associated with the successful implementation of a cross-site initiative is often underestimated. Noting this risk, a 2005 report on the Urban Health Initiative concluded, *"Foundation underspending either for its own staff or for an intermediary can invite initiative failure as well as undermine the learning that would be generated by a robust enough test of the ideas behind the initiative."*[21] Even when working primarily through an intermediary, there is still a considerable time commitment on the part of foundation staff. For example, in the MacArthur Foundation's New Communities Program in Chicago, an intermediary was responsible for most of the initiative management, in this case LISC Chicago. However, there were monthly LISC-MacArthur staff meetings as well as quarterly meetings between the LISC principals and the foundation's president. While having a "managing intermediary" significantly reduced the foundation's need to track and keep up with neighborhood-level action, the program officers from MacArthur kept relatively close oversight of much of the work in the neighborhoods, including making annual or bi-annual site visits.

Multiple Funders

Often the support for multisite initiatives comes from multiple funders who are using a variety of structures to pursue their objectives. The staffing and governance of an initiative is often determined by whether or not the funders initiated the work versus whether an intermediary or partnership of organizations initiated and designed the work and then went to funders for support.

There are many examples where a set of funders has *created a new intermediary that is charged with a specific mission and then go on to develop a cross-site initiative*. Examples would include ArtPlace (a funder-created intermediary focusing on creative placemaking) and the National Fund for Workforce Solutions (a funder-created intermediary focusing on sectoral workforce development). Given that the funders created the intermediary, they are likely to play a strong governance role over the work, and while not necessarily involved in the day-to-day work of the initiative, they are involved in major design and funding decisions.

Some cross-site initiatives involving multiple funders are being *managed through an existing intermediary*. In this case, the funders are not necessarily funding the intermediary as in the previous example, but are funding and supporting a cross-site initiative being undertaken by the intermediary. For example, a number of foundations are supporting the Opportunity Youth

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[20]Mack, K., Preskill, H., Keddy, J. and Jhawar, M. (2014). Redefining Expectations for Place-based Philanthropy. *The Foundation Review*, 6(4).

[21]Brown, P., Richman, H. and Webber, J. (May 2005). *The Urban Health Initiative: Lessons for Philanthropy*. Philanthropy and Community Change Program. Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago.

Incentive Fund, an initiative of the Aspen Institute. Staff of the Aspen Forum for Community Solutions, in partnership with Jobs for the Future, manage this initiative.

Perhaps an even more complex structure involves multiple organizations coming together as a partnership and seeking funding from multiple foundations for a specific cross-site initiative. In this case, there are challenges in thinking about staffing and managing the actual initiative as well as challenges related to its governance. The Integrated Service Delivery Collaborative (ISDC), a partnership of LISC, MDC, and United Way Worldwide formed to advance the field of integrated service delivery, exemplifies the complexity of this model. This partnership, along with its six funders, forms the National Leadership Group (NLG) of the Working Families Success Network. In effect, the ISDC is both part of the NLG and staffs the NLG. The NLG is co-chaired each year by one funder and one intermediary. The NLG decides on the work of the Collaborative, chose the two pilot sites in its current initiative, and is involved in thinking about field-building, evidence and evaluation, and national and state policy work.

What Works

- ensuring that funders and intermediaries share a common vision and deep understanding of the initiative's theory of change and are committed to it;

- if using embedded staff, recognizing that the skills needed often do not match those of traditional program officers, requiring the need for training and new hiring;

- if using an intermediary, being very clear about roles, responsibilities, the lines of authority, and the level of discretion, particularly over resources, which the intermediary has in making decisions; and

- if multiple funders are involved, developing a governance structure and communications channel that ensure that staff of each sponsor are engaged in the learning as well as strategic decisions as the initiative unfolds.

Pitfalls

- assuming that if working through an intermediary the funder does not need to allocate significant internal staff time to the initiative;

- underestimating the amount of staff time and financial resources needed to manage a complex multisite initiative;

- becoming so distant from the actual work of the sites by working through intermediaries that some of the learning to the funder is lost; and

- losing the deep engagement and level of interest of the funder if there is lack of involvement in some of the on-the-ground work with sites.

The Work of the Sites

Beyond the larger design considerations, funders need to make strategic decisions about what the sites will actually work on and how they will do their work. The following section examines the work of the site from four perspectives:

1. "Where"—the geographic focus.

2. "What"—the research, planning, and implementation activities.

3. "How"—the governance and partnership structures.

4. "Who"—the leaders, organizations, and communities that are engaged.

"WHERE" THE WORK TAKES PLACE

In a recent review of place-based initiatives completed for a December 2014 forum at the University of Southern California, one of the authors noted that when thinking about place-based initiatives, most people *"envision a multi-year initiative focused on a small, distressed neighborhood."*[22] While thinking about place-based work is evolving, many continue to equate place-based strategies with work at the neighborhood scale. Even in initiatives that did not specify that sites should have a neighborhood focus, such as the Living Cities Integration Initiative and the Working Cities Challenge in Massachusetts, many of the communities applying to be part of the initiative proposed efforts targeting a specific neighborhood or set of neighborhoods.

While neighborhoods have been the most common way to define place-based initiatives in the community development field, in other fields, such as workforce development, economic development, and public health, the focus is more on "people" than on "place" and efforts often extend beyond

> **Focusing on Smaller Geographic Areas:**
> **Annie E. Casey Foundation's Family-Centered Community Change Initiative**
>
> While the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Making Connections initiative may not have resulted in the outcomes that were originally anticipated, the foundation's investments did result in significant learning about place-based work. The lessons learned through Making Connections helped shape Casey's future neighborhood-based comprehensive Family-Centered Community Change initiative in three ways:
>
> 1. Instead of creating entirely new intermediaries or partnerships, the new initiative is "joining" existing efforts.
>
> 2. Casey decided to focus on a single approach to poverty, two-generation strategies, instead of leaving it up to the sites to decide.
>
> 3. Rather than focusing on large urban neighborhoods, Casey concluded that if it wants to be able to demonstrate results, it needs to focus on smaller geographic areas.

