THE PRINCIPLES FOR

Equitable and Inclusive
Civic Engagement

A GUIDE TO

TRANSFORMATIVE

CHANGE

BY KIP HOLLEY

THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

This publication was produced by the Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity at The Ohio State University. As a university-wide, interdisciplinary research institute, the Kirwan Institute works to deepen understanding of the causes of—and solutions to—racial and ethnic disparities worldwide and to bring about a society that is fair and just for all people.

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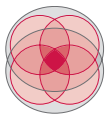
KIRWAN INSTITUTE
for the Study of Race and Ethnicity

Equitable and Inclusive
Civic Engagement

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Civic engagement is more than collection of meetings, techniques, and tools. It takes place in an environment made up of diverse people, practices, conditions, and values. Our civic environments are where we derive our opportunities to succeed. Some communities have healthy, sustainable and rich civic and built environments. Others suffered from decades of segregation and disinvestment, leaving residents segregated from opportunities and unable to strongly influence the policies that drive community investment.

As a result, residents in these communities have lost the structural and cultural supports necessary to ensure justice and to achieve successful outcomes in their lives. The result is that civic engagement is often viewed as a means of gathering consent for initiatives supported by those with wealth and power, rather than a vehicle for delivering civic power to the community. Because of these circumstances, civic engagement has begun to lose legitimacy and effectiveness, as people look elsewhere to make change, particularly in communities that are struggling.[1]

To restore the power and stature of civic engagement, we must become mindful that those who are excluded from community-based *decisions* are not excluded from community development *impacts*. Social inequities can lead to highly polarized and uncertain civic environments, conditions that can discourage free and open exchanges of ideas. In turn, these constraints can lead to inequitable investments, which again lead to lack of trust, polarization, and even more retrenchment.

For people to exercise their civic power and voice equitably, we must change the way we think about civic engagement, making *transformative changes* in our longstanding customs, assumptions, and institutions. It also means moving our conversations away from those that foster polarization and towards those that build relationships, foster mutual accountability, and strive for understanding among neighbors.

Transforming the civic engagement environment is a change in both context and culture. The legitimacy of outreach efforts is tied to the amount of opportunities that community members have to exercise leadership.

Changing the civic engagement environment so that it is based on principles of honesty, hospitality, trust, a respect for the power of dissent, and most importantly of all, the sharing and honoring of gifts, can be instrumental in creating an environment where all can share in our communities' bounties. Empowerment can begin by sharing gifts. For individual community members to share their gifts and move from being spectators to co-creators, large-scale projects must be directed by robust community-led engagement.[2]

Creating an engagement environment that links neighborhood concerns to larger regional or societal issues encourages residents to realize their full potential to change circumstances on a larger stage.[3] Substantive community change happens when people form authentic connections with each other at any scale. Realizing the interconnectedness of the stakeholders in our civic environment can help further bind our communities together while empowering the individual to make change on a larger level. Embracing this type of bottom-up community decision-making and community-based resources creates a more meaningful engagement environment and fosters a sense of community ownership that is at the heart of long-lasting change.[4]

Our neighborhoods and our nation are in the middle of a massive wave of demographic and economic shifts. More and more Americans are people of color and immigrants. Many people are living longer, but can suffer financial insecurity and health challenges in their retirement. Poverty rates, especially for children of color, are rising. The educational achievement necessary for creativity to flourish and to meet the needs of a changing economy lags in many communities across America. Income inequality is at "Gilded Age" levels, and economic mobility has decreased since the post-World War II rise of the middle class. Credit remains tight, and debt is rising for many families. Vacant and abandoned properties remain a significant challenge for many cities and regions. Predatory lending practices and the foreclosure crisis disproportionately impacted neighborhoods of color, contributing to a four-fold increase in the black-white wealth gap. Concentrated poverty is growing, as is the research showing the detriments of concentrated disadvantage to child and family well-being. In many ways, we are becoming more diverse and divided at once. Our neighborhoods are increasingly becoming marked by troubling levels of extreme poverty and extreme wealth.

For more than ten years, the Kirwan Institute has worked with communities across the country to challenge these social inequities. From Detroit, Michigan to Gulfport, Mississippi, to Merced, California, the challenges to ensuring equity and opportunity for all are varied, as are the solutions proposed to address them. However, a critical factor in successful community development and expanded opportunity is civic engagement.

Robust civic engagement and timely community development can productively occur together, expanding opportunity for more people and families. However, if they are radically separated, isolated, episodic, and solely process-focused, both civic engagement and community development can fall short of their aspirational goals. Worse yet, they can contribute to a community's divisions across racial and economic lines. If civic engagement and community development decisions leave out the people most affected by those decisions; if they do not foreground meeting the needs of our most vulnerable citizens and families, then we can see a downward spiral of community disengagement and disinvestment.

The *Principles for Equitable and Inclusive Civic Engagement* invites community leaders, policy makers, planners, and community developers to share in Kirwan's collective knowledge and experience with promoting equitable civic engagement and community development. We hope to see more community dialogue that reflects the diverse voices in our communities, considers the assets of traditionally marginalized or underrepresented community members, and contributes to sustainable, diverse, equitable and healthy communities. We can use the assets and power inherent in our people and communities to bring about justice, opportunity, and effective democracy for all.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

KIP HOLLEY *is a researcher at the Kirwan Institute. His primary area of focus is community engagement, social capital, and civic leadership. Kip works to equip minority and low-income peoples with the tools needed to bring equity to the civic engagement environment, helping the Kirwan Institute to fulfill its mission to promote a just and fair society.*

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What is Civic Engagement?

Civic engagement has been discussed in many academic disciplines, from geography and sociology to business and public administration, making consensus on a definition elusive. The term civic engagement is also used interchangeably with related terms, such as community engagement, public participation, and civic life. A definition of *public engagement* provided by the National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation notes that it is "often used interchangeably with the term *'civic engagement,'*"[5] which points to the confusion and closeness of these terms.

While one can argue that terms such as 'civic', 'pubic', and 'community' describe different contexts for engagement, we have found that these terms tend to be used interchangeably in practical applications. Therefore, for the purposes of our work, we tend to use all such terms to describe acts where community members of all statuses make and appraise community decisions, either formally or informally.

The American Planning Association defines *civic engagement* as "the process of working collaboratively with individuals and groups to achieve specific goals,"[6] while the International Association of Public Participation defines *public participation* as "any process that involves the public in problem solving or decision making and uses public input to make decisions."[7] The National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation further defines *civic capacity* (i.e., "the capacity for communities, organizations, and societies to make wise collective decisions and to create and sustain smart collective action") and *public engagement* in similar terms ("various forms of highly inclusive public dialogue and delib-

eration that are critical steps towards policy development, collaborative civic action, and other forms of public problem solving").[8]

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Other definitions are narrow and distinct. *The Public Participation Handbook* defines *public participation* as "a process by which public concerns, needs, and values are incorporated into governmental and corporate decision-making."[9] The handbook then gives qualifying statements that denote what public participation *isn't*. According to the text, public participation relates only to administrative decisions by public agencies or private organizations (not public officials or judges), occurs only between people and organizations, and is an "organized process."[10]

Robert Putnam, a noted scholar on social capital, argues that *civic engagement* is meant to "refer to people's connections with the life of their communities, not only with politics."[11] The organization Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement (PACE) posits that "the defining characteristic of active civic engagement is the commitment to participate and contribute to the improvement of one's community, neighborhood and nation."[12] These latter definitions describe a set of conditions, rather than a series of actions. The National Civic League follows suit with its definition of civic infrastructure as "formal and informal processes and networks through which communities make decisions and attempt to solve problems."[13] Similarly, The World Bank defines civic engagement as "an environment made up of the legal, social, and administrative processes that give the community a voice in government matters."[14]

👤 CASE STUDY PROFILE ────────────────────────

Building Healthy Communities: Merced

Tatiana Vizcaino-Stewart is the Hub Manager for Building Healthy Communities: Merced Hub. (BHC Merced) BHC Merced is part of a statewide 10-year plan from The California Endowment. BHC Merced is a partnership made up of community residents, public agency leaders, community benefit organizations and other interested individuals and organizations aimed at taking action to their communities a healthier and happier place to live. The HUB will be coordinated and managed by the host agency (United Way of Merced County) and the HUB Steering Committee.

The Kirwan Institute was commissioned by The California Endowment to embark on a community engagement and opportunity mapping process as part of the Endowment's Building Healthy Communities initiative in Merced. As part of this process, Kirwan partnered with BHC Merced to identify existing assets in the community, seek opportunities for asset development, and build capacity around the use of Kirwan's Opportunity Mapping approach and systemic policy change. From the outset, we all understood that the opportunity maps produced as part of this project were a means to an end. Our primary focus was to increase the capacity of the community to communicate their needs and make positive changes.

"People need relationships to see how they can do something...bring them into communities where people can see themselves as a bunch of Davids, working on a small scale to make change. It's only found through community, a space where they can share their story, trust being developed and can feel confident that we can take this on."

Ponsella Hardaway — Executive Director, MOSES

The Kirwan Institute's Definition of Civic Engagement

We believe that civic engagement is more than just a set of practices; it is also a set of conditions. The civic engagement environment is not only informed by what we practice, but by *how we are positioned in our communities*. The civic engagement environment exists in the interconnection of our community and individual lives. How we practice civic engagement is tied to our access to resources and opportunities, which is dependent upon the (perceived and intended) motivations behind issue-specific public engagements.

For instance, in the Town and Village of Essex, Vermont, the engagement environment is spearheaded by Heart and Soul Essex, a civic engagement program sponsored by the Orton Family Foundation. The civic engagement environment is marked by principles such as 'Community Connections,' 'Thoughtful Growth,' and a dedication to uplifting the local economy. The community of 20,000 is overwhelmingly White, with a median household income that is higher than the national average. It is home to IBM Microelectronics as well as a number of ski resorts and private schools. Many of the principles that guide

these efforts are directly informed by the principles of community members and match community engagement patterns, including programs to promote local businesses, and the use of community events such as fairs and festivals as engagement and empowerment opportunities. The environment also has support from organizations and businesses, but is still led by community members.

"civic engagement is more than just a set of practices; it is also a set of conditions."

Meanwhile, on the west side of Columbus where the author spent most of his childhood, the economic conditions are much different. The per capita income is lower than the national average, with many residents living on fixed incomes and working more often in blue collar and service jobs. Many of the people whom he went to high school with did not finish college. The neighborhood is becoming increasingly diverse, with significant numbers of Hispanic and Somalian community members. Community-wide principles for civic engagement are

not documented in any manner, and practices specifically designed to affect community decisions are relegated to public meetings, often held on weekday evenings and with little inherent power built in for individual community members to affect community changes. Institutional support has traditionally been low, with many area businesses generally only superficially involved in community activities. In both of these cases, the practices and principles of the civic engagement environment are linked to the socioeconomic conditions of the residents.

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We believe that **civic engagement describes the practices, principles and socioeconomic conditions that comprise the environment in which people interact with their community and come together to make and implement community decisions that provide justice and opportunity for all community members**. Community decision-making is the foundation of access to opportunities and justice. Certainly state and federal laws and regulations, as well as a rapidly globalizing world, impact our lives. Yet how we experience and define our communities on an everyday level—interactions with our neighbors, service providers, local businesses, religious leaders, and officials—helps to give shape to the ideas like "neighborhood" and "community" and provides a space for people to act with power no matter their circumstances. City hall meetings and

voting booths are not the only places for our voices to be heard. People engage with their communities in a multitude of ways, from community festivals and PTA meetings to shopping at local businesses and participating in block watches. These interactions are central to the idea of community, and provide people with a rich environment for creating opportunities for everyone.

