Editorial

Special Issue: Community Development for Equity and Empowerment

Robert Mark Silverman

Department of Urban and Regional Planning, University at Buffalo, Buffalo, NY 14214, USA; rms35@buffalo.edu

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In cities and settlements across the world, calls for equitable community development policy are unparalleled. The forces of globalization, neoliberalism, and accompanying austerity measures pose new challenged to practitioners engaged in community development and advocacy work. This special issue on "Community Development for Equity and Empowerment" examines strategies to navigate these challenges across a number of domains. The articles in this special issue highlight four pivotal, although not exhaustive, issues that community development practitioners confront when attempting to empower communities and promote equitable outcomes.

First, community development practitioners need to understand how communities are positioned in relation to broader institutional frameworks in which they are embedded. Three of the articles in the special issue deal with aspects of this dimension of promoting equity and empowerment in the community development process. In "Uncovering 'Community': Challenging an Elusive Concept in Development and Disaster Related Work", Titz, Cannon, and Krüger examine how the concept of community is defined in community development work. They argue that this is a core issue, since how we define community sets the parameters for subsequent efforts to promote equity and empowerment. The authors conclude that the ambiguous manner in which community is used makes the empowerment of disenfranchised groups problematic. Although their analysis focuses on work in the areas of disasters and climate change, it has implications for community development more broadly. The article is valuable because it provides an assessment of how the theoretical treatment of community can be conflicting, which confounds efforts to promote redistributive justice. The authors argue that the application of inconsistent theory to community development practice can be harmful and fall short of addressing underlying causes of inequality, disempowerment, and injustice.

Another article dealing with how communities are positioned in relation to broader institutional frameworks is Garcia's, "Symbolism, Collective Identity, and Community Development". This article explores how low-income communities use symbolism as a tool for empowerment. In particular, the article examines how Puerto Ricans in Chicago, IL appropriate the Puerto Rican flag in order to promote community interests. The article focuses on how the flag is used to claim ownership of physical and social spaces in an effort to counter gentrification and displacement. In a related article titled, "Experiences and Strategies of Young, Low-Income, African-American Men and Families Who Navigate Violent Neighborhoods and Low-Performing Schools", Fitzgerald, Miles, and Ledbetter examine how African-American youth tap into community resources as they navigate institutions and urban space. They describe how African-American families utilize traditional coping strategies to overcome obstacles found in neighborhoods, the criminal justice system, public schools, and child welfare agencies. The article finds that young African-American men navigate these obstacles using kin network, strategies of "staying low", and through positive peer support structures. Combined these three articles highlight the institutional frameworks that community development practice is embedded in and some strategies used at the grassroots level to navigate them.

The second issue that community development practitioners confront when attempting to empower communities and promote equitable outcomes involves the implementation of grassroots

strategies. There has been a great deal written about these strategies in reference to the United States and the European contexts. Most of this literature focuses on implementation through formal organizations that tap into informal networks found at the community level. As an extension of this work, this special issue focuses on highlighting grassroots community development strategies undertaken in developing countries. Che's article, "Re-Inventing Community Development: Utilizing Relational Networking and Cultural Assets for Infrastructure Provision", examines how village development associations (VDAs) in Cameroon fill gaps in infrastructure for resource-limited communities. The author describes how grassroots organizations are central to the planning and development of infrastructure that supplies fresh water, equips schools, and builds roads, bridges, and community halls. By incorporating VDAs into local development, social inequality and other barriers of disadvantage are narrowed. Although this approach parallels grassroots community development in other contexts, the limited capacity of the national government in Cameroon makes the contribution of VDAs essential to successful implementation. It also leads to the transfer of skills and knowledge, and the empowerment of local communities.

Similarly, the role of grassroots organization in the implementation of local community development programs is examined in the article by Ruducha, Huang, Potter, Hariharan, Ahmad, Kumar, Mohanan, and Hazra titled, "Perceived Social Networks and Newborn Health: Evidence from Self-Help Group Communities in Northern India." This article focuses on how women's self-help groups (SHGs) facilitate information sharing about newborn childcare and breastfeeding. The researchers found that women living in villages and blocks with SHGs had consistently higher number of relationship ties, health advice ties, and a higher density of health advice networks than those living in the non-SHG areas. SHGs strengthened social capital and promoted accountability to local communities in the health system. Again, these finding were consistent with the role of grassroots organizations and networks in other contexts. However, they appeared to be even more consequential in developing nations where grassroots empowerment is a critical component of capacity building, given the absence of broader support from governmental agencies.