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[22]The Center on Philanthropy and Public Policy and the Sol Price Center for Social Innovation, University of Southern California, (2015). *Place-Based Initiatives in the Context of Public Policy and Markets: Moving to Higher Ground*. Los Angeles: The Center on Philanthropy and Policy.

the neighborhood. Complex community change initiatives that focus in these areas frequently focus on entire cities, counties, or metropolitan regions. For example, the Casey Jobs Initiative targeted metropolitan areas and Healthy Places NC targeted counties.

Funders should make sure that that they carefully consider how to balance people and place if they are seeking to improve the economic conditions of people. In particular, if funders want to focus on neighborhoods, it is important that they build on the existing learning and find ways to differentiate their work from the work that has been done in the past. Before choosing an approach, funders should consider which aspects of the problem can be effectively addressed at the neighborhood scale and which require engagement with broader systems.

On the opposite side of the spectrum, initiatives that focus on systems in large geographic areas need to ensure that they understand the realities of how a system operates on the ground. Systems often work differently in different places. If you get too far from working in the neighborhoods where residents interact, you may have a more difficult time identifying system challenges. Working at the neighborhood level may ground the experience people have with the larger systems.

In addition to assumptions about the geographic scope, much of the work looking at comprehensive community initiatives has examined efforts in neighborhoods within large cities. How this type of work plays out in rural communities, small cities, and suburbs has not been explored as fully. Currently, there are at least two initiatives that are specifically targeting smaller communities: the Working Cities Challenge and HICCup's The Way to Wellville. These efforts may eventually provide new insights into the opportunities and challenges related to working with smaller cities.

There is growing recognition in the field that it may be useful to think about initiatives as being "place-conscious" rather than "place-based." In a 2010 paper published by the Urban Institute, Manuel Pastor of the University of Southern California and Margery Turner of the Urban Institute argued that the sharp distinctions many practitioners draw between place-based and people-based strategies are counterproductive, "*and that instead we need a blended place-conscious approach, recognizing that poor communities need to be revitalized but that they also need to be connected, and that residents need to be provided a choice to exit but also a choice to stay.*"[23] A recent monograph published by the University of Southern California, *Place-Based Initiatives in the Context of Public Policy and Markets: Moving to Higher Ground*, focused in large part on the connections between people and place. Contributors to the book, which was the culmination of a yearlong inquiry into the state of place-based initiatives, proposed and discussed strategies for embedding neighborhood initiatives in broader system frameworks,

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[23]Pastor, Manuel, and Margery Turner. *Reducing Poverty and Economic Distress after ARRA Potential Roles for Place-conscious Strategies*. Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute, 2010.

connecting local work to regional initiatives, moving from "pilot to policy," and looking at how to blend funding.[24]

What Works

- aligning the site's geographic scope with the systems being targeted—for example, workforce programs operate on a regional scale, while zoning and land use systems are often municipal in scale;

- adapting strategies to the specific conditions of the area targeted by the site;

- allowing each site to define the geographic scale that is most appropriate to the problem it is seeking to address;

- nesting place-based site work in broader system change efforts in order to build channels for learning and influence between the site and regional or state-level systems; and

- understanding how funding flows are controlled in systems related to the initiative.

Pitfalls

- focusing on changing systems over which partners operating in a small geographic area have little influence;

- developing strategies that are essentially about "placemaking," when the result on which the site is focused involves improving the economic conditions of a specific set of low-income individuals or families who live in the targeted community;

- failing to prepare for conflicts related to gentrification and inequality that often accompany neighborhood-level efforts;

- developing community indicators and assessing population-level outcomes in neighborhood efforts without accounting for resident mobility; and

- allocating considerable time and resources to strategies that focus on creating jobs within a neighborhood when neighborhood residents would be better served by efforts to increase access to jobs beyond their neighborhood boundaries.

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[24]The Center on Philanthropy and Public Policy and the Sol Price Center for Social Innovation, University of Southern California, (2015). *Place-Based Initiatives in the Context of Public Policy and Markets: Moving to Higher Ground*. Los Angeles: The Center on Philanthropy and Policy.

"WHAT" WORK IS BEING CONDUCTED

There is huge variation in cross-site initiatives in terms of how directive the funders are in determining the focus of the sites' work.

Most of the multisite initiatives reviewed for this paper left it up to the sites to determine the specific strategies that they would pursue to achieve the goals set out by the funders. In some initiatives, the overall goals of the initiative limited the range of strategies; while in others, funders focused on the processes related to the work and were relatively flexible on the types of strategies that sites pursued. As noted, in the cases of the Living Cities Integration Initiative and the Boston Federal Reserve Bank Working Cities Challenge, there was very little direction about either the problem to be addressed or the strategies to be pursued. This was the work of the sites. The common element was identifying a shared result, identifying the systems that would affect that result, and developing a cross-sector collaborative that would work in new ways to change systems.

Sites involved in the reviewed philanthropic initiatives were implementing a wide range of strategies designed to improve outcomes for low-income individuals. These strategies included affordable housing, transit-oriented development, anchor institutions, entrepreneurial development, early childhood education, workforce development, and K-12 education. Within these general strategy areas, sites often spent considerable time and resources in designing and implementing some type of pilot program or significant community project, which in many of the neighborhood-based comprehensive community initiatives included major real estate developments.