At its most basic, civic engagement is how we exercise our political power, individually and collectively. Research shows that civic engagement is the tool that people tend to interact with policymakers and others with the power to act on our communities directly.[15] Civic engagement is how we as people make community policies more responsive and ensure that those decisions are beneficial.[16] On one hand, in a democracy, the voices of those who participate most are most likely to be heard and heeded by decision-makers.[17] On the other hand, inequitable access to meaningful civic engagement opportunities can lead to inequitable participation—and thus, unjust investments, conditions, and outcomes. ◼

Social Inequities in Civic Engagement

Many communities suffer from an inadequate civic engagement environment. It is not surprising that membership in community organizations has fallen across the country and that surveys have shown that attendance at public meetings and political events has also fallen over the past half century.[18]

One difficulty is that in many communities across the country, the engagement environment is built for efficiency in terms of time and money.[19] This attitude has increased as communities across the country have faced tighter budgets, but the principle of efficiency is often written into the rules for civic engagement in many communities.[20] The open meetings laws across the country tend to be tightly regimented and constructed to produce standardization, rather than voice and power.[21] For instance, the Brown Act in California contains rigid procedures for how officials and residents can communicate during meetings and otherwise.[22] Unfortunately, "efficiency" is still a priority for public meetings in many places.

For instance, during a recent conversation with a metropolitan planning organization concerning engagement with equity advocates and residents from areas of racially concentrated poverty, officials claimed that time and resource constraints made it impossible to spend a great deal of time on "niche" concerns of the advocates and residents. As the comment on "niche" concerns demonstrates, an emphasis on efficiency does not necessarily lead to equity in civic voice. Studies show that when civic engagement activities emphasize efficiency over empowerment, the result is a loss of influence for residents, particularly those whom are already at a socioeconomic disadvantage.[23]

Additionally, people are left out of the con-

versation for reasons of politics or preference. In one study of civic engagement, community members in Clearwater, Florida related that local meetings did not include the community's diverse population, but limited them to "the usual suspects," who were also on several boards.[24] In a similar study, New Jersey residents complained in a survey that elected officials often appoint community members to engagement who have their own particular agenda.[25] When community members are invited to participate in the engagement process more readily, they can find their voices muted by the use of aloof and unfamiliar jargon, or meeting procedures that are completely foreign to the manner in which

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"The decline in civic life is occurring alongside a widening wealth gap and a shrinking middle class, where more and more Americans are struggling to make ends meet"

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they often interact with the community. In our work in Detroit, a regular complaint from community advocates was that the community engagement meetings for the city's planning initiatives were often too technical for residents to understand. Our community partners also pointed out that in many communities in the city, the connections between low-income and minority community members and the people, places, and activities that comprised the engagement environment in the city were weak and had little bearing on their lives. More people than ever are unclear about how to engage in community decision-making, so they don't engage at all.

Despite the variety of civic engagement

techniques available, much of the engagement environment in many communities still consists of meetings and hearings that are sometimes inaccessible or outright unknown to most residents. In Detroit for instance, re-entering citizens, immigrants, the disabled, the homeless, and other residents make up a significant portion of the community, but often do not have a significant voice when decisions are made, largely because they are unable to attend public meetings due to resource constraints.[26] Yet these are the people who tend to be the most affected by community policy decisions.

The growing divide between the haves and have-nots in the civic engagement environment mirrors the growing divide in our communities. The decline in civic life is occurring alongside a widening wealth gap and a shrinking middle class, where more and more Americans are struggling to make ends meet.[27] In our more disadvantaged communities, decades of neglect and disinvestment, along with economic and racial inequality, have robbed these communities of healthy civic engagement supports. This results in bleak engagement environments that often separate vulnerable residents from opportunities to make a difference in their communities.[28] Further, inadequate support for engagement weakens their ability to influence the policies that drive community investment.[29] Residents in these communities have been deprived of the resources necessary to collaborate effectively to ensure justice and create meaningful opportunities to succeed through investments in schools, parks, fresh and affordable food, preventative health care facilities, day care, community policing, block watches, credit for home improvements and green weatherizing, community gardens, and a host of other opportunities.[30]

All of this is occurring at a time of rising income inequality and heightening levels of poverty, particularly among communities

> **"[The] relationship shift needs to be done in a way that creates reciprocal accountability—so that residents and government and business all see mutual respect as essential [for healthy communities] as it is."**
>
> *Dessa Cosma – Economic Justice Across Michigan*

of color. While the growing gap between the wealthiest Americans and the least wealthy Americans has been well documented, the racialized income gap is even worse, with Whites earning 19 times as much as African Americans and 15 times as much as Hispanics at the beginning of 2000.[31] The unemployment rate for African-Americans is over twice as high as the national average, and in 2012, 9.7% of non-Hispanic Whites were living in poverty, compared to over 25% of Hispanics and African-Americans.[32] People of color are more often learning in poorer performing schools, and living in more impoverished neighborhoods.[33]

These economic trends are important because rising income inequality is a major contributor to unequal access to public power along racial and economic lines.[34] According to University of Maryland Professor of Government and Politics, Eric M. Uslaner, ineffective civic engagement in communities with high minority populations and those with few resources reinforce structural inequalities and can entrench unexamined biases.[35] Rising income inequality has made it difficult for an increasing number of people to become involved in civic life.[36] Income inequality creates fewer opportunities to cooperate, and more stress for those below the median income, creating real barriers to helping shape community policy.[37] Faced with this inequality, those with fewer resources often find participation less

useful or impossible, leading them to stop participating in engagement activities altogether, widening the gap in civic voice and power, leading to even more social inequality.[38] In a report on economic inequality and political access by the public policy research group *Demos*, researchers found that the majority of African Americans and nearly half of Latino Americans earned too little to impact their elected representatives, despite the fact that they stand to be the most effected by public policies on issues such as economic and education policy.[39] Without adequate access to power, people of color and economically disadvantaged people tend to find themselves on the outside of important democratic processes and removed from opportunities to succeed and thrive.

Meanwhile, studies have shown that those who have access to more income and better educational opportunities are more likely to have a more profound impact on public decision-making than those without access to those resources.[40] People who have greater access to resources are also able to frame community conversations to their benefit, leaving those without resources completely out of the conversation in certain circumstances.[41] A survey of the wealthiest 20% of Americans found that they are substantially more likely to have regular contact with elected officials, and are much more likely to be involved in civic groups and political campaigns, increasing

their influence over public policy.[42] In a civic engagement environment that is increasingly smaller and less accessible to the general public, those with more wealth have an advantage and those without are practically voiceless. It is clear that inequitable investment and inequitable engagement are tied together, and represent an inescapable downward spiral for many communities.

These economic and racial disparities also rob the civic engagement environment of its most precious asset: public trust. Trust in civic institutions is typically cited as fundamental ingredient to effective civic engagement,[43] and Americans have been losing trust in social and civic institutions steadily since 1972.[44] Research has found that trust in civic engagement processes rests on a foundation of economic equity.[45] When resources are distributed inequitably, people tend to become discouraged with the ability of civic institutions to add positive value to their lives. In addition, people at the very top and the bottom of the income scales often do not see each other as sharing the same fates.[46] Many studies have connected wide economic inequities to a breakdown of democratic institutions.[47] In short, social inequities can lead to highly polarized and uncertain civic engagement environments, conditions that can discourage free and open exchanges of ideas. These constraints can lead to inequitable investments, which again lead to lack of trust, polarization, and even more retrenchment.

The shift towards more diverse neighborhoods, combined with growing racialized poverty in many of our communities, means that more people experience a civic environment characterized by resource constraints and a growing lack of trust. The effect has not only been devastating for struggling communities, but for our civic engagement environment as a whole and by extension, democracy itself. The enormous and growing, wealth and resource gap among people and communities threatens to rob communities of the trust and sense of community needed for a civic engagement environment to thrive.

Notably, traditional civic engagement practices are often inadequate at bringing diverse community members together at best—and a culprit in widening the divide at worst. Given these challenges, civic engagement is increasingly structured to gathering consent for initiatives supported by those with wealth and power, rather than a vehicle for community facilitating the expansion of civic power among everyday residents. When civic institutions are no longer able to provide opportunities for citizens to exercise power over their communities, our communities lose their inherent ability to provide the necessary resources. Good schools, healthy citizens, safe neighborhoods, and economic opportunity have all been tied to a healthy and equitable civic engagement environment. However, when trust in civic institutions erodes, communities decay and our future prosperity and democracy can be permanently imperiled. ■

Transforming the Civic Engagement Environment

When confronted with challenges related to civic engagement, a common response is an attempt to improve participation through a change in technique. We have worked with a number of communities trying to engage with communities of color through the Sustainable Communities Initiative.

While we underscored the different life experiences and structural barriers that people of color can still face today, many officials still ended up asking for civic engagement techniques to communicate *at* residents (i.e., impart information from planning efforts and solicit feedback) rather than engage with them as equal partners in order to address their barriers to meaningful engagement. Often, this was due to the constraints put on their engagement efforts by the aforementioned challenges.

Regardless, these techniques alone cannot easily address the decades of community neglect and disinvestment that lead to the distrust, apathy, and inequity that characterize dysfunctional engagement environments. Distrust, apathy, and inequity are challenges that require a transformation in our approach to civic engagement rather than more techniques. Peter Block defines *transformation* as a shift in context and a shift in language and conversation.[48] Researchers Burke and Litwin distinguish *transformational change* as a change in behaviors and a shift in values.[49] In order to truly transform the civic engagement environment in communities, we must shift from a civic engagement led by techniques to an engagement environment based on inclusive principles, allowing communities to

create relevant practices that manifest those principles in the engagement environment.

Our experiences have shown that carefully considered and articulated values and principles can act as positive, guiding forces in successful community engagement. Peter Block contends that communities cannot problem-solve their way into fundamental change, but that real change comes from a change in ideas.[50] While wealth and access to resources generally provide more opportunities for engagement, the principles that underlie community engagement tend to shape the civic engagement environment. In our experience, we have found that principles that are acted upon often determine whether or not civic engagement is a trusted community process. During our first meeting with a group of community activists in Detroit, it quickly became clear that people were not interested in talking about yet another civic engagement plan; rather, they wanted to discuss what civic engagement was supposed to accomplish, and for whom, at a most basic level. As the conversation deepened, we found that residents in Detroit had come to see a basic democratic principle—public accountability—as fundamentally broken in their city.

During a recent project with residents from Merced, California, rural farm workers complained that they had difficulty speaking with health and education officials about health care and recreation access for children. The reason was that these institutions held open meetings to discuss service delivery problems in the middle of the day, while many of these residents were at work. Despite this seemingly obvious deficiency in community voice, the institutions had been unwilling to make any changes in their schedule. It seemed to the residents—many of whom were Latino and working-class—that these institutions did not value their input, and so the residents became even more reluctant to engage, despite the wealth of engagement "techniques" offered to them later on.

