

Collaborating to Reduce Poverty

Views from city halls and community-based organizations

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INTRODUCTION

The past few years have witnessed an unprecedented growth in collaborative efforts between city halls and community based organizations (CBOs) to reduce poverty and/or revitalize neighborhoods. These initiatives are characterized by a new language (e.g., collaboration, empowerment, community building) and a new sense of optimism that the intractable problems of poverty and neighborhood decline can be overcome.

This new, collaborative approach to poverty reduction and neighborhood revitalization in many U.S. cities is due in part to three intersecting streams of activity: (1) comprehensive community initiatives launched by national and local foundations, local governments, and, in some instances, residents themselves (Kingsley, McNeely, and Gibson 1997; Stone 1996); (2) efforts to broaden and expand the work of community development corporations to also include human services, community-based strategic planning, and neighborhood mobilization (Briggs and Mueller 1997; Walker and Weinheimer 1998); and (3) new federal government initiatives such as empowerment zones and enterprise communities, Healthy Start, Operation Weed and Seed, and school-to-work programs, which emphasize partnerships, collaborations, and community building.

The purpose of this chapter is to gain a better understanding of the ways in which community organizations and city governments are working together to reduce poverty and revitalize neighborhoods, the factors

that either contribute to or inhibit effective collaborations, and the strategies communities are using to foster more effective collaborations. The evidence comes from surveys conducted in summer 1998. The city government survey was sent to all local governments of cities with a 1990 population of 50,000 or greater. The CBO survey instrument was sent to the executive directors of a random sample of nonprofit organizations in cities with populations of 50,000 or greater.

THE STATE OF CITY-CBO RELATIONS

A primary purpose of the survey was to assess the variety of ways in which city governments and CBOs are working together to reduce poverty and revitalize neighborhoods and to assess the factors that facilitate or hinder the effectiveness of that interaction. We asked respondents to characterize the "typical" city government-CBO relationship around poverty reduction and/or neighborhood revitalization issues in their city. Possible responses ranged from "do not work together on these issues," to "take collective action and share power in dealing with these issues." In the discussions that follow, we treat responses in the survey's last two categories (Table 15.1) as indicating the presence of "collaborative" city-CBO relationships.

The responses reveal a mixed picture regarding the state of relations between city governments and CBOs. Although relatively few of the respondents characterized the typical city-CBO relationship in the highest category ("take collective action and share

Table 15.1 Assessment of typical city-CBO relationship by type of respondent

	Total %	City %	CBO %
Do not work together on these issues	3	4	3
Work on separate activities with limited interaction	7	0	11
Work together on an irregular or ad hoc basis on these issues	33	23	38
Work together regularly and consistently on these issues	49	64	43
Take collective action and share power in dealing with these issues	7	9	6
Total percentage	100	100	100
N	324	101	223

power”), almost half (49%) indicated that city governments and CBOs typically work together regularly and consistently on poverty and neighborhood revitalization issues. A substantial minority (43%) of the respondents assessed city-CBO relationships as irregular, ad hoc, or more limited.

City officials generally offered a more positive impression of city-CBO interactions than their CBO counterparts. A substantial majority of city respondents (73%) characterized typical city-CBO relationships in the two most positive categories. In contrast, only 49% of the CBO respondents characterized typical city-CBO relations in their community in collaborative terms.

The state of city-CBO relationships may be a reflection of city characteristics. Larger cities with their greater administrative hierarchy may find it more difficult to adopt power-sharing arrangements with community organizations. Likewise, cities with larger poverty populations may have a more difficult environment in which to work. Having a greater number of communities in need of revitalization may make it more difficult for city governments to meet the expectations of community-based organizations for programmatic coordination and power sharing. In the simplest terms, such cities have more CBOs vying for the attention of city government.

The patterns reported in Table 15.2 are consistent with these expectations. Respondents from larger cities, cities with nonwhite populations above the national median, and cities with poverty populations above the national median are less likely to view city-CBO relationships positively. However, these

Table 15.2 Percentage collaborative responses by city demographics

	N	% Collaborative*
Population		
50,000 to 99,999	101	62
100,000 to 249,999	95	57
250,000+	128	51
% nonwhite		
Below national median	117	62
Above national median	207	53
% below poverty		
Below national median	79	62
Above national median	245	54

Note: * Differences in percentage collaborative among categories are not statistically significant at .05.

differences are not of sufficient magnitude to attain statistical significance.