For funders who are taking a system change approach to achieving scale, there is often considerable work with sites to ensure that

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Understanding the Scale of the Problem: The Denominator Exercise

Funders, evaluators, and intermediaries have developed a number of different tools for influencing sites as they work out their theories of change, strategies, and outcome measures. The "denominator exercise," developed by RWJF for the Urban Health Initiative, is one such tool that has been found to be particularly useful in complex community change initiatives. The denominator exercise is a set of questions that forces site partners to think about how the scale of a potential strategy compares to the scale of the problem they are hoping to solve. In its most basic form, the exercise asks partners to estimate a "denominator," the total number of individuals affected by the problem being targeted, and a "numerator," the number of individuals in that target population who would be reached by a strategy. The denominator exercise is highly flexible and expandable. It can be a simple thought exercise using quick, back-of-the-envelope calculations or it can be a sophisticated cost-benefit analysis incorporating in-depth research on factors like projected funding levels, program dropout rates, and resident mobility.

However it is formulated, the denominator exercise should push site partners to think concretely about scale and impact, assess the limitations they face, and ground their work in a plausible theory of change. This can have a transformative effect on their thinking. If a site has broad and ambitious outcome targets, but the partners are considering a narrow, service-oriented strategy, the exercise might convince them to shift to a riskier, but potentially broader-reaching, system change approach. On the other hand, if a site wants to change outcomes for a particular neighborhood or a narrowly-defined segment of a population, the exercise can help the site realize it needs to focus its efforts more carefully.

implementation activities associated with pilot programs and real estate projects do not end up consuming all of the initiative's time and resources.

What Works

- providing sites with external research, data, and evidence to understand the problem and identify system leverage points;

- identifying the system barriers associated with clearly defined problems;

- using a tool to help sites think about the scale needed to achieve their desired results;

- engaging diverse perspectives to understand the problem and to define the boundaries of the particular issues on which the initiative will focus; and

- reaching a common vision at an early stage of the initiative.

Pitfalls

- paying insufficient attention to the importance of understanding the problem; failing to follow the spirit of the dictum that the first 55 minutes should be spent on the problem and the last five minutes on strategies;

- engaging in superficial system change work because of insufficient field knowledge and understanding of the existing evidence;

- defining a problem too broadly, leading to focusing on too many strategies;

- getting bogged down in the larger systems that are at root cause, which may not be appropriate areas to address in a place-based effort;

- creating a list of strategies or planned activities before developing a clear vision of what the initiative is trying to achieve;

- developing indicators and data around too many things; and

- designing the work around a particular result without first considering whether the outcome is measurable or too dependent on exogenous factors beyond the control of the site.

"HOW" THE WORK IS UNDERTAKEN

Developing new structures and processes for addressing complex problems and involving individuals and organizations that do not normally work together is a core element of almost all of the initiatives reviewed for this paper. Increasingly, collective impact has become an

accepted model of this way of working, but there are many other forms of cross-sector partnerships or networks that sites can adapt.

Recognizing the diversity of structures that have been created, Living Cities has developed a framework for thinking about the different forms of cross-sector partnerships. According to its framework, "*The term cross-sector partnership is often used to describe an array of activities involving representatives from multiple sectors. These activities range from events and one-time projects, to government-appointed commissions and ongoing programs, as well as alliances of stakeholders working in new ways to address complex social and economic challenges.*"[25] This framework illustrates that there is not one right way to structure a partnership and that working across sectors may look very different depending upon the problem the group is seeking to address, what instigated the formation of the partnership, and the partnership's authority within the community.

Others in the field are also recognizing that not only are there many forms of cross-sector partnerships, but there is also an evolution in how stakeholders work together with not all stakeholders in a community necessarily wanting or needing to get to collective action. Doug Easterling, who has worked on evaluations of a number of multisite community change initiatives, believes that collective action needs to "*emerge in a community from naturally forming networks*" and that the role of foundations is to form long-term relationships with these networks and help them to assess whether they are interested in moving to collective action. He sees five stages of development[26]:

1. Organizations with common interests are disconnected from each other.

2. Organizations with common interests are informally networked.

3. Networked organizations begin to envision collective action.

4. Networked organizations develop a strategic framework for collective action.

5. Networked organizations carry out coordinated strategies that produce collective impact.

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[25] Gold, A. (September 2013). *What Barriers? Insights from Solving Problems through Cross-Sector Partnerships*. Living Cities.

[26] Easterling, D. (2013). Getting to Collective Impact: How Funders Can Contribute Over the Life Course of the Work. *The Foundation Review, 5(2).*

In some models, the focus is on the networked relationships, not on a specific cross-sector partnership with a clear governance structure and a specific backbone organization. A number of funders, including the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, the Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation, the Colorado Trust, and the Garfield Foundation, have been supporting the development of networks in places and across systems. This work differs from that of collective impact in that funders are not supporting a specific cross-sector table, but are working to broker and support more extensive networks that often focus on individuals as leaders rather than as members of specific organizations. In the collective impact model, there are usually more clearly defined roles for those sitting at the "table" than is the case in more network-oriented processes. The Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation has changed its staffing structure to reflect its network orientation. It no longer has "program officers," but hires what it calls "network officers" who work intensely in communities on building and strengthening networks around defined issues.

What Works

- using network approaches that focus on enhancing the connections amongst people and organizations in a community in the early stages of their proposed work;

- thinking about collective impact as a process that happens in phases;

- understanding the local context and the range of adjacent initiatives and "tables" that are working on related issues in the community; and

The Importance of System Mapping: The RE-AMP Network

In 2003, the Garfield Foundation developed an approach to advancing a clean energy economy in the six states of the Upper Midwest. This initiative, which started with a small group of funders and nonprofits, began its work with intensive efforts to map the systems that were involved in the issue and to identify the key leverage points for making the changes within these systems that would lead to better results. This process led the initial group to build the network based on its now deep understanding of the systems.