👤 CASE STUDY PROFILE ────────────

Detroit Civic Engagement Fellows

Dessa Cosma-King is the Program Director for The Center for Progressive Leadership: Michigan. She and other Detroit area civic engagement leaders participated in the Detroit Civic Engagement Fellows project between 2012 and 2013. The project was initiated by Ponsella Hardaway, the Director of MOSES in Detroit, who saw a need to dive deeper into issues of equitable civic empowerment and community marginalization across the Detroit region. With a planning grant from the W. K. Kellogg foundation, she partnered with the Kirwan Institute as well as a group of creative community leaders who had worked tirelessly around issues of engagement in the region for years.

The goal of the group was to create a concept model for equitable civic engagement that could be used throughout the region. The model and the resulting principles were designed to create a significant change in the relationship between decision-makers in the region and residents that would shift community decision-making power closer to residents, particularly in majority-minority and low-income neighborhoods.

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"We have to be in touch with our own story when we engage with others about who we are, our own oppression, what is our own struggle, bringing who we are to these situation will help us connect in terms of changing and engaging people."

Ponsella Hardaway – Executive Director, MOSES

A change in principles—for example, valuing someone else's time constraints—is a better place to start a relationship with fellow neighbors. In our work, we have identified three fundamental transformations that often need to occur in the community engagement environment to move from superficial interventions towards truly transformational remedies to community challenges: a change in the **structure** of the civic engagement environment, a change in how communities **measure** successful civic engagement, and a change in the **motivations** for engagement.

Structural Changes

The ability to effectively ground civic engagement activities in a set of shared, local community principles, and *then* finding techniques and practices to fit them, requires a big shift in the language, structure, and intent of civic engagement. Until this transformation happens, the tools that we use to achieve robust engagement are bound to have only a limited effect on the challenges we face in civic engagement and sustainable community development. In a very real way, a shift towards principle-based civic engagement is to decide to change the *shape* of the engagement table, rather than changing what's *on* the table. A transformative grounding in equitable and inclusive princi-

ples requires revisiting the history, customs, assumptions, and structures of the relationships we have as community members, with each other and with our local community institutions. Customs, language, practices, metaphors, and objects that are a part of our engagement environments often are a powerful indicator of who has power and who does not.[51] Transformational engagement interventions require these factors to be acknowledged.

We must also learn how to work and communicate across our comfort zones, focus on strengthening relationships with community residents that we may rarely associate with, and change the relationships with those that we do.[52] This requires more than reaching out to others or providing aid to those who may be struggling. We must commit to connecting individual concerns to community issues and reach out to those who are generally left out of the community conversation. Transforming the civic environment requires that we commit to building relationships characterized by empathy, mutuality, and a commitment to resident and stakeholder empowerment.

Success Measures

Transformational change also requires re-defining the outcome of an engagement initiative. The success or failure of many traditional civic engagement techniques is based on numbers: the number of meetings, the amount of people who attended. However, those numbers tell us little about what happened at those meetings. Were new connections made at the meeting? Were the voices of the most marginalized heard? Did people come away with a new understanding of each other? Were people empowered to change their circumstances?

According to Pastor et. al. in *Transformations, Transactions and Translations: Metrics for Building, Scaling, and Funding Social Movements*, many of the familiar measures of success are no longer as effective as they used to be.[53] This can be particularly true of countable measures in an era of generally declining engagement numbers and new ways to engage that may not be calculable using traditional means.

More than ever, the health and quality of community relationships seems to be a defining factor in determining how relevant community engagement is to community members. Community leaders need to know not how many people attended a meeting, but how community members have been changed through their meeting. It is more important than ever to know how engagement activities can build and promote community capacity and social capital, so that people can continue to engage in the community long after we have left. Those responsible for engagement activities must expand the ways in which they measure change by planting it in a vision of community togetherness, making it possible to judge how far residents have come collectively by the experiences of community members rather than on head counts at meetings.[54]

Motivations for Engagement

The common factor in each of these changes is a deep sense of **intentionality**. From our experience, we have learned that true equality comes through an intended effort to create it. Much like one must intentionally set out to start a new personal habit, communities must intentionally set out to make the shifts, changes, and imagination needed for equity to thrive. One of our partners, Doran Schrantz from ISAIAH in Minnesota put it best: "Commitment to the outcome, not just the process." This commitment is crucial to transforming the engagement environment.
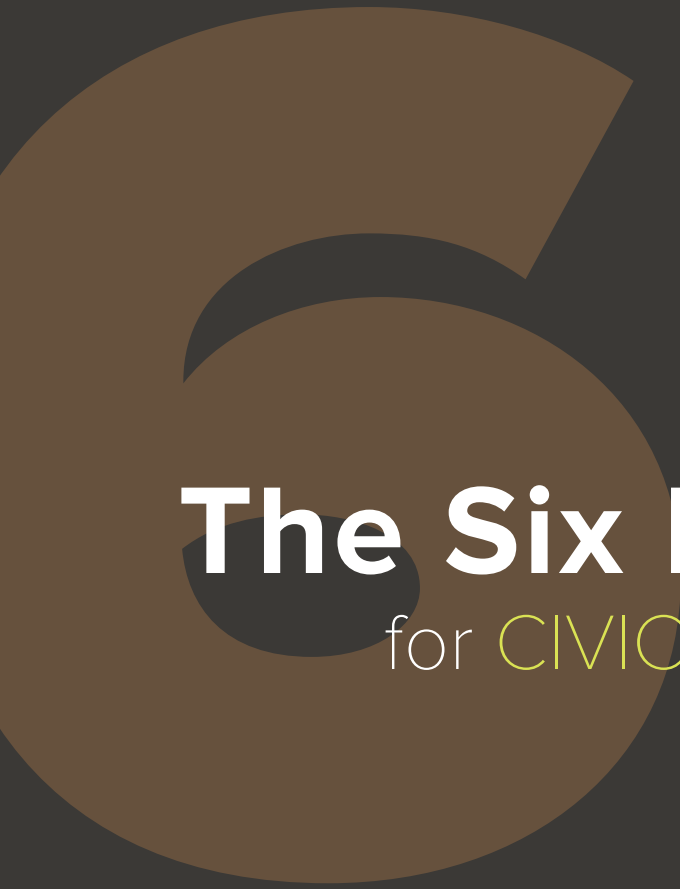
That shift starts with the development of shared equitable principles, not with pre-assigned techniques. If we are to widen the engagement environment so that the diversity within our communities will be truly represented, then change in the civic engagement process must bring about a democratic, inclusive environment, one where all community members can contribute meaningfully as they choose.[55] ∎

The Six Principles for Civic Engagement

The principles that are necessary to create an equitable civic engagement environment are those that are able bolster civic opportunity for everyone. This is particularly for those who are often left out of community decision-making. The most meaningful principles to follow are those that promote an engagement environment that is characterized fairness and acceptance by fosters an inclusive, authentic, and dynamic engagement that encompass a diverse set of participants, locations, languages, and processess.[56]

In that spirit, we would like to share the principles that we have found to be successful in achieving such environments. These include: Embracing the gifts of diverse communities; facing the effects of race, history, and power inequities as a community; practicing radical community hospitality; building trust and commitment in the community engagement environment; honoring dissent and protests as expressions of civic voice; and adapting to community changes.

In the following pages, we will share the knowledge and experiences of ourselves and our community partners to illustrate the important characteristics of these principles and how they can create environments where everyone has the ability to have a say in community developments and the ability to make community decisions together.

The Six Principles
for CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

These six principles are necessary to create an equitable civic engagement environment best suited to bolster civic opportunity for everyone—**particularly those who are often left out**.

SOMETIMES IT'S NOT ABOUT MONEY; IT'S ABOUT KEEPING PEOPLE ENGAGED... WE DON'T HAVE WEALTH, BUT WE DO HAVE COMMUNITY RELATIONSHIPS THAT ARE OUR STRENGTH.

White Center, WA Resident[57]

Embracing the Gifts of Diversity

▶ A healthy and equitable civic engagement environment is built around gifts that community members contribute and their ability to capitalize on the benefits of creative gifts.

▶ Communities tend to have many different people who take on leadership roles at various times.

▶ Social capital can be a powerful source of wealth for communities by making more resources available throughout the community, encouraging neighbor-to-neighbor connections.

A community is rich with people and institutions that are capable of creating more opportunities for community members—or restricting them. From elections and city council meetings to church services and block watches, community events are where people demonstrate their ability to express ideas and change circumstances. Our communities are where we share our gifts, and sharing gifts is vital, not only for the health of our communities, but for our individual health. For example, personal satisfaction is highly correlated with sharing our talents and skills with others.[58] However, some people are repeatedly denied the opportunity to identify, develop, and share their gifts. The lack of access to educational and economic opportunity has been cited as the main barrier for minorities and those with low-income to participate in public life.[59] A healthy and equitable civic engagement environment built around the assets of community members can capitalize on the benefits

of a diverse set of gifts.[60] Building strong communities starts with recognizing the power that already exists in typically undervalued people and neighborhoods.

Using 'Bridging' Social Capital to Increase Meaningful Engagement

People have a wealth of power in their combined social capital—the networks, norms, and trust that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives.[61] The local PTA, a neighborhood garden, and church drives are the types of activities that can help create strong connections that more formal engagement activities often cannot.

For many racially and economically diverse communities, uncovering and utilizing this social capital between community members can be difficult. These efforts are often fraught with tension and unease due to the effects of historical and structural racism. These unresolved tensions are why many communities struggle to build social capital. However, diversity is a challenge to trust only when it is not accompanied by vigorous social interaction.[62] Verna Myers, a well-known diversity consultant for legal firms, sums up this idea by saying:

So, many black and white people have never had a real opportunity to get to know each other as individuals, to live and play next to each other. We also neglected the tough conversations needed to reconcile after so many years of racial bigotry and to process what we learned and needed to unlearn.[63]

Intentionally using the community engagement environment to build *bridging social capital*—social capital that is built among diverse community members—has been shown to help create new connections between diverse community members and make resources available within the community, encouraging community members to become involved in the lives of their neighbors. These connections reflect strong attachments to communities and a commitment to making them better places to live for everyone.

For instance, in Weinland Park, a neighborhood in Columbus, Ohio that is emerging from years of economic and safety problems, the Weinland Park Neighborhood Festival is an annual event that has been held in the neighborhood for seven years and has grown to attract 300–500 residents. Steve Sterrett, a community leader and activist in the Weinland Park neighborhood describes the success of the festival in creating bridges across diverse neighborhood groups, "when you can bring

Try This! | **Complete a Capacity Inventory**

One critical part of building a healthy community is finding out what individual capacities each resident possesses. A **Community Capacity Inventory** can be a powerful "tool" that can be used to address problems, promote growth, and enhance the quality of local life. The inventory collects information about community assets from the individual to the associational and institutional level in order to get a true sense of what community members can offer each other in order to solve common problems.

Find out more about Community Capacity Inventories:
The Asset-Based Community Development Institute
http://www.abcdinstitute.org/docs/CapacityInventories(1).pdf

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300 people together and they really do represent the diversity of the neighborhood, you can't help but feel that there is value in people seeing each other." Through events such as the Weinland Park Neighborhood Festival, diverse people are able to recognize their linked fates.