COLLABORATION BY PROGRAM AREA

The overall assessments of city-CBO relations may obscure variation across specific issue areas. To address this possibility, respondents were asked to indicate the typical level of city-CBO interaction in a variety of program areas. The percentage of respondents characterizing city-CBO relationships in the issue area as collaborative are reported in Table 15.3. Only city and CBO respondents who reported their organizations were working in a program area are included in this analysis.

City officials are again more positive than their CBO counterparts in the characterization of the state of collaboration across program areas. On average, across the 14

Table 15.3 Percentage reporting collaborative responses by program area and type of respondent

Program Area	% of respondents working in area		% Collaborative	
	City	CBO	City	CBO
Affordable housing	100	89	73	48
Public safety	100	68	75	45
Homeless assistance	100	86	68	43
Senior services	97	62	62	31
Neighborhood improvements	100	74	62	33
Youth development	97	68	59	22
Economic development	99	73	55	26
Community organizing/advocacy	97	88	54	26
Family support	94	81	43	27
Employment and training	95	73	40	20
Health care	85	67	36	27
Child care	91	67	43	19
Transportation	91	66	36	24
Adult education	88	67	24	17
Average			52	29

Notes: a. The denominator of the percentage, total respondents in the category, varied between 88 and 104 for city respondents and 136 and 229 for CBO respondents.

b. All city-CBO differences in percentage collaborative respondents are significant at least at .05 except health care and adult education.

program areas, 52% of the city respondents but only 29% of the CBO respondents characterize city-CBO relations as collaborative. For both city and CBO respondents, these assessments are considerably lower than in Table 15.1, where the focus was on the state of the "typical" city-CBO interaction. The pattern of assessment across the various program areas is strongly correlated ($r = .84$). In other words, city and CBO respondents tend to rate the same program areas as high or low in collaboration.

The patterns of collaboration across substantive policy areas tend to map closely the activities of city governments and CBOs. Evidence of higher levels of collaboration seems to be greatest in those program areas where city governments and CBOs have some degree of responsibility—either directly or indirectly (e.g., affordable housing, homeless assistance, public safety). On the other hand, the data suggest lower levels of collaboration in program areas where city governments and/or CBOs have not traditionally played a prominent role in service delivery or

have been major recipients of federal aid programs (e.g., adult education, transportation, health care, child care, family support).

COLLABORATION BY PROGRAM PHASE

City-CBO relations may vary not only across program areas but also by when collaboration occurs. For example, some collaborative relationships may only be exploratory or advisory in nature and confined solely to the formative phases of a program, such as identifying key stakeholders, assessing community needs, and developing a vision to guide the program. Other forms of collaborative relationships between city government and CBOs may extend deeper into the life cycle of public programs and involve joint/shared participation in funding, implementation, and/or evaluation. Table 15.4 reports the proportions of respondents characterizing city-CBO relations in the two

Table 15.4 Percentage reporting collaborative relationships by program phase and type of respondent

Program phase	Type of respondent	
	City	CBO
Identifying community needs	69	35
Developing project/program concept	51	28
Developing plan/budget	38	20
Inclusion of key stakeholders	61	28
Identifying/securing funding	50	31
Initial project/program implementation	47	24
Ongoing project/program management	39	22
Monitoring and evaluation	39	26
Average	49	27

Notes. a. The denominator of the percentage, total respondents in the category, varied between 104 and 105 for city respondents and 224 and 228 for CBO respondents.

b. All city-CBO differences are significant at least at .05.

most collaborative terms for eight phases of program development.

The extent of perceived collaboration varies considerably across the phases of initiatives. Collaboration is judged to be highest in the early phases of a project such as identifying community needs, developing the project concept, and including key stakeholders. The exception to this pattern is "developing the project plan and budget," which had relatively low levels of perceived collaboration. Assessments of collaboration were lower for the ongoing aspects of a typical initiative such as implementation, project management, and evaluation. Once more, city respondents were more likely than CBO respondents to characterize city-CBO relations as collaborative. City and CBO respondents' assessments of the degree of collaboration by program phases also were strongly correlated ($r = .85$). Thus, city and CBO officials tended to agree on which phases are characterized by more collaboration and which by less.