The network that was built involves a steering committee and multiple working groups. While this network shares many characteristics with some of the cross-sector collaboratives that have been formed to oversee collective impact initiatives, according to the case study on RE-AMP completed by Heather McLeod Grant, "*RE-AMP focused on designing a network with decentralized structures, many hubs, shared leadership, and multiple platforms for connecting and communicating.*"* For many, this network model is less "top down" than many of the collective impact structures, with more distributed capacity and a more fluid structure that is able to be more adaptive to changing needs and conditions.

*McLeod Grant, H. (Fall 2010). *Transformer: How to Build a Network to Change a System*. A Case Study of the RE-AMP Energy Network. Monitor Institute.

- recognizing that creating a shared vision and committing to collective action is a process that takes time and requires trust building and honest conversations.

Pitfalls

- applying a centralized, prescriptive model such as collective impact to all complex social problems;

- using the lure of money to get stakeholders around the table;

- being too directive about who should be at the table;

- failing to communicate clear expectations about the roles and responsibilities of a table member; and

- not recognizing the amount of time and effort it takes to build a strong governance table.

"WHO" NEEDS TO BE INVOLVED

Related to the issue of how the work is undertaken is the issue of who in the community is engaged in the site work. Considering who needs to be involved in the site work involves thinking about leadership and community engagement.

Leadership

The type and level of leadership at the site level is often found to be one of the most critical factors in many evaluations of the initiatives that philanthropy has supported. Assessing this level of leadership at baseline is clearly one of the major elements of site readiness that needs to be considered in the site selection process. But identifying and nurturing this leadership is an ongoing element of the work of the sites throughout the life of an initiative.

As funders work with sites, there are multiple layers of leadership that they need to consider:

1. *The core leadership group:* Whether the initiative is supporting sites that have a structured collective impact table, one organization or intermediary that is the focal point of the work, or a more loosely structured network, the depth and strength of the ownership of the work by a group of stakeholders in the community is a factor that is found in many community change efforts.

2. *Public sector leadership:* In efforts with a strong system change focus, public sector leaders need to be engaged in the work. This public sector leadership needs to be at multiple levels and should be based on an understanding of the systems that are critical to achieving the sites' goals.

3. *System change leaders:* In most initiatives, there is either a site director or a set of leaders who are tasked with overseeing the work. In system change initiatives, these leaders should not be "program managers," but should have a different skill set that is needed to manage a system change effort. A report on the system change work of the Casey Jobs

Initiative by Scott Hebert included a list of eight characteristics shared by system change leaders across the initiative's sites. These characteristics included capacity for reflective learning; ability to translate from the particular to the general; ability to bring together disparate parties and serve as a mediator; ability to talk to a range of audiences; listening and knowing what to listen for; power analysis skills; talent for seeing the big picture; and an aptitude for innovation.[27] A review of the RWJF Urban Health Initiative concluded that system leadership skills were important, noting, *"Lack of systems knowledge and skills make it difficult for these program directors to conceptualize and strategize for scale."*[28]

Community Engagement

Comprehensive community initiatives have focused significant attention on how to engage community residents in the work. Almost every evaluation of this work concludes that meaningful community engagement is an important factor in how the work progresses. In the comprehensive community work, community engagement is usually equated with different forms of resident involvement in the work.

Beyond the work related to comprehensive community initiatives, there is also increasing discussion on the importance of engaging the community. For example, responding to concern that much of the collective impact work is top down, funders and practitioners involved in this work are now thinking more about how to integrate community engagement in collective impact efforts. However, in this work, funders and those involved in the site work need to think about community engagement more broadly, beyond just "residents." Engagement could also consider how to gain the perspective of the population being targeted for the work. For example, efforts that focus on disengaged youth often consider how to involve them in the work. Or, if the focus is on the small business development system, the community to be engaged would be small business owners. A roundtable on community engagement convened by the Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions defines community as the *"individuals, families, networks, and organizations who will be affected by the initiative and who participate in it, but who are not usually considered to have active leadership roles in creating community solutions."*[29]

What Works

- employing someone whose job is system change and spanning boundaries—facilitating, organizing across sectors, stimulating new thinking, managing conflict, assessing progress, bringing in new players, connecting to outside groups;

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[27]Hebert, S. (2010). *Changing Systems is Like Moving a Mountain…And Other Insights from Successful Workforce Leaders*. Baltimore: The Annie E. Casey Foundation.

[28]Trent, Tina R., and David M. Chavis. "Scope, Scale, and Sustainability: What It Takes to Create Lasting Community Change." *The Foundation Review*, 2009, 96-114.

[29]Barnes, M., Born, P., Harwood, R., Savner, S., Stewart, S. and Zanghi, M. (2014). Roundtable on Community Engagement and Collective Impact. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Fall 2014.

- engaging the public sector in order to facilitate cross-sector learning, coordinate strategies, and change policies, practices, and funding flows;

- enlisting local champions who understand system issues and will be able to "own" the work;

- ensuring that all involved have the same definition of community engagement;

- thinking strategically about where community engagement can fit into the site's work and how it can further the goals of the initiative;

- engaging with and learning from those who directly interface with the targeted systems in order to inform the work and build credibility;

- engaging leaders who are learning-oriented system thinkers; and

- recognizing that the process of long-term system change usually requires engaging the public sector on at least three levels: political leadership, agency/organizational leadership, and frontline staff.