Bridging social capital can happen at a church with diverse membership, or in a civic group that rallies residents from different neighborhoods together under a common banner. For instance, *Beyond Welfare,* a program in Ames, Iowa that helps foster relationships between families receiving public assistance and families with higher incomes, creates bonds between people from different walks of life that can create a ladder to opportunity for those with fewer resources, and makes it easier for those community members to demonstrate their skills.[64]

"early exposure to diverse cultures can help children develop more empathy for others and navigate interpersonal relationships later in life"

The most meaningful benefits of diverse social capital may ultimately be for the next generation. Research has shown that early exposure to diverse cultures can help children develop more empathy for others and navigate interpersonal relationships later in life.[65] Socializing with people from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds can contribute to student academic development, and increased adaptability in business settings later in life.[66] The long-term benefits from building strong social relationships in diverse neighborhoods may provide our children the tools

and skills that they need to thrive in the 21st century economy. Building strong bonds in diverse communities is an important aspect of unlocking the potential for the community to provide assets and opportunities now and into the future.

Understanding That Communities Are Not Monolithic

It can be tempting to think of a neighborhood or a city as uniform and to ascribe common ideas, goals, and themes to all community members. This can be especially common when discussing minority-majority communities.[67] However, we have found that communities, no matter how challenged, are comprised of a myriad of different stakeholders, ranging from individual residents to small businesses, churches, schools, community groups, and informal associations. Community stakeholders come from all walks of life; new immigrants, young people, the elderly returning citizens, those with disabilities and homeless families are all members of many communities, though they are often not thought of as true community stakeholders.

Furthermore, these various community stakeholders may sometimes have goals and values that are not complementary. In White Center, Washington, community members found that "mysterious" resistance for a possible annexation was coming from a community group that had not felt included in many of the official conversations on the matter, so they created their own community organization in order to raise their concerns on the subject. By finally recognizing this group, stakeholders were exposed to factors that had not been previously discussed in the potential annexation.

Many communities are also becoming more racially and ethnically diverse. The US is projected to become a minority-majority country by 2043, meaning that many commu-

nities that are currently comprised primarily of White residents will most likely become much more diverse.[68] Communities will house people with an increasingly wide range of ideas, beliefs, customs, and relationships. The story that one community member has about her community may be completely different than her neighbor's. Recognizing the multiple truths experienced by community members from many different walks of life is crucial to a healthy and equitable engagement environment. For example, the community organization Better Healthy Communities Merced recognizes the need for embracing diversity in engaging the Hmong population in their county. Although strategies for outreach are still being discussed, there is acknowledgment of a need to understand and adapt their outreach efforts to meet cultural differences and the creation of spaces for honest conversation. In Weinland Park, the Weinland Park Collaborative and the Weinland Park Community Civic Association regularly lead neighborhood dialogues to encourage constructive conversations around the needs of the community's diverse population.

Valuing All Scales of Civic Engagement

Civic engagement can be as simple as two neighbors talking about a local issue over a backyard fence or as large and complex as a summit of economic, political, and community leaders to discuss regional growth. Civic engagement activities at these different scales are ultimately related, because community stakeholders at each level share the same community and are affected by similar issues. Civic engagement can also take place on multiple political scales. The engagement initiatives initiated by community members in Weinland Park and on the South Side of Columbus are good examples of neighborhood-level engagement, while the work of

Better Healthy Communities Merced exemplifies city and county-level engagement. In Minnesota, ISIAH is involved in state-level civic engagement initiatives.

The strongest initiatives for change and fulfillment often come from within the community. Informal leadership is especially helpful for creating change and providing support in rural communities. For example, in his study of community helpers in rural communities in Appalachian Pennsylvania, social researcher Robert D'Augelli found that coworkers, neighbors, and spouses helped friends and relatives most frequently.[69] Sociologist Omar McRoberts observed some black urban churches providing congregants with information on jobs, medical care, educational opportunities, naturalization services, and other resources, in part through the church's ties to other organizations.[70] These experiences are what Ponsella Hardaway, one of the Detroit Civic Engagement Fellows with whom we worked with in Detroit, calls 'David Moments'—community engagement experiences where individual community members can see how their own efforts and the efforts of those around them can help change community circumstances. Though they often don't involve direct involvement from larger stakeholders, the Fellows found that these experiences are crucial to ensuring that community members are able to fulfill community needs and advocate for the community at a larger scale.

Ultimately, we have found that the best community partnerships often involve residents experiencing challenges and people who can influence neighborhood conditions, such as business and grass roots leaders.[71] This is perhaps best exemplified by the approach of the Weinland Park Collaborative and Weinland Park Civic Association. Community officials work with community members through the neighborhood dialogues, allowing the community to determine community goals and assisting with resources for their implemen-

tation, to transform the neighborhood into an inclusive, opportunity-rich environment.

In many top-down community dialogues, power is concentrated at the top and many gifts, particularly those of the racial minorities and those with low-incomes tend to be under-utilized. Community efforts that start from the community allow more people to use their natural gifts. Sharing gifts is an empowering experience, often leading to extraordinary changes in circumstances.[72]

In Merced, California, we witnessed community members come together for an annual community festival. At this festival, community members share their gifts and talents. The fair features local foods, crafts, and activities for people from all walks of life. While this festival is largely informal, it is also a very important civic engagement venue. Young people learn new skills, and are introduced to many of the cultural gifts within the community in the midst of a supportive educational environment. The festival also serves as a venue for families to find out more about local services from government and local business partners. The sharing of these gifts raises everyone's individual power and connectivity. To quote Peter Block, "gifts need to be named and exchanged for them to have meaning."[73]

Community empowerment often begins by sharing gifts. For individual community members to share their gifts and move from being spectators to co-creators in the community, large-scale projects must be directed by robust community-led engagement.[74] Creating an engagement environment that links neighborhood concerns to larger regional or societal issues encourages residents to engage meaningfully and realize their full potential to change circumstances on a larger stage in the community.[75]

Try This! **Asset Usage Mapping**
Who uses these assets? When? How? **Asset Usage Mapping** is aimed at identifying the role and location of resources that help to expand opportunity within communities. While most asset mapping stops here, we suggest going further and listing the various community members who use each asset and how they add to that resource's ability to make the community better.

For instance, if the local park is an asset, what sorts of activities in the park make it an even better asset? Are there popular ethnic festivals that take place? Field trips from the local school? Local vendors selling food or other wares? This not only helps identify the assets themselves, but also points to the gifts that people bring to community assets.

Seek Out Multi-lingual Volunteers
In our experience, people want to use their gifts, particularly to better the community around them and there are often plenty of ways for them to be helpful in a meaningful way. One of the primary barriers that new immigrants have to engaging in community activities is the language barrier. Community members can help someone use their gift of translation to make activities more inviting for more community members.

Recognizing the Many Types of Community Leadership

Community leadership is often thought of as hierarchal. Though some key leaders may be best positioned to facilitate change, reliance on them as the *sole* agents of change may inadvertently heighten the disparity of influence between the haves and have-nots within the community.[76] In many communities, leadership is more often horizontal, decentralized, and based within networks of community members.[77] Robert Putnam suggests that civic associations and similar institutions are important, in part, because they are horizontally structured, and they help bridge diverse social networks while increasing the availability of the social capital within a community.[78] Terri Bailey, a noted civic engagement consultant, described leadership in the communities that she worked with in *Ties that Bind* as "an expectation of all members rather than a position enjoyed by a few."[79] The strongest networks, she continues, are those in which members take over leadership roles and constantly encourage others to do the same. In this way, community leadership is expanded to become part of the lives of all community members.[80]

In our experiences, we have found that communities tend to have many different people who take on leadership roles at various times. Community members may be natural *connectors* who move between organizations and groups and create relationships that can help build community opportunity.[79] In *The Abundant Community*, the authors note that:

> *…compared with a leader, a connector has a very different role in the community. A connector is in the center of the room, often unrecognized but always creating new relationships and often acting in a modest way.[82]*

From their vantage point as laypeople, these leaders are responsible for encouraging others to get involved and play an important role in holding social capital in reserve for future use by using their skills at maintaining relationships between neighbors.[83] Connectors also provide communities with opportunities to build relationships with other communities, discovering new allies in facing shared challenges by helping community members from diverse backgrounds understand the connections between each of their individual concerns and shared community challenges. Other valuable community actors have been described as *catalysts*, people who use everyday expertise and wisdom to bring fresh perspective to problem solving.[84] In addition to more traditional leaders, these community members are responsible for uplifting community voice and for trying to improve access to opportunity for more residents.

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Embracing the Gifts of Diversity

The gifts that people bring to their communities represent the brick and mortar of the communities. The abilities, competencies, and experiences that community members share with each other often form the bedrock of that community and give them the tools to meet the many challenges in our society. When those gifts are diverse, the community itself benefits by being able to apply them to the many needs within the community. By embracing the power of the diverse gifts of all of our community members, we not only give ourselves and our neighbors more tools to confront our shared difficulties, but we help empower each other and help one another uplift our strengths.

Deeper Understanding

1. Think about your community. What would you most like to show a friend who was visiting for the first time? Who would you want them to meet? What activities would you be most anxious to show off? What aspect of the community would you say defines it?

2. Who are informal leaders in your community? Who are some important people? Elders? Characters? Friendly people? Think about how these characteristics can be used to provide leadership in the community.

3. Communities are often home to many activities, ranging from zoning meetings to book clubs, all of which provide the opportunity for people to demonstrate their gifts. Can you name some informal/formal activities that happen in the community within a given year? Who in your community could tell you more?

ONLY AN HONEST CONFRONTATION WITH REALITY CAN BRING REAL HEALING. SUPERFICIAL RECONCILIATION CAN BRING ONLY SUPERFICIAL HEALING.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu

Realizing the Role of Race, Power, and Injustice

▶ Communities are stronger when they recognize and acknowledge the roles that racism and inequality play in the engagement experiences of community members.

▶ When community members become aware of the power imbalances in their community, they are more able to change those power dynamics by validating the experiences of traditionally less powerful community members.

▶ Addressing power imbalances within the community often requires significant and challenging changes that will most likely be resisted by those who are the most powerful in the community.

Acknowledging the life experiences of our neighbors is often an important part of ensuring that they feel welcomed in the community.[85] People interpret behaviors, information, and situations through the lenses of their own experiences and cultural narratives.[86] If you live in a community where people are friendly and the environment is safe and healthy, you may see the community as a warm, open, safe place. However, if you've experienced discrim-

ination at a grocery store or a robbery at your home, it may lead you towards a very different picture of your community. Unfortunately, the experiences, concerns and perceptions of the most vulnerable people and families in our communities often go unheard.

In our work, we have found that in order to build an inclusive community engagement environment, neighbors cannot afford to marginalize one another's experiences. Communities are stronger for acknowledging the historical context in which their neighbors are engaging in the community. Discrimination, marginalization, and unequal community power dynamics have played a central role in shaping many of the habits and relationships in our communities.[87] Recognizing their effect on the experiences of our neighbors can help us forge a new future from the lessons from those experiences. When community members ignore or avoid the injustices experienced by their neighbors, they risk alienating those whose lives have been colored by them,

and losing important knowledge and wisdom to help solve our collective challenges.

Recognizing the Historical Inequities in Our Communities

Our communities have histories. The histories of many communities are marked by a terrible exclusion of people on the basis of racial and ethnic background or economic circumstances. The inequities that are present in our communities today are built on decades of structural inequality.[88] As a result, the prior experiences of community members have a very real and powerful effect on their present relationships and expectations.