As a follow-up, both sets of respondents were asked to indicate the phase of an initiative that was most essential to achieving effective collaboration. Although they differ somewhat in rank order, the top four choices for both city and CBO respondents were the same: identifying community needs (49% city, 47% CBO), inclusion of key stake-

holders (42% city, 28% CBO), developing project/program concept (28% city, 26% CBO), and identifying and securing funding (20% city, 39% CBO). Thus, not only do both city and CBO respondents perceive greater collaboration in the earlier phases of an initiative than in the later but both sets of respondents also view the earlier phases as more crucial to successful collaboration.

BENEFITS AND BARRIERS TO COLLABORATION

Why should city governments and CBOs work together to reduce poverty and revitalize neighborhoods? Proponents of collaboration frequently point out that "collaboration changes the way we work" and note such positive attributes as building consensus, promoting diversity and inclusiveness, taking a strategic as opposed to a programmatic approach to problem solving, and emphasizing long-term as opposed to short-term accomplishments (Gray 1989).

We asked city government and CBO officials to indicate what types of benefits were typically achieved in their communities as a result of their current collaborations (Table 15.5). City respondents were much more positive than CBO respondents in their assessment of the benefits of current collabor-

Table 15.5 Percentage of respondents identifying a benefit of collaboration by type of respondent

Benefit	Type of respondent	
	City	CBO
City gains better understanding of community needs	95	75
Partners gain better understanding of each other's capacity	93	67
Activities are better aligned with community priorities	92	67
Strengthens other partnerships within the community	91	65
Activities are more effective at achieving goals	87	63
Activities are more comprehensive	78	65
Creates an atmosphere of mutual trust	85	57
Creates a forum to address competing views and priorities	89	52
Involves residents in planning and implementation	91	60
Builds appreciation for efforts of city hall and CBOs	83	56
Fosters connections with other groups	88	61
Large-scale activities can be undertaken	66	63
CBOs gain access to city's technical resources	90	50
Larger pool of funding is available	68	52
Promotes leadership development	79	49
Fosters connections across city departments	83	43
Responsibility and accountability are shared	74	42
Creates a forum to address racial and class biases	65	38
Average	83	57

Notes: a. The denominator of the percentage, total respondents in the category, varied between 101 and 105 for city respondents and 215 and 221 for CBO respondents.

b. All city-CBO differences are significant at least at .05, except larger-scale activities can be undertaken.

ations. The percentage of respondents reporting that a specific benefit had been achieved averaged 83% for city respondents, compared with 57% for their CBO counterparts.

Once again, the assessments of whether various benefits were achieved were significantly correlated ($r = .56$). Even so, there is considerable difference of opinion between city and CBO respondents on a few benefits. Nine out of 10 city respondents believe that their current collaborations provide CBOs access to city technical resources, but only 50% of CBO respondents see that benefit accruing from current collaborations. A discrepancy of similar magnitude occurs with regard to the benefits of "fosters connections across city departments" and "creates a forum to address competing views and priorities."

A follow-up question asked respondents to identify the three most important benefits

of collaboration. Four of the five most frequently cited benefits were the same for city and CBO respondents: "activities are better aligned with community priorities" (city 46%, CBO 33%), "larger pool of funding is available" (city 26%, CBO 42%), "activities are more comprehensive" (city 23%, CBO 17%), and "activities are more effective at achieving goals" (city 24%, CBO 20%). City respondents included "involves residents in planning and implementation" (city 27%, CBO 13%) among their top five benefits, whereas CBOs included "city gains better understanding of community needs" (city 19%, CBO 24%). By and large, the benefits of city-CBO collaborations identified by respondents as most important are also perceived as accruing from current collaborations by more than 80% of city and 60% of CBO respondents (Table 15.5). The one major exception is "larger pool of funding is

available," which two-thirds of city respondents but a bare majority of CBO respondents perceive as flowing from current city-CBO collaborations.

There is far less agreement between the two groups concerning the greatest barriers to effective collaboration. Apart from identifying inadequate city funding and lack of trust as important barriers to effective city-CBO collaboration, there is little else that city and CBO respondents agree on with regard to important barriers. CBO respondents point to city government and the local political environment as the primary obstacles to effective collaboration to reduce poverty and revitalize communities. For CBO respondents, an overly bureaucratic city government that does not want to release control is the major obstacle to effective collaboration. The city respondents, on the other hand, see CBOs with limited resources, poor administration, and parochial interests as the major stumbling block. A lack of mutual trust and poor communication reflect and reinforce these views of one another.