Pitfalls

- not being clear about the definition of "community" or the relationship of community engagement to the outcomes anticipated;

- thinking that community engagement only means involving "residents";

- not being explicit about the racial and equity challenges facing the community;

- not recognizing the potential expansion in timeframe for the work that is required for a robust engagement process;

- assuming that any one group of residents, businesses, or a specific community-based organization represents the community as a whole;

- appointing the wrong person as initiative director—many evaluations have concluded that initiative directors need to be connectors or system leaders, not just managers; and

- being unclear about the rules of engagement and the roles of different population groups and organizations early on in the site's work.

# Implications—Multiple Approaches to System Change

While this paper has described the myriad of choices grantmakers face in designing and implementing a multisite, cross-sector initiative to address complex community problems, thus far the authors have addressed each choice as if it was an independent variable, a selection off an *à la carte* menu. Research suggests that, in fact, the structure of an initiative, including the design elements at the initiative level and the site level, are interdependent pieces of a puzzle that must fit together coherently in order to maximize impact. While there are countless variations in how an initiative and site work could be designed, given the particular interest in system change as an approach to achieving scale, the authors of this paper profile three distinct systems-focused models, looking at some of the interrelated design choices embedded in each. What distinguishes the three initiative models is the locus of system change: at the site, through an intermediary, or embedded throughout initiative design.

INITIATIVE STRUCTURE FOCUSED ON COMMUNITY-BASED CHANGE

 Description: System change is based at the site level—neighborhood, city, or region.   This model is most commonly associated with collective impact.   A cross-sector table is assembled at a site, often composed of a diverse set of stakeholders. Changes in the system occur through a series of actions taken by the organizations   represented   at   the table. Actions to change the system can start with institutional changes within the organizations present at the table, but can also involve collaborative action taken by multiple members or perhaps all the members of the cross-sector table.

Examples:

- **The Integration Initiative (Living Cities)**
- **Working Cities Challenge (Federal Reserve Bank of Boston)**
- **Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund (The Aspen Institute)**
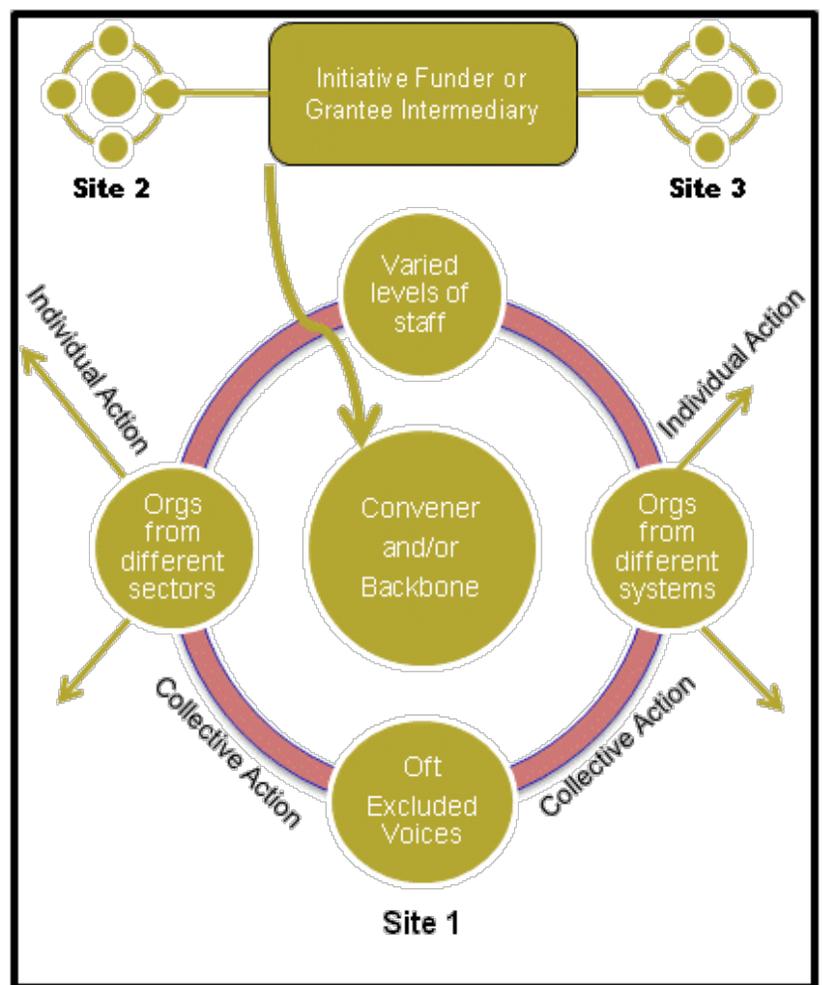
From an initiative standpoint, the system change is a sum of the changes made at a local level. Each site pursues its own system change agenda, which may or may not relate to the work at other sites.

Supporting Initiative Design Choices: For this approach to system change to be successful, initiatives need to choose sites carefully, with an eye to sufficient capacity and cooperation at the site level to change systems through collective action. Initiatives may find it difficult to select sites with the highest need since often these places lack capacity and have a history of distrust that may make it difficult to implement a collective impact approach. The lower the capacity and historic level of cooperation in the community, the greater the impact on the time horizon for the initiative as well. Sites with weaker capacity and collaborative foundation will require a lengthier investment before system change results are likely to be seen. While a competition approach to selecting sites is not incompatible with collective impact, it is important that the selection process provides sufficient insight into the capacity and pre-existing degree of collaboration among stakeholders. Some initiatives find that a more informal selection process that allows for closer observation and more candid perspectives on site capabilities over a longer period of time helps identify the sites best suited for collective action.