We need to acknowledge in constructive dialogue the role that race and discrimination has played, and continues to play, in creating opportunities for some individuals while denying them for others. We need to be mindful of race and class when we identify dominant assumptions, define meaning-

Try This!

Community Policy Timeline
When we think about our nation's past, it can be difficult to understand how the many changes that we have gone through have affected the community in which we live. America has witnessed many policy changes, from the New Deal and Suburbanization to School Desegregation and NAFTA.

Make a timeline of significant policy changes over the past century, then ask community members from different walks of life what their experiences of these events was like, and how it affected their relationship with the community. Put those experiences on the timeline and share it with others to help them understand the different path that people have walked in the community.

Power Mapping
Who has the power to influence community decision-making in your community? Are there organizations or people who tend to make or support decisions that affect education, jobs, housing, etc.? Power mapping enables you to identify powerful stakeholders in your community and determine how they are connected to each other and other community members. This tool is invaluable to understanding power dynamics in your community.

ful outcomes, and assign accountability to people and institutions for the decisions they make. It is not only a matter of relating to each other as people and valuing each other, but understanding how our institutions and decisions, past and present, impact opportunities for ourselves and others.[89] Civic engagement doesn't occur in a historical vacuum, and we have found that it is counterproductive to attempt to ignore or minimize history in our community conversations. When community members become more aware of how historical inequities effect the engagement patterns of our communities today, a common understanding is formed, validating the experiences of all stakeholders and inviting everyone to more thoughtfully create a new future for the community.

Honest leadership in the form of leaders who can admit their own and their organization's imperfections are key components to creating an environment where these truths can be discussed. Steve Sterret of the Weinland Park Collaborative refers to this type of leadership as leaderships with the "virtue of humility" whereas Doran Schrantz of ISIAH simply calls this quality "vulnerable leadership." Community members that are able to exhibit these behaviors in community engagement activities are able to help create equitable and inclusive communities by modeling honesty about the effects of long-standing structural inequities in community dialogue and helping others understand how those inequities affect community dialogue today.

Awareness of Racial Bias in Community Dialogue

Although many communities have made great strides to eliminate overt forms of racism, implicit racial biases and unexplored assumptions still play a significant role in community dialogue and decision-making.[90] The problem of racism in our communities now deals less with an individual's conscious biases, but rather with the unconscious biases that are held within our society and the structural barriers that are created because of them.[91] Implicit bias refers to the attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner.[92]

These biases and assumptions are often communicated through unconscious responses to conscious observations such as physical mannerisms, speech patterns, and racially exclusive social patterns.[93] Research in social psychology has shown that automatic racial stereotypes can persist, regardless of conscious or personal rejection of prejudice toward blacks.[94] For instance, African-Americans are more likely to receive impolite treatment at stores and restaurants and are more likely to pay more for goods and services, etc. This also suggests that minorities are more likely to be marginalized in community meetings, despite the fact that racial discrimination is often expressly prohibited.[95]

Recognizing these biases and assumptions and creating community engagement strategies that account for their presence is vital to an inclusive and healthy engagement environment. In many communities, increasing opportunities for diverse community members to talk about racial attitudes within an environment that is structured to produce reconciliation have produced a greater sense of community among all members. Among the community leaders that we've worked with over the years, almost all of them have stressed the importance of intentionally ex-

ploring implicit biases and assumptions in creating an inclusive community.

Reverend John Edgar of The Church for All People speaks about his experiences confronting these issues with parishioners on the South Side of Columbus:

> *Every Sunday morning we have 175 folks who are gathered for worship and interact in hallways and small group settings. In those kinds of interactions, we've had the chance to invite people to interact around key issues of qualities of life, including race and various types of inequality. We find that within that smaller microcosm, we really make progress, those things matter. So even if it's not replicable in a non-faith setting, when people worship together, it breaks down barriers, when people talk about their hopes and dreams with each other and pray for each other it can have an effect. Then we can name the elephant in the room about racial injustice.*

Uncovering the assumptions, biases, and silent language of racism within the community engagement environment can be a challenging undertaking. However, when developed with an intention to create a more inclusive community, the result is often a more vibrant and equitable community.

Awareness of Structural Power Imbalances

Many challenges in civic engagement are related to unequal power among community members. Conversations about topics such as gentrification and crime in the community often are marked by differences in power and can be superficial in nature. In communities as different as Gulfport, MS and Merced, CA, poor and disenfranchised residents have reported feeling powerless to influence community decisions. Many residents explained that they were not even aware of who could help address their concerns.

Communities often have multiple centers of power, and we have found that it is wise to be aware of power dynamics within the

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CASE STUDY PROFILE

Weinland Park – Columbus, Ohio

Steve Sterrett is a member of the Weinland Park Civic Association and a longtime community resident and partner. The Weinland Park Civic Association works to engage with the diverse community stakeholders in the neighborhood and work together with them to improve the quality of life in the Weinland Park neighborhood.

In 2012, the Kirwan Institute was asked to facilitate a community meeting in Weinland Park hosted by the Weinland Park Civic Association aimed at helping community residents communicate honestly and productively about race, income, and difference in their community and develop a shared community vision for the future. As a result of this engagement, we were able to learn how each of these residents saw the community differently based on the experiences of themselves, their friends, and people who were similarly situated. It was a reminder that the engagement environment can be different not only from community to community, but for people within communities.

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> **"We have to be in touch with our own story when we engage with others about who we are, our own oppression, what is our own struggle, bringing who we are to these situation will help us connect in terms of changing and engaging people."**

community that may impact engagement.[96] For example, *One Voice Louisiana*'s Ashley Shelton spoke of the multiple centers of power within her community such as churches, local business associations, and local educational institutions and that their level of influence is not always equal and is often dependent on the issue or setting. In many of the communities where we have worked, when important decisions are made, powerful community stakeholders tend to ignore informal engagement activities at smaller scales, particularly those led by people of color, in favor of larger, top-down engagement processes that can lead to further alienation of those who are already marginalized in the community, and result in less effective community policies.[97]

Those who tend to have less access to power in the community often find themselves at the mercy of a community that they had little hand in creating, likely contributing to an atmosphere of apathy and despair. In order to remedy these power imbalances, all community stakeholders must be generally aware of their role in the community engagement environment, from public meetings to

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Try This! > **Ethnic Roots Story**
This exercise is designed to help people see where race, difference, power, and discrimination may have played a part in their own family history. By looking backwards at people in our own families, grandparents, ancestors, etc., participants can open their minds to the fact that race and ethnicity play a part in our American experiences in a fairly safe way.

Meeting Evaluation
Before the next community meeting, have one or more meeting officials complete a **Meeting Evaluation**. Based McGraw-Hill's Cultural Indicators of Power, this inventory can help meeting officials understand how vocabulary, practices, objects, and other components of meeting can reflect power dynamics in the larger community and create unequal access to community voice and power in the community.

More about this exercise can be found on McGraw-Hill's Student Section.
http://www.mhhe.com/socscience/comm/group/students/power.htm

neighborhood watches, and how those roles reinforce or change power imbalances. Awareness and acceptance of community power dynamics and their consequences can help create the atmosphere conducive to changing these power dynamics.

Understanding that Power Sharing Involves Conflict

Shifting or sharing power requires fundamental changes. Power dynamics are often a major factor that shapes one's experience in a community. So it is often impossible to change power dynamics without some disruptions.

While working with advocates for African-American leadership in Portland, Oregon—a community not normally known for racial divisions—we found that a gradual change in community leadership to reflect African-American concerns was met with quite a bit of resistance in some communities.[98] Members of ISIAH of Minneapolis, shared that they faced conflict, both inside and outside of their organization, as their relationship with more powerful state-level stakeholders changed. Conflicts arose from those inside of government who now had to adjust to a new relationship with the group and their focus on racial equity and structural change. While inside the organization, conflict arose with those who had been more comfortable working to make change outside of the power structure.

These examples illustrate a common finding about organizational change: people, no matter how well intentioned, rarely relish giving up power without resistance.[99] As Martin Luther King, Jr. pointed out, "History is the long and tragic story of the fact that privileged groups seldom give up their privileges voluntarily."[100] Strengthening our civic engagement practices means honestly confronting resistance to share power from traditionally powerful community members and organizations in communities.

Realizing the Role of Race, Power, and Injustice

The effects of historical and present economic and social marginalization play a crucial role in shaping our community dialogues and in forming our public places and policies. In many cities, the neglect and isolation of entire communities of people is written into the fabric of the built environment, from informally segregated spaces, to crumbling infrastructure, to a lack of basic amenities for child health and safety. In order to have a truly inclusive, equitable community environment, we must acknowledge the realities of these continuing divides, and the real challenges of power dynamics and multiple, often contrasting, truths and goals.

An acknowledgment of the realities of historical exclusion, of the experiences of race and class divides can help set the table for authentic dialogue about various barriers to success and move people towards collaborating to overcome them. This can pave the way for holistic conversations that foregrounds the investments—in both people and places—needed to build and maintain social capital.

Deeper Understanding

1. What were the experiences of people in your community during the Civil Rights era or during school desegregation? Can anyone speak to how the community was before then, what happened, and what is the community like now? How relevant are these stories to the story that people tell about your community?

2. What does 'civic power' look like in your community? What are its characteristics and how do you know when someone has it and when someone doesn't?

SOMEWHERE, SOMEHOW, SOMEBODY REACHES OUT TO THEM... THAT HAPPENED TO ME. THAT ONE PERSON OPENS THE DOOR FOR YOU AND HELPS YOU KNOW WHAT TO DO.

Resident, "Ties that Bind"[99]

Radical Hospitality: Invitation and Listening

▶ We have found that the best engagement environments strive for a direct and meaningful impact on the concerns of residents from every walk of life, and are undertaken in a manner that is relevant and respectful of all community members.

▶ For a community to be truly inclusive, community members must be intentional about including the most vulnerable members of the community in a manner that is both inviting and empowering.

▶ Diverse groups of community members such as young people, new immigrants, returning citizens, and people of color can face tremendous resource barriers to engagement and as a result, many communities fail to incorporate their voices.

▶ Providing community members a forum for listening to each other's concerns in a healthy, respectful way is key to an understanding and supportive community engagement environment.

▶ When community members are dedicated bringing neighbors from all walks of life into the circle of community, their experiences, knowledge, and wisdom can help clarify issues.

Welcoming diverse voices into our community conversations requires more than a cursory invitation to join a meeting or event. The invitation must reflect their needs and concerns. If someone is concerned about drug dealing on their street or the lack of high-performing schools in their community, they need to see those concerns on the agenda. Reaching out to community members means meeting them where their concerns are. Community hospitality is best when it is tailored to those whom you wish to reach.

Building communities where everyone feels a sense of belonging and ownership does not happen accidentally. Inclusion needs to be intentional, particularly in the case of the most vulnerable members of our communities. Civic engagement derives its importance from its impact on people beyond the meeting, hearing, or vote. To be relevant to people's lives, the civic engagement environment must be seen as a space for people to share their voices honestly and have a meaningful impact on community developments. Real hospitality requires a determined dedication to inclusion, a commitment to the idea that when the community comes together, everyone is represented.