The third issue that community development practitioners confront when attempting to empower communities and promote equitable outcomes involves strategies to provide affordable housing and cope with neighborhood change. These areas of community development are in rapid transition across the globe as housing systems evolve, neoliberal policies expand, and public subsidies shrink. In her article, "Homeownership: What Does Houston Habitat for Humanity Homeowners Have to Say?". Thomas examines how sweat equity is used to empower new homeowners. The article focuses on the role of the nonprofit affordable housing developer Habitat for Humanity in empowering low-income homeowners in Houston, TX. This article offers important insights about the challenges of delivering affordable housing using private, nonprofit development models in an age of growing austerity. In a different vein, Danley and Weaver examine how residents facing displacement due to gentrification find empowerment through daily acts of protest in their article titled, "'They're Not Building It for Us': Displacement Pressure, Unwelcomeness, and Protesting Neighborhood Investment". This article focuses on the gentrification and displacement processes in Camden, NJ. It highlights how growing backlash at the grassroots level can be an important community development resource for practitioners to draw from in their efforts to construct alternatives to the emerging neoliberal narrative about urban revitalization.

Building on these discussions of local trends in affordable housing and community development, the article titled, "The Impact of Single-Family Rental REITs on Regional Housing Markets: A Case Study of Nashville, TN", by Chilton, Silverman, Chaudhrey, and Wang places the issue of affordable housing and neighborhood change in the global context. This article examined the implications of large institutional investors on the scope of community development options. Specifically, this article examines the socio-spatial distribution of single-family homes owned by institutional investors in Nashville, TN. It highlights how the financialization of housing has accelerated the expansion of the "rentership society" across the United States and Europe. With this shift, resources to support efforts to

empower community development initiatives have been diminished. However, the contradictions inherent in financialization have also spurred increased calls for grassroots efforts to return to a community-centered approach to affordable homeownership and the expansion of tenants' rights.

The final issue that community development practitioners confront when attempting to empower communities and promote equitable outcomes involves collaborations with larger institutional stakeholders like hospitals and universities. In their article, "Creating Communities of Choice: Stakeholder Participation in Community Planning", Wesley and Ainsworth describe how community members can be valuable allies to city officials engaged in downtown regeneration and community planning. This article focuses on a city–university collaboration in a historically neglected area that was once a thriving African-American cultural and commercial district in Jackson, MS. The collaboration brought together a cross-section of community stakeholders. The group's work culminated in a proposed land-use plan that balanced the needs of families, businesses, and the City's revitalization efforts. The plan called for the transformation of the district into one that is mixed-use, equitable, and family-oriented, while preserving the area's historic and cultural assets. In many ways this represents a unique set of outcomes to replicate in other settings.

In contrast, Taylor, Luter, and Miller describe how university collaborations have historically fallen short in their article titled, "Institutional Imperialism, the University and Black Neighborhood Development: A Forgotten history of Higher Ed, 1940–1970". This article explores the historic relationship between universities and communities adjacent to them. It argues that since the mid-twentieth century, universities developed an imperial relationship with surrounding neighborhoods in order to expeditiously facilitate campus expansion. In response, a backlash emerged by the mid-1960s growing out of broader urban rebellions and the black power movement, fatefully curbing the pace of campus growth. More contemporaneously, political economic imperatives driven by neoliberal models used to finance higher education motivated universities to re-engage with local neighborhoods. This constitutes what the authors identify as a neo-imperialistic relationship with neighborhoods. To temper this, the authors advocate for alternative forms of collaboration that avoid exploitive relationships with neighborhoods.

A number of lessons can be garnered from the four issues that community development practitioners confront when attempting to empower communities and promote equitable outcomes. First, it is important to understand that community development is embedded in broader institutional structures. Although this can be viewed as a constraint, there is also a dialectal relationship between community development and its institutional context. Because of the inherent connection between the two, practitioners who apply foresight can calibrate community development policies with institutional transformation in mind. Second, grassroots implementation is a critical component of transforming institutions, since it entails the transfer of skills and knowledge to community-based stakeholders. Consequently, the dissemination of skills and knowledge to grassroots groups is also a critical component of community empowerment. Third, one of the bedrock components of community development involves the production of housing and neighborhoods that first and foremost produce equitable and empowered communities. The articles in this special issue highlight how community development practitioners face new challenges in this area due to the emergence of a hegemon buttressed by neoliberalism and finanacialization in relation to housing and community development policy. Finally, this special issue explores the possibilities and drawbacks of university–community partnerships in the community development process. This serves as a reminder that grassroots, community control must be the core of such partnerships if they are expected to produce equitable and empowering outcomes.

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