This design carries implications for the type of capacity enhancement provided during implementation as well. Once the sites are selected, initiatives pursuing this type of system change will need to focus capacity enhancement efforts on building effective collective action—providing tools on how diverse stakeholders can work together, how to best communicate, how to use data effectively—as well as providing support to the convener or backbone organization.

Supporting Site-level Design Choices: Each site determines what it will focus on based on local assessment of needs and opportunity. While initiatives can set a specific system, like education, as the focus for each site, local content may vary; the commonality is the "How" sites work together with a common approach to governance. Initiatives will also often provide support for the table in the form of support for either a backbone organization or other type of convener. Initiatives will sometimes be prescriptive on the types of stakeholders that should be at the table.

Advantages and Challenges of Community-Based System Change Initiative Structure

Advantages	- The potential for assembling "unlikely suspects," a highly diverse collective, can spur new insights and innovation. - It likely leads to locally authentic strategies since system approaches are community generated. - The process may produce ancillary benefits such as capacity improvements at local organizations.
Challenges	- Table diversity can make it difficult to achieve consensus on goals and strategies. - In communities with low capacity and limited collaborative history, laying a foundation takes years. - A focus on collaborative process can divert energy from problem definition and strategy development. - Individual actions of engaged organizations can take the form of projects or programs and limit system focus. - There is a danger of having the table default to updates on a collection of unaligned activities. - Community-level collaboration often occurs in a neighborhood or city—may not align with jurisdiction of targeted system.

INITIATIVE STRUCTURE EMPHASIZING INTERMEDIARY-DRIVEN CHANGE

Description: This initiative model seeks to balance work at the local level with a recognition that the jurisdiction of systems is often broader than individual sites' span of operations. The design of the initiative is such that individual sites' work, which could be neighborhood- or city-based, or even individual project/program pilots, feeds into a broader system change agenda.

Examples:

- **Building Healthy Communities Initiative (The California Endowment)**
- **Communities of Opportunity (King County and the Seattle Foundation)**

An intermediary that operates at a broader geographic scale than the individual sites aggregates lessons and synthesizes learning from site-level work to develop a change agenda appropriate to its geographic scope. The intermediary could be the funder itself, similar to the role The California Endowment has played in Building Healthy Communities. In some cases, the intermediary could be the grantee, who could simultaneously be acting as the manager of the initiative as well as the leader of the system change work. For example, in the case of Communities of Opportunity, Living Cities is supporting an initiative led by King County and the Seattle Foundation. A cross-sector table is being created at the county level, which is, in turn, funding cross-sector partnerships in three communities. The grantee intermediary could also be solely tasked with system change, as is the case with the Workforce Solutions Group, the policy advocacy grantee of the workforce funders collaborative, SkillWorks in Boston. Regardless of funding relationship, the intermediary is likely to focus on policy and practice changes, gleaning insight for the agenda from local site work and catalyzing grassroots support within sites in support of the policy agenda.

Supporting Initiative Design Choices: The site selection process will need to narrow the relevant content areas. Unlike the community-based system change model, an intermediary-led model will need more commonality in the content areas of site work in order for the sites to complement each other and ultimately roll up into a coherent policy-focused system change
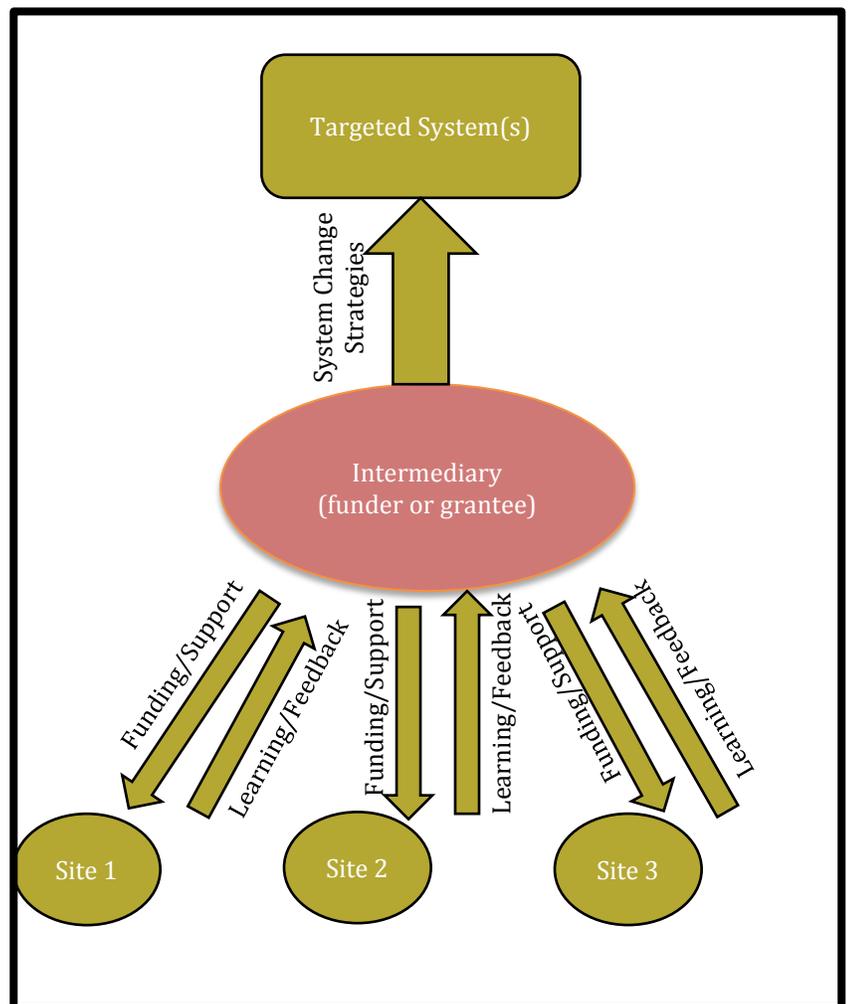
agenda. The geographic scope from which sites can be drawn will also be related to the geographic focus of the intermediary's system change agenda. If an initiative is using an intermediary model to affect state policy, then sites need to be within a single state. If an initiative is looking to affect a county-level system, the local sites should be within the relevant county. The intermediary-led approach should place a premium on evaluation and learning as critical mechanisms in supporting the development of the system change agenda. Formative evaluation is a critical tool in identifying cross-site barriers that could be a focus of system change efforts, while more rigorous outcomes evaluation can support a system change agenda that is making the case for broader adoption of and increased resource allocation for effective practices.