Bold and Courageous Hospitality

Civic engagement is about building genuine and meaningful relationships between community members. A key component is that all parties feel engaged and empowered.

Unfortunately, not all voices are heard equally. In the community dialogues that the Kirwan Institute generally engages in as part of our opportunity mapping work, many residents have complained of often feeling disengaged at community meetings and acquiring a feeling of "meeting fatigue"—reflecting experience with too many meetings that have too few tangible results. A study of community engagement found that minorities tend to have less opportunity to engage in community decision-making.[102] Residents have related that engagement activities are often poorly advertised and that the meetings are superficial, leaving them feeling shut out and unheard.

Try This! **Storytelling Sessions**

The ability to tell one's story in one's own voice can be a powerful way to foster a sense of inclusion and belonging amongst people who would otherwise feel left out. Create time and space for community members to share stories about important changes or ongoing issues within the community. A library, school, coffee shop or local place of worship can provide a comfortable setting in which community members can learn more about each other through the power of authentic storytelling. Afterwards, have community members report what they've heard and find a venue to share stories with the wider community to increase inclusion within the community.

This lack of outreach is particularly troublesome for those whose voices already tend to go unheard. Diverse groups of community members such as young people, new immigrants, returning citizens, and people of color can face tremendous resource barriers to engagement and as a result, many communities fail to incorporate their voices. For community decisions to be meaningful, community leaders must decide that these voices are integral to the conversation. Targeted approaches that are designed to specifically include hard-to-reach populations are needed to effectively engage with diverse residents.[103]

For example, Kirwan was asked to facilitate a community meeting in Weinland Park in order to help residents develop a shared vision for the community. During our initial meeting, many participants stressed that their community conversations needed to integrate the voices of Latino and Somalian community members, who were rarely targeted for outreach. Without these voices, many felt that any community meetings were inauthentic and did not address all of the issues. Others mentioned that those with past complications with the law also felt unsafe coming to meetings, since law enforcement officials were often present and literally "standing guard" at the meeting. Still others in the neighborhood felt that it might be necessary to have meetings "loud and in the public" in order to attract people who might be resistant to a typical meeting setting.

We have found that the best engagement environments strive for a direct and meaningful impact on the concerns of residents from every walk of life, and are undertaken in a manner that is relevant and respectful of all community members. In Detroit, some of the Fellows spoke of having community meetings on neutral ground in order to allay fears of police harassment. In White Center, community officials reached out to established immigrant community groups in order to initiate relationships with new immigrants. Thoughtful hospitality towards all members of the community is crucial to creating an engagement environment with strong relationships that can help ensure that everyone is empowered to play a part in the community.

Community Development for All People engages in what they term "radical hospitality" that promotes honest interactions in places that promote hospitality and mutual respect. A key component of hospitality is providing these safe spaces for people to speak honestly with one another. However, honest conversations can only be had between parties when trust exists. Building trust requires patience, commitment, and intentionality.

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Hospitality is more than just inviting people into the community. Particularly in diverse communities with marginalized residents, hospitality means inviting people to have difficult conversations. This is a key component in building trust in communities where trust has been lacking. Rev. Edgar shares a story from his work on the South Side that illustrates this point:

"In communities across the country, issues such as race, income inequality, public and private resource allocation tend to be hot-button issues and some can find it difficult to talk about these openly with strangers. However our partners emphasize that if spaces exist within the community that regularly invite residents to have those conversations in a safe environment—and continually deliver that environment, then those topics can be discussed which can help communities begin to build the trust needed to that community engagement is healthy, equitable, and inclusive."

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Listening with Intention

Many community challenges are multi-faceted and connected. To further complicate things, people experience policies differently depending on how they are situated. The passage of a school levy may mean little to a retired homeowner with no children in the house, but might be crucial to a mother of three renting an apartment nearby, and may eventually affect the retired homeowner through their property values. Given that communities are often comprised of people with differences much like these, listening is an important aspect of healthy community dialogue. In our work with the Detroit Fellows, many of the Detroit Fellows shared that creating an atmosphere where people could listen to the stories of other community members was crucial to helping people understand how larger political and economic forces affected their daily lives and how they could address these changes as a community. However, this is also an aspect of community dialogue that is given little attention.

As has been discussed earlier, many community engagement activities, particularly those centered on decision-making are designed to produce timely decisions, rather than well-deliberated ones. Within these engagement arenas, listening to community member concerns is often relegated to a few minutes at the beginning of the meeting or other engagement arenas within the community with tenuous connections to the decision-making process. In his book *The Road Less Traveled*, psychologist M. Scott Peck claimed "You cannot truly listen to someone and do something else at the same time"[104] Listening is work that takes energy and requires concentration.[105] The same can be said for communities. Listening must be intentional, allowing time and space to ensure that everyone is heard. This is because few of us truly hear someone's story when we first encounter it. According to author David Austin Sky, when we listen to someone's story, we are often hearing it through our own experiences. In his book, *See the Forest, Hear the Trees*, Sky says that in order to truly understand someone else's story, we must realize that our own story can jostle for attention, and get in the way.[106] When people can make peace with their own stories and can listen with an intention to hearing something new, other people's stories can be better heard.

Engaging through Frames of Opportunity

How might civic engagement help unite neighbors around ideas that address shared values? While strategies may differ, starting the conversation around the principle of expanding access to opportunity for everyone has resonated with many partners of ours.

For example, ISAIAH was interested in helping community members address difficult questions about race and economic equity. Kirwan and ISAIAH co-created a set of tools for community members and advocates that would help them address issues of race and class and also develop a shared framework for action. Throughout the process, ISAIAH, Kirwan, and many community members worked to find a new way of making community decisions by changing the conversation from one where community members competed over resources to redefine what the "good life" is, and whom should have access to it.

We worked with ISAIAH to hold a number of structured conversations intended to move the conversation from competition between community members to using all of our resources and abilities to create a better future together. ISAIAH and Kirwan created a series of interactive worksheets to help analyze decision-making from an equity viewpoint, such as "Who benefits from these decisions?" "What are our basic values as a community?" "What

would it look like if equity was at the heart of our decision-making process?" "What outcome do we want and who should benefit?"[107] These dialogues were meant to help shift the frame from zero-sum solutions to solutions that would help bring about a better future for everyone.

From the resources created with Kirwan, ISAIAH was able to implement a house meeting process around the concepts of opportunity stories and situatedness. In these meetings, 4,000 people talked about their relationships with race and equity as they shared their own opportunity stories. Openness to understanding the circumstances of our neighbors and how they are situated in the story they tell about the community creates a new level of understanding that is unachievable without intention.

In *The Abundant Community*, Peter Block and John McKnight posit that, "when we join together with our neighbors, we are the architects of the future that we want to live in."[108] Common values of opportunity, fairness, and concern for neighbors shape a more equitable vision of fairness and justice.[109] Linking people and concerns through broader lenses of opportunity can open up new ideas.[110] Shifting the context of conversations toward themes of opportunity may help people start to link their individual stories to wider structural issues, such as mortgage lending, college financial aid, the minimum wage, improved health care treatments, and other facets of life.[111] This can then help them place other people's stories similarly into historical and structural context.

Belongingness

A sense of belonging is important to everyone. Whether the connection is to family members, friends, or co-workers, people want to belong. Unfortunately, there are people in many communities—often people of color and those with lower incomes—who are perceived as not being a full or deserving part of the community, and/or who are purposely excluded. This matters to policy and place-making, because research has shown that people are treated

Try This!

Cultural Sharing Food Festival or Picnic
Partner with local institutions and community members to facilitate a multi-cultural food festival or community picnic. Solicit recipes and food ideas from a diverse set of community members and work with local officials who might be able to provide food, equipment and space. Community members can also teach others how to make certain dishes, increasing the understanding between diverse community members. Learning about diversity is sometimes done best through sharing the fruits of that diversity.

Meetings In More Central Locations
Community meetings have often been described as inaccessible or inconvenient by the most marginalized. In Detroit, the engagement process that informed the city's new master plan included a 'roaming table' where facilitators set up a meeting space in various neighborhoods throughout the year rather than holding a series of central meetings that may have been more difficult to attend. Try conducting meetings in a variety of rotating settings, or pairing them with other meetings such as school open houses.

differently in terms of public decision-making depending on how they are perceived.[112] Powerful business and government leaders tend to be treated as partners or with deference by community members and policy makers, while people returning from prison, homeless families, racial or ethnic groups, LGBTQ families, and those with low-incomes can be treated very differently.[113]

For example, in Detroit, a decision to sell several hundred acres of vacant land within the city to an agricultural company was met with anger by residents who did not feel involved in community decision-making. Though the parcels belonged to the city, the residents felt that decision impacted not only their feeling of community, but potentially their property values, educational opportunities, and future employment choices.[114] As people feel less connected to the decisions that impact them, the gulf between residents and city officials can grow. In Merced, many community meetings that were held within the city were difficult for rural residents to attend. These citizens often included migrant workers and the rural poor, who were deeply affected by issues of recreational activity planning and transportation infrastructure.

In scenarios such as these, not only do those members who have been left out lose, but so does the community-at-large. Just as in the above examples, community members are affected by community changes regardless of their level of involvement in the decision-making process. Too often, communities soon find themselves unable to adequately address the myriad challenges that occur when policies are implemented without an authentic understanding of or connection with the people most affected. Without a true understanding of the circumstances, the remedy will not be adequate. Also, many of those who are the most likely to be left out of the community engagement environment often have skills, experiences, and knowledge that are greatly needed

in the community. For instance, non-profit agencies such as Goodwill have been employing community members with disabilities successfully for decades and recent studies have shown that intergenerational programming between the elderly and children can provide benefits for both groups.[115] Inclusion is not only a good idea for those who are left out, it is vital for a healthy, functioning community.

In *"Poverty and Race Through a Belongingness Lens,"* john powell describes the need to be more inclusive as "widening the circle of our community."[116] When community members are dedicated to bringing neighbors from all walks of life into the circle of community, their experiences, knowledge, and wisdom can help clarify issues. In Los Angeles County's Second Supervisorial District, The Empowerment Congress seeks to robustly involve the community in the public-decision making process in order to create solutions that truly benefit all.

Neighborhood associations can be vehicles to empower and strengthen communities or contribute to feelings of exclusion. Many neighborhood associations have membership rules which exclude renters. However, in many low-income or mixed-income communities, renters can make up the majority or near majority of residents. Community partners on the South Side of Columbus related to us that similarly exclusionary rules such as these can make working with neighborhood associations difficult for organizations like Community Development for All People. The Weinland Park Community Civic Association specifically changed its charter in order to welcome renters, who had previously been left out of the association. A community that endeavors to truly include those who are the most marginalized among us can then grapple with healthy, diverse, inclusive place-making in the midst of nationally rising income inequality and racial segregation.

Radical Hospitality: Invitation and Listening

Engaging with the entire community starts truly inviting everyone into the community and valuing their input and leadership. It requires a commitment to everyone belonging and to receiving input from all community members. Starting from values of openness, belonging, and listening can lend outreach efforts much of their energy and longevity. When more people are invited to make community decisions our communities grow stronger and provide opportunities for a wider range of people to grow and succeed.