STRATEGIES FOR EFFECTIVE COLLABORATION

As the preceding discussion of barriers makes clear, effective collaboration between city governments and community-based organizations does not occur spontaneously—it requires concerted effort and commitment on the part of both partners. The survey asked city and CBO respondents to identify some of the strategies they have used in their collaborations and to indicate how valuable certain strategies could be in making their collaboration more effective.

Using city government funding or incentives for community-based activities was the most frequently employed collaboration strategy and one of the strategies perceived to be most valuable (Table 15.6). Nevertheless, the city and CBO responses reflect different perceptions of how often city funding and incentives are used. Of city officials, 82% said their local government makes funding or incentives available for collaborative community-based activities, whereas only

63% of CBO respondents reported that they initiate these types of activities using city government funding or incentives. Various approaches to open channels of communication between partners are frequently employed and perceived as valuable.

Perhaps the most interesting finding in this area involves the adoption of a comprehensive and strategic approach to poverty reduction, an approach that many advocates of collaborative problem solving have encouraged. For example, the empowerment zone/enterprise community initiative based its designation of zone communities in part on the quality of the community-based strategic plan developed by multiple stakeholders (e.g., government, community, private sector, etc.). Fifty-six percent of the city and slightly less than half of the CBO respondents indicated that they have actually employed a comprehensive and strategic approach to poverty reduction and/or neighborhood revitalization. However, approximately 70% of both groups view this strategy as very valuable in creating successful collaborations.

DISCUSSION

Collaboration has become a watchword in city-CBO relationships. Academic observers, private foundations, national policy organizations, and federal government programs have increasingly advocated and provided incentives to foster collaborative interactions between city governments and community-based organizations. The present study has reported the results of a survey on the current status of city-CBO relationships and prospects for increased collaboration in the future. The findings are mixed.

The barriers to collaboration identified in the survey response are substantial and deeply embedded. City respondents see the major hindrances to collaboration arising from characteristics/traits of the CBOs, and CBO respondents see the major barriers arising from shortcomings of city administrators. Moreover, the identified barriers reflect characteristics that serve the particular organizations well while working against

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Table 15.6 Strategies used to bring about more effective collaborations and their perceived value by type of respondent

Strategies	City	CBO		
	% Employing strategy	% Responding "Very valuable"	% Employing strategy	% Responding "Very valuable"
Initiating community-based activities using city government funding/ incentives	82	79	63*	57*
Using advocacy efforts to raise public awareness of issues and needs	49	41	60	56*
Developing a forum for increased communication between city government and CBOs	66	64	51*	58*
Creating a CBO consortium or network to work with city government	61	55	58	52
Sharing/exchanging ideas on best practices for successful partnerships	44	58	51	52
Adopting a comprehensive and strategic approach to poverty reduction or community revitalization involving multiple partners and program areas	56	72	48	70
Initiating targeted outreach to private sector partners with city and CBOs	56	54	39*	52
Creating a spin-off organization to implement joint projects	33	27	30	26
Bringing in a third-party intermediary to help develop collaboration	30	18	27	29*
Number of respondents	104		219	

Notes: a. Because respondents only rated the value of strategies that they employed, the number of respondents potentially varies across the strategies. For this set of respondents, the actual number was never more than one or two less than that shown in the table.

* City-CBO difference significant at least at .05.

collaboration. For example, the failure of CBOs to see the citywide picture that city respondents see as a barrier to collaboration reflects the very nature of CBOs, their linkage to the local community. Likewise, city government's bureaucratic decision structures and assertion of control that CBO officials see as barriers to collaboration are responses by city governments and officials to real organizational needs for structuring authority and maintaining accountability. Poor communications and lack of trust, which are identified as barriers by both sets of respondents, in part reflect the difficulties of bridging this organizational divide. Developing trust is exceptionally difficult when it requires relaxing or deviating from strategies and approaches that have served organizations well in the past.

The positive finding of the survey is that despite these apparently fundamental barriers, a large amount of city-CBO collaboration is occurring. The percentage of respondents reporting collaborative city-CBO relationships varies across program areas and by the type of respondent, but on balance the results indicate that a large percentage of cities and CBOs are working together regularly. In addition, the respondents see these collaborations as yielding substantial benefits—city governments have a better understanding of community issues and are able to design and implement programs that better fit community needs. These are benefits anticipated by proponents of collaboration. It would seem that the efforts and incentives to promote collaboration between cities and CBOs have enjoyed notable success.