Supporting Site-level Design Choices: This initiative structure can be more agnostic about the geographic boundaries of the site. Of the three models of system change, this approach is probably most supportive of neighborhood-level site work since the intermediary can function at the broader level that more closely matches the jurisdiction of the targeted system. This initiative approach needs to be more prescriptive on the "What" at the site-level, what work is actually being conducted. In order for the intermediaries to effectively develop a system change agenda based on site work, the "What" sites focus on will fairly quickly need to move to implementation. It is from the implementation work that system barriers and promising practices can be identified and incorporated into a broader policy platform.

Advantages and Challenges of an Intermediary-Driven System Change Initiative Structure

Advantages	• Local work provides a vehicle for engagement of residents/targeted population. • It allows for neighborhood-level investment while simultaneously supporting system change at an appropriate jurisdictional level (e.g., county, region, state). • The intermediary can be the primary interface with local sites, alleviating the funder staff burden.
Challenges	• Creating a system-thinking, high-functioning intermediary is costly, time-consuming. • If funded sites/activities are too disparate, it is difficult for the intermediary to synthesize system insights and strategies. • Risk of focus on pilots at local sites—intermediary could be diverted to making pilots successful rather than gleaning system insights from local work.

SYSTEM-LED INITIATIVE STRUCTURE

Description: This initiative structure focuses on a single system (e.g., early childhood education) or perhaps a single specific desired outcome (e.g., lower carbon emissions). Rather than determining the initiative structure and then selecting the systems on which to focus, these initiatives develop the structure around the goal and the system levers that must be affected to reach the goal. A hallmark of the system-led design structure is initial support from the funders for system analysis and research to create an informed framework of what levers will lead to the desired outcomes.

Example:

- **RE-AMP Network (the Garfield Foundation)**

Frequently, initiatives of this type develop a multifaceted approach to policy and practice change often with emphasis on policy advocacy. The geographic focus tends to be certainly broader than community-based system change and frequently broader than intermediary-led change. The scope matches the span of the targeted system—state, multistate region, or nation.

Thorough system mapping prior to initiative design

Initiative designed to align with specific system jurisdiction/span and relevant levers

Group focused on System Lever

Group focused on System Lever

Group focused on System Lever

Initiative-wide population-level goal

The work may be site-based or broken into other networks, united not by geography but by the interim outcome or strategy stakeholders are pursuing. Place-based work generally occurs only when the initiative deems it is the relevant jurisdiction for an aspect of the system change strategy.

Supporting Initiative Design Choices: The most significant implications for this type of structure relate to the phasing of the work. System-led initiatives require extensive pre-launch planning in order to ensure that the initiative and site structure and strategies are positioned to affect the targeted system's key leverage points. It would not be uncommon for such initiatives to spend a year conducting system mapping prior to launch. The system mapping then informs "site selection" in which sites are frequently chosen not based on need or capacity alone but on
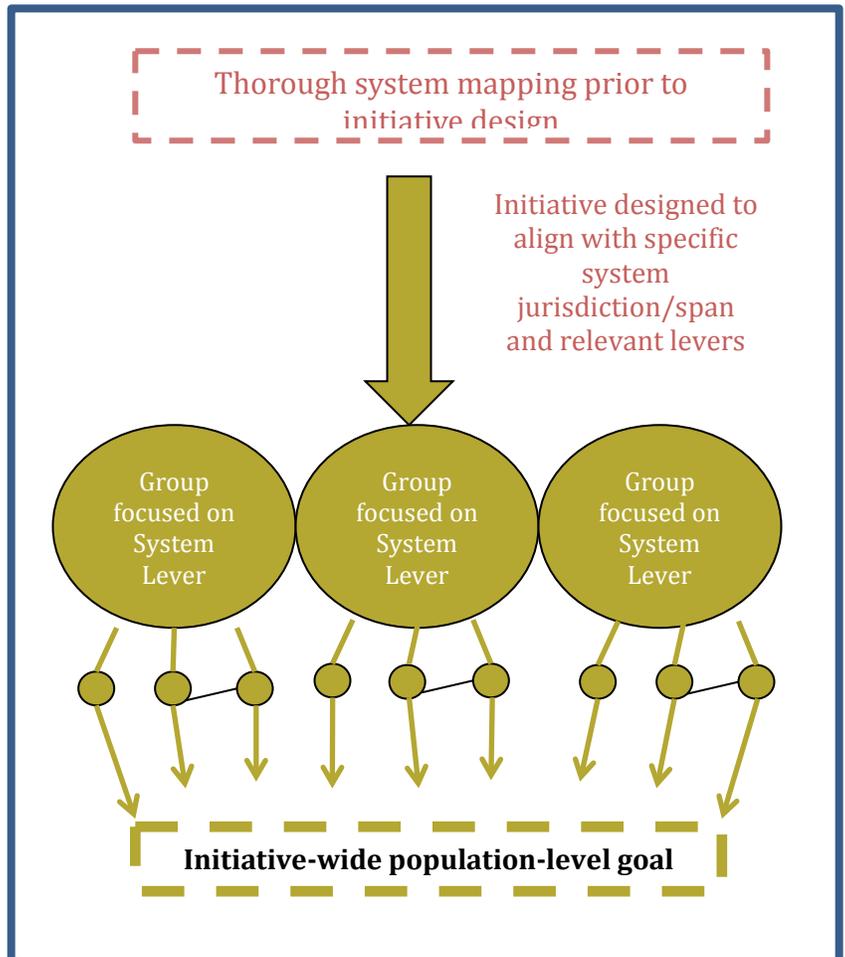
their potential to influence key leverage points in the system. Sites are often seen as complementary components of a broader strategy, nodes on a networked movement, with each site driving toward the same shared goal. Evaluation needs to be aligned to the initiative structure as well. Evaluation is likely to focus less on the site-level assessments of progress but on progress of the entire initiative toward its shared goal.