Deeper Understanding

1. Think about activities in your community where you can see people gathered as community members. Anything from neighborhood meetings to community gardens, book clubs, PTA meetings, churches and festivals. Then think of your community at large, or if possible, look at some quick demographic stats. Now think about who is represented at these events and who isn't? Are some people more represented than others? Who interacts with whom? How do people interact with these activities? How are these interactions the same and how are they different from one another?

2. Look at the list of community members that are not often represented at community activities. What do you think would draw them into more community events in the future? Next, find some of these community members and ask them the same question. Compare and contrast your list. Which items are the same, and which items are different? Were there any other surprising results?

3. Reflect on the dialogue and decision-making activities surrounding some recent development decisions in your community. What were some of the claims made for and against those decisions? How did those claims resonate with various people in the community? Is there a message about the development that could have been more inclusive? Why or why not? Try to create one with what you've learned in this section.

"IT'S DIFFICULT TO CONVINCE PEOPLE TO GET INVOLVED... BECAUSE OF LIVING THEIR LIFE IN A DISTRESSED NEIGHBORHOOD, OR BECAUSE PAST EFFORTS HAVE LED NOWHERE.

Merced County Resident, Moving Merced Communities Forward[117]

Trust-Building and Commitment

▶ When community members are able to witness a program or initiative creating real change, they are more likely to stay involved in the community engagement environment.

▶ When those who are the least privileged in the community are able to demonstrate their skills and abilities in a meaningful way, the community engagement environment becomes a setting where mutual trust can grow.

▶ Lasting mutual accountability cannot be created by using punitive means to bind stakeholders to promises. Instead the willingness to share power and responsibility builds trust among stakeholders because it signals that all community members are seen as valuable, equitable partners in creating the community.

Strong communities are built on a foundation of trust and mutual respect. If we as neighbors cannot trust one another, we cannot build a community together. Unfortunately, the traditional model of accountability and trust among community stakeholders is often ad-versarial. This manifests itself in a "watchdog" mentality, marked by legal actions, protests, and boycotts.[118] Though these forms of civic action can be useful tools, threats and punishments that aim to bind stakeholders to the promises they have made are often not

sufficient means to create mutual accountability over the long term. Instead, we have found that trust is built by forging relationships based on mutual support.

Making and Keeping Promises

Many people in the communities that we have partnered with feel outright distrust of civic institutions; they report that they have been let down or outright lied to by community officials. In these communities, the engagement atmosphere tends to be fraught with suspicion, doubt, and ultimately, disengagement. Residents have reported that community programs tend to lose support due to the inability of institutions to deliver on their promises, leading to further distrust among residents.

People believe in what they can see. We have found that making real commitments to residents with respect to resources and clear, measurable goals creates something tangible for people to be able to trust.[119] The Detroit Fellows concluded that this could be done by making accountability an integral part of the

relationship between residents and elected and appointed city officials by way of dedicated processes, policies, and standards designed to promote the journey from word to deed. One of the Fellows in Detroit pointed out that if people see a program or initiative creating real change in the community, they are more likely to stay involved in capacity-building activities.[120] By making and keeping commitments, community members can form equitable and fair partnerships based on mutual trust and respect.

Long-term commitment is critical to enacting lasting change through robust civic engagement processes. Steve Sterrett of the Weinland Park Collaborative identifies the key roles that commitment and trust play in civic engagement, "I think one of the reasons that the Weinland Park Collaborative has been relatively successful so far has been that we're all still at the table... you just build relationships over time and people, they know who you are and whether they can trust you or not. They know who you are, they know who to call, and that makes a difference."

Try This! > **Start a Community Organization or Project With Others**
Mutual accountability and trust are best gained through combined action. Work with neighbors to start a community group or organization. It can be anything from a block club or a community garden to an informal book club or a garage sale. Regardless of type of group, coming together with other community members in this way is an excellent opportunity for people to make and keep promises to each other and understand how to support one another to complete a shared goal.

Rotating Leadership at Local Meetings
Invite community members who are often not in a position of power to take a leadership role in a community meeting. Community members could also be asked to add to or even create the agenda for the next meeting. By sharing knowledge and power within the decision-making process, members who would often be marginalized and wary of community decisions may be more willing to support community decisions that they have played a role in creating.

> **"When we look at our own struggles, when we engage with people we can see the connections. Engaging people means connecting with them in an authentic way; being humble and realizing that we're not that different."**

Ponsella Hardaway – Executive Director, MOSES

Building Trust by Building Empowerment

The legitimacy of community outreach efforts is tied to the amount of opportunities that community members have to exercise leadership. This is particularly true in the case of communities that have experienced long-time disinvestment and discrimination. Many people who live and work in these communities are already marginalized in many other facets of life. When this power dynamic presents itself in the community decision-making process, it reinforces a sense of powerlessness, and renders community participation empty and ineffective.[121] This further deepens distrust and alienation of community members from partnerships with other stakeholders.

A sense of trust is tied to a feeling of empowerment. When those who are the least privileged in the community are able to demonstrate their skills and abilities in a meaningful way, the community dialogue becomes a setting where mutual trust can grow. Strong community involvement will help ensure that agreements between stakeholders are honored, and foster continued support for community initiatives.

One of the lessons that we learned is that trust is often built, not through words, but through actions. Rev. John Edgar of Community Development for All People puts it this way, "We've been at it long enough and we're good at getting stuff done in the community. We have a credibility that we didn't have before and we've been able to win over some of the civic associations that we had a hard time with." This shows why taking steps to support community members in sharing their diverse gifts are so important. Until community stakeholders learn that they can help one another, it can difficult to build trust. From babysitting to coalition-building, sharing gifts is at the core of building trust in communities.

Mutual Accountability is Vital to Community Engagement

Neighbors, teachers, local business owners, and other community members play important roles in our lives. Communities are networks of people who share responsibilities for contributing to the outcomes that affect the group as a whole. The presence of a local playground for one family might depend on the volunteer work of their neighbors. A job-training program run by a nearby community center or church may bolster employ-

ment for young people in the neighborhood. This concept lies at the heart of reciprocal accountability: people helping each other make contributions to the community that they all value. To accomplish this, community stakeholders must be willing to offer and deliver support to each other.

People of color and low-income residents can sometimes feel unsupported in their efforts to find opportunities to contribute meaningfully to their community. In Detroit, the Civic Engagement Fellows reflected that engagement activities often tend to revolve around what marginalized communities lack, rather than focusing on their strengths. On the other hand, the Fellows also reported that city officials in Detroit often felt unsupported by the community when advocating for community needs at the city and regional level.

Mutual accountability creates more complete and honest communication between community stakeholders. It encourages shared responsibility and shared learning. In our view, the willingness to share power and responsibility builds trust among stakeholders because it makes real the promise that all stakeholders are seen as valuable, equitable partners in creating the community. Mutual accountability is key to making sure that the agreements made today can withstand political and social changes, and continue to benefit the community.[122] Likewise, vulnerable leadership from those with more power to act within the community, characterized by honesty and humility creates hospitable environments in which trust can be built.

👤 CASE STUDY PROFILE

ISAIAH

Doran Schrantz is the Executive Director of ISAIAH. ISAIAH is a collection of congregations, working together across Minnesota, who are building community power for community policies that prioritize racial and economic justice. ISAIAH's values are centered on a vision of community, hope, and God's abundance for all people.

In 2010, the Kirwan Institute and ISAIAH collaborated to develop a series of reports and documents focusing on the Minneapolis-St. Paul region. These materials highlighted the ways in which public decision-making reinforced patterns of racism and disinvestment and provided a roadmap to creating more equitable community decision-making. During the process, we reaffirmed the ideas that the fates of community members are interconnected and that racial and ethnic hierarchies are often endemic to our civic engagement environments and must be consciously dismantled and rebuilt with a focus on inclusion, equality, and expanded opportunity for all.

Trust-Building and Commitment

Solving long-term community problems requires community members who are willing to build long-lasting partnerships. Trust is the glue that holds these bonds together. Communities across the country have shown us that trust begins with honoring a commitment and keeping a promise. Communities where people work together for common goals start with person-to-person commitments. Residents can widen the circle of inclusion, so that more people and families can recognize and give gifts that make their neighborhoods stronger and healthier for all.

Deeper Understanding

1. Ask people about their most positive and most negative stories from their history within the community. How did those experiences affect the trustworthiness of other community members and the community at large?

2. Who is most likely to feel supported or unsupported in your community? Ask community members from various walks of life to tell a story about their experiences. How did those experiences color their relationship with the community?

NONCOOPERATION AND BOYCOTTS ARE NOT ENDS THEMSELVES... THE END IS REDEMPTION AND RECONCILIATION. THE AFTERMATH OF NONVIOLENCE IS THE CREATION OF THE BELOVED COMMUNITY.

Martin Luther King, Jr.

KIRWAN INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY OF RACE AND ETHNICITY

Honoring Dissent and Embracing Protest

▶ The strength of the diversity in our communities relies on our ability to accept and respect our differences.

▶ When communities avoid controversial topics for fear of conflict, they tend to produce the very conflict they hoped to avoid.

▶ Strong oppositional activities such as protests and boycotts may be able to highlight issues that are difficult to discuss in more traditional engagement settings.

▶ An engagement environment that supports a space for long-term dialogue and disagreement can help stakeholders stay focused on new possibilities, even while holding different views on issues.

Peter Block writes that "if we cannot say 'no,' then our 'yes' is meaningless."[123] The strength of the diversity in our communities relies on our ability to accept and respect our differences. In strong communities, voices of disagreement can actually strengthen the civic engagement environment by offering alternatives and raising tough questions. A diverse set of ideas, visions, and backgrounds within a community are valuable assets. When those differences are expressed, we find out more about our communities and ourselves. By

truly honoring dissent, we can create a civic engagement environment where our rich conglomeration of ideas can be brought together in order to build communities that are more than the sum of their parts.

Sadly, in many of our communities, people have forgotten the skills and abilities needed to bring respect and attentiveness into difficult conversations about our shared resources. The good news is that those skills and abilities are still with us. As part of a program of racial healing initiated by The Michigan Roundtable for Diversity and Inclusion, some community members in Detroit gather on the first Friday of every month to talk about important community topics ranging from gentrification to discrimination against LGBT residents. Since members are committed to listening to and understanding each other, many come away with a new understanding of what their neighbors are experiencing. In order to achieve truly inclusive communities, we must rediscover the ability to share experiences in an environment of openness, respect, and compassion.

Difficult Conversations Must Be Embraced

When public engagement avoids controversial topics for fear of conflict, they tend to produce the very conflict that they hoped to avoid.[124] Community challenges cannot be met while withholding our differences. Differences between people will ultimately surface, and then the community is left without the tools to productively navigate them.[125] In order to discuss our differences constructively, authentic forms of dissent must be seen as a form of care, not resistance.[126] Authentic statements of doubt shift the culture of our engagement towards openness and honesty, while building accountability and commitment among residents.[127] A climate of open listening is the backbone of a healthy engagement process.