Although the survey reveals substantial evidence of city governments and CBOs working together regularly, and both sets of respondents responded favorably to questions about city-CBO "collaborations," the identified relationships seem best characterized as a "thin" version of collaboration. Scholars define *collaboration* to require but not be limited to working together on a regular and consistent basis. Academic definitions and associated discussions of collaboration typically include a power-sharing relationship between partners. For example, Gray (1989, 5) defined collaboration as "a process through which parties who see different aspects of a problem can constructively explore their differences and search for solutions that go beyond their own limited vision of what is possible."

The results of this survey indicate that city governments and CBOs are working together, and a larger number are working together on a regular and consistent basis. However, relatively few of the respondents—either in response to questions regarding "typical" city-CBO interactions or to questions focused on city-CBO interactions in specific program areas—describe those relations in terms of cities and CBOs sharing power. Moreover, when the focus turns to city-CBO interactions at the various phases of initiatives, the most positive assessments appear to be in the early formative stages of initiatives. This is consistent with respondents' perceptions of the benefits of collaborating. The responses to these questions cluster around better awareness of community needs and shaping of program initiatives to reflect community priorities. Both sets of respondents see greater city-CBO collaboration early in the initiative process, and both tend to see the benefits of collaboration in those phases. Involvement in implementation, ongoing project management, and joint accountability for outcomes (e.g., monitoring/evaluation) are not only less likely to occur, but city and even CBO respondents see these issues as less central to city-CBO relations.

Although the fact that a large percentage of cities are working regularly and consistently with CBOs to engage the communities in needs assessments, and initial project

design is a very positive finding, this thin version of collaboration may not produce the beneficial outcomes suggested by some proponents of collaboration. For example, as Chrislip and Larson (1994, 13) noted, when collaboration is successful, the benefits often affect the entire community:

When collaboration succeeds, new networks and norms for civic engagement are established and the primary focus of work shifts from parochial interests to the broader concerns of the community. Collaboration . . . not only achieves results in addressing . . . substantive issues . . . it also builds "civic community."

The fundamental reordering of city-CBO relations anticipated in such descriptions of collaboration is unlikely to proceed from the thin version of collaboration apparently at work in the minds of most city officials and CBO directors. Of course, the adoption and spread of the thin version of collaboration may be a necessary step to the fuller version envisioned by scholars of organizational dynamics. The emphasis that both city and CBO respondents place on communication and trust as important to facilitating collaboration is underscored by the overwhelming agreement by both sets of respondents that a comprehensive and strategic approach to poverty reduction and community revitalization is an effective strategy. Many of the private and public initiatives emphasizing collaboration have included comprehensive, strategic planning as a funding prerequisite. This approach brings public, private, and community stakeholders into a neutral setting and strives to obtain consensus concerning problems, strategies for addressing problems, allocation of responsibilities, and monitoring. In sum, this approach flattens the city hierarchy by bringing responsible decision makers directly to the table and offers the potential of minimizing the obstacles of control and "turf" embedded in lower levels of city administration. It also places CBO officials in a decision-making realm where the larger picture of citywide needs comes into focus. The facilitated nature of this process offers the potential for real communication across the city-CBO divide.

In short, comprehensive strategic planning has evolved as a process to address most of the barriers to collaboration identified by city and CBO respondents. Their responses to the survey indicate their recognition of that fact.

Strategic planning, however, is not a panacea. As a strategy for advancing collaboration, it has two major challenges. The first involves challenges to its internal success. The participants have to include the major stakeholders, persons with authority (not simple representatives) must be at the table, the various parties must see the process as potentially important and commit to it, and the facilitation must go well. Even if a planning process is successful, the shared understandings, trust, and commitments made by the participants must be exported to the larger community. Implementation in the face of embedded hierarchies and parochial community views is the second challenge to successful strategic planning.

In closing, the results of the National League of Cities survey indicate that collaborative approaches to persistent poverty and neighborhood revitalization are no longer confined to a handful of cities but

have become fairly widespread across cities of all sizes and conditions. Future research is needed to understand more fully the dynamics and determinants of these relationships in individual cities. Although national surveys can aid in identifying the scope and frequency of city-CBO partnerships, case studies and comparative

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