Supporting Site-level Design Choices: In determining the "Where" for site work, system-led initiatives are more likely to be policy focused and, as a result, tend to operate on a broader geographic scale. System-led initiatives are unlikely to focus resources at a neighborhood or even city level since the locus of policy action for these initiatives is often at the state or national level. As for "What," system-led initiatives' policy focus is likely to place an emphasis on advocacy, although that can be balanced with implementation to demonstrate the value of improved practices. The focus on policy advocacy will also influence the "Who" and "How" at the site level. In building the support for system change, system-led initiatives are less likely to be formal or strict about naming partners, using memorandums of understanding, or setting strict governance structures. Since the goal is to build a movement, the sites will want to be fluid and welcoming of new allies in their effort to change the targeted system.

Advantages and Challenges of System-Led Initiative Structure

Advantages	- Advance thinking leads to focused, high-leverage strategies. - Geographic scale is more likely to align with system. - Minimal formal structure allows initiative to adapt to changing system.
Challenges	- Initiative is more narrowly defined with all initiative activities, not just those at a single site, driving toward single goal. - Extensive time devoted to initial research and system mapping can be time consuming and expert intensive. - System mapping process could easily create expert-led and top-down approach.

Conclusion

This is an exciting time in the world of philanthropy. Many funders are making a deep commitment to investments in social change efforts with ambitious goals of achieving enduring system impact and improving the lives of large numbers of individuals in communities throughout the nation. In addition, federal, state, and local agencies are seeking to develop new approaches to addressing the inequities that are found in communities across the United States. Designing specific initiatives that involve new cross-sector collaboration and seek to reach population-level scale is a significant element of this new approach. In order to ensure that this work leads to the intended outcomes, it is imperative that funders and practitioners learn from the past and seek to design their initiatives with a level of deliberate planning and strategy that reflects the complexity of what they are undertaking.

This paper just skims the surface of many of the strategic design issues that need to be considered. Within each design element there is a broader literature to be explored and significantly more learning that could be mined. At the minimum, the hope is that as both foundations and social impact investors think about how to invest their resources more strategically, they will recognize just how complex this process is and how interrelated each of the design elements are.

In the end, what works involves a combination of the elements of the initiative design, sustaining a commitment to the principles and goals of the initiative throughout the duration of the work, and working in close partnership with sites to ensure that the work at the community level is able to achieve the aspirations that funders had in mind in developing the initiative.

List of Interviewees

INTERVIEWEE	AFFILIATION
Gwyn Barley and Ned Calonge	Colorado Trust
Prue Brown	Prudence Brown Consulting
Rick Brush	HICCup
Ray Colmenar	California Endowment
Douglas Easterling, Ph.D.	Wake Forest School of Medicine
Pennie Foster-Fishman	Michigan State University
Lori Fuller	Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust
Jamie Gamble	Imprint, Inc.
Robert Giloth	Annie E. Casey Foundation
Maria Hibbs	MPH Social Strategies
Craig Howard	John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation
Tom Kelly	Hawai'i Community Foundation (formerly of Casey Foundation)
Katie Loovis	GSK
Dwayne Marsh	HUD Office of Economic Resilience
Heather McLeod Grant	McLeod-Grant Advisors (formerly of Monitor Institute)
Stephen Patrick and Monique Miles	Opportunity Youth Aspen
Justin Piff	OMG Center for Collaborative Learning
Carl Sussman	Sussman Associates
Liz Weaver	Tamarack Institute
John Weiser	BWB Solutions
David Wertheimer	Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

Attendees of Roundtable on Multisite Initiatives

Cassandra Benjamin	Consultant	CSB Consulting
Prabal Chakrabarti	Vice President of Regional and Community Outreach	Federal Reserve Bank of Boston
Gabriella Chiarenza	Research Associate, Community Development	Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco
Laura Choi	Senior Research Associate | Community Development	Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco
Naomi Cytron	Senior Research Associate	Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco
Dr. David Fleming	Director and Health Officer	Public Health-Seattle & King County
Robin Hacke	Staff Extender	Robert Wood Johnson Foundation
Dr. Anthony Iton	Senior Vice President of Healthy Communities	The California Endowment
Tamar Kotelchuck	Director, Working Cities Initiatives	Federal Reserve Bank of Boston
Dwayne Marsh	Senior Advisor	HUD Office of Economic Resilience
John Moon	District Manager, Community Development	Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco
Sharon Roerty	Senior Program Officer	Robert Wood Johnson Foundation
Donald Schwarz	Director	Robert Wood Johnson Foundation
Maggie Super Church	Consultant	Federal Reserve Bank of Boston
Marian Urquilla Flores	Principal	Strategy Lift
John Weiser	Partner	BWB Solutions

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