Confronting difficult topics such as racial and economic inequality in an environment of respect and compassion can also foster true understanding between neighbors and strengthen community bonds.[128] The power that exists within strong neighbor-to-neighbor bonds can help unlock the hidden potential needed to develop new solutions. Innovative solutions demand the collective creativity, awareness, and support of the community, not an environment where voices are silenced and the views and experiences of the most disadvantaged are unwelcome. Eric Uslaner points out that creating spaces for organizations and grassroots leaders to engage in political education allows community members to have difficult conversations about race, LGBT rights, criminal justice, and immigrant rights, among others.[129] As an example, Minnesota's ISAIAH worked with the Minnesota Department of Transportation (MNDOT) to confront racial bias in transportation construction projects. Over the course of several conversations, ISAIAH asked MNDOT workers and management about the underlying policies, processes, and assumptions that drove MNDOT's investment strategies. They also asked what workers saw as potential solutions to institutional inequities.[130] Making room for constructive conflict as well as critical examination of the assumptions that underpin our public decisions allows marginalized community members to address inequality within the public policy discussion in a way that can bring about greater understanding.[131]

When space is provided in the community to openly talk about these issues on a regular basis, people feel more comfortable talking about them.[132] We have learned that it is important to invite people to explicitly share these experiences, repeatedly and in an environment where they will be heard.

Doran Schrantz from ISAIAH claimed that

their successes in civic engagement largely were catalyzed by conversations where there was "no agenda and no project," but plenty of space to have open and honest conversations about race, class, and difference. "I think the challenge with the neighborhood dialogue," recalled Steve Sterrett from Weinland Park," was that... you set them up in a way that allows them to flow [with] the way the people dialogue, what their interests are, it's hard to give them an agenda."

Holding the Tension of Different Perspectives

People are passionate about their communities and have a variety of solutions to the challenges that their communities face. When conflicts among community members arise, they must be willing to bear the tension of disagreement in a spirit of community and open communication while staying dedicated to the underlying goal of restoring their communities.[133]

In order to avoid these inevitable conflicts, community members often withdraw from them altogether. For example, some residents in communities across the South Side of Columbus, several people reported that they are wary of attending open meetings because of the "drama factor"—the fear that the conversation may be contentious and end in loud, screaming disagreements that just foster more enmity between neighbors. At the Kirwan Institute, we have found that community members share this experience across the country. The result of this retreat however is that important community needs are left unaddressed and community circumstances do not change.

Roger L. Conner, a specialist in public policy advocacy, argues that civic engagement often requires us to suspend our assumptions and conclusions, at least temporarily.[134] An engagement environment that supports a space for long-term dialogue and disagreement can help stakeholders stay focused on new possibilities, even while holding different views on community issues.[135] The Civic Engagement Fellows were a diverse group, and disagreements about civic engagement were a regular feature of our meetings. Often, the Fellows were called upon to hold the tension of varying views on civic engagement while searching for solutions to the city's governance and public accountability challenges. As a result, the group felt encouraged and supported in generating new knowledge and novel strategies. It also facilitated the examination of underlying assumptions and models informing their approaches to civic engagement. An engagement environment that prizes authentic solutions over efficiency is better able to foster strong relationships between neighbors.

Try This! **Start or Support an Alternate Legitimate Arena**
If your community regularly holds meetings that have limited space for other topics, work to establish or support the establishment of an alternate, legitimate arena for those concerns. This will allow community members who would otherwise feel marginalized within the current meeting structure to have a community space where their concerns are front and center. However, for this strategy to be effective, the alternate community space or organization must be given full legitimacy, and some mechanism for meaningful action along with already established community stakeholders.

Protest as a Valid Expression of Civic Voice

Civic engagement happens whether or not a space has been created for it within the formal engagement structure. If no place has been created, engagement presents itself as protest.[137] Protests can take the form of political rallies or sit-ins, boycotts, consumer choices, or even graffiti. The ability to demand fair and equitable treatment is crucial for the health of community relationships. Engagement in community decision-making is as much about demonstrating individual political power as it is about building relationships. Authentic community relationships can only exist where all parties have the power to choose for themselves.

According to sociologist Rhonda Baruch, acknowledging the honest expression of frustration within the community can lead to constructive social action.[138] Protests and other oppositional activities highlight issues that are difficult to discuss in more traditional engagement environments. Recognizing protests as means of bringing attention to unresolved community issues and as an expression of community power gives community members an opportunity to come together to find shared solutions on equal footing.[139] Martin Luther King and other civil rights leaders often used nonviolent direct action "to create such a crisis and establish such creative tension that a community which has consistently refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue."[140] Creating spaces for authentic expression is an important step to finding new solutions that are meaningful to community members from all walks of life.

KIRWAN INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY OF RACE AND ETHNICITY

Honoring Dissent and Embracing Protest

The strength of the diversity in our communities relies upon our ability to accept and respect our differences. In strong communities, voices of disagreement have the potential to strengthen the civic engagement environment by offering alternatives and raising tough questions. Solutions to difficult challenges are rarely realized without entering into conflict. By truly honoring dissent, we can create a civic engagement environment where our diverse bank of ideas and knowledge can be brought together to build communities that are more than the sum of their parts.

Deeper Understanding

1. What are the characteristics of a contentious or 'hot-button' issue in your community or in your experience? How have issues such as these played out in your community activities and conversations?

2. Think about some protest actions (i.e., picketing, demonstrating) that you felt were misguided or inappropriate. Leaving aside the protesters stance on the issue(s), what about the protests made you feel that way? Can you think of an aspect of these protests that strike you as valid? How do other community members from different walks of life feel about these protests?

3. Think about activities or people who you may have labeled as 'disruptive' at community meetings or events? What made you feel this way? Can you imagine a community forum or event where they could express themselves and be recognized within the community?

EVERYONE THINKS OF CHANGING THE WORLD, BUT NO ONE THINKS OF CHANGING HIMSELF.

Leo Tolstoy

Adaptability to Community Change

▶ A healthy civic engagement environment can provide space for people to negotiate the challenging time between when one set of circumstances ends and the other begins.

▶ In order to create a supportive environment for community change, community members must be willing to try to forgo comfort for truth, and to give up old roles for new roles.

▶ Honest conversations about civic power, and the potential for abuse and what constitutes legitimate and illegitimate power are important components of ensuring that community changes are equitable and meaningful.

Change is difficult for many of us. Changes in behavior, attitudes and beliefs require that a person navigate a stressful process of inner psychological adjustment.[141] Our communities are constantly changing. Neighbors move in and out. Businesses close or move on. New technologies, such as television and the Internet, change the way that we communicate and alter how we define our "community." To be engaged in a community for any amount of time means entering into this difficult process of change, possibly many times.

Communities often find themselves unable to adapt to these changes. The mixture of an attachment to tradition, institutionalized inequalities, and exclusive leadership models often leave community members out of community decisions just as they are attempting to become a greater part of the community.

In order to respond to inevitable changes,

the community engagement environment must be flexible as well. The civic engagement environment can provide space for people to negotiate the challenging time between when one set of circumstances ends and the other begins. In this "neutral zone," people can understand one another's circumstances and create innovative solutions.[142] In order to truly make the transformative changes needed to engage community members from these principles, communities must be open to change.

Flexibility and Openness to Change

Our communities change over time, and our civic engagement environment needs to be able to adapt. Deep attachment to solutions that may have been successful years ago can create a resistance to change in the face of new community dynamics. When community members can admit that change is happening, they can overcome their resistance to collab-

oration and reconciliation when it comes to making the change happen.[143]

To illustrate the power of flexibility in supporting community change, Roger Conner related the experiences of *Make the Road by Walking*, a community-based LGBTQ advocacy group, during their effort to convince local high school officials to take more aggressive measures in protecting LGBTQ youth from harassment and violence in school. The group's young leaders came to believe that school officials were ignoring the problem and crafted a list of demands aimed at further protecting LGBTQ youth. School officials, however, felt that there were few complaints and when presented with the demands—many of which included changes to the school policy and more intensive reporting of possible harassment— they immediately balked.[144]

Instead of responding with further protests and demonstration, the advocacy organization decided to take a different tack and decided

👤 CASE STUDY PROFILE ————————————————————

Community Development for All People

Reverend John Edgar is the Pastor for The Church for All People and Executive Director of Community Development for All People (CD4AP) a Methodist ministry and community development organization on the South Side of Columbus. Their mission is to help engender a whole, healthy, and engaged community all community members are empowered to pursue their hopes, dreams, and aspirations. Through both their ministerial work and in the community, CD4AP works with community stakeholders to provide for those less fortunate while also building a space where the voices that often go unheard within the community can be amplified.

CD4AP partnered with the Kirwan Institute in order to create a new model of growth and prosperity on the South Side of Columbus. The neighborhoods on the South Side are diverse, and the project aims to use social capital and inclusive civic engagement to foster a form of community revitalization that places diversity and equity as a primary goal, and aligns both physical infrastructure and social investments to support this goal.

to look more closely at the reasons behind the school officials' resistance and worked to craft a collaborative plan that would further protect LGBTQ students that was cognizant and respective of the fears of the administrative backlash that such changes could cause.[145]

In the end, all parties had to risk changing their behavior in order to move forward. The advocates had to give up their monopoly over their demands and their assumption that the school officials needed to be pushed into changing their action with protest actions; the school officials had to give up their assumption that honest dialogue and sharing the power of initiative with outside advocates would get them into trouble. In the end, each group was rewarded with measures to tackle LGBTQ discrimination and respect for administrative needs.[146]

We must be willing to try to forgo comfort for truth, and to give up old roles for new roles.[147] Within the framework of shared values, community members have the flexibility to create programs and processes that ensure that the engagement environment can be a vehicle for finding solutions to common challenges. A healthy civic engagement environment reflects the changing needs of the community.

Changes in Civic Power Demand Extra Attention

When community members who have been the most marginalized in terms of community decision-making are able to gain more power, there is often a great deal of excitement and movement within the community. However, there is also a need for heightened awareness. Doran Schrantz, Executive Director of ISAIAH relates that as the organization's ability to play an important role in state decision-making grew, it became increasingly challenging to resist being co-opted into positions which ran counter to their goals. A number of community organizations that we have partnered with have noted that community engagement can be difficult to understand from inside power structures because engagement activities initiated by powerful stakeholders can actually be a means of disempowering other community members.

It has been observed that community engagement can serve several purposes within communities. Community engagement activities can be used to empower community members, but they can also be used to placate, misinform, manipulate, and insulate more powerful stakeholders.[148] Some community stakeholders have related that invitations to participate more fully in community decision-making have found themselves asked to

> **Try This!** **Comfort Zone Challenge Club**
> In order to build a positive experience of adapting to new changes and moving outside of one's 'comfort zone,' community members may find it helpful to organize groups or clubs dedicated to trying new experiences within the community. If possible, make sure the groups are diverse and comprised of people who are open to having new experiences. Choose some set times to meet and try something new in the community; an ethnic food or entertainment venue, an event or religious service in your community that you may not have been to before. This type of activity can be even more useful when combined with storytelling session, or community-based groups like community gardens.

work against the needs of less powerful community members.

For ISAIAH, the key to helping ensure that they were able use their community power to empower residents, they constantly engaged in internal conversations about their experiences with community power, the temptations that it brought, and whether what they were doing was a legitimate extension of their core mission. Their constant attention to these difficulties helps to call attention to the changes inherent in community power while also helping community members understand their changing relationship with the community. In order to ensure an equitable and inclusive engagement, those groups who have power, particularly those who advocate for equity, must take concerted and intentional action to understand the nature and limits of the power they hold within the community.

Change is a Challenging Journey

When people change, whether by choice or not, the changes take physical, emotional and psychological energy. Fundamental change can involve difficult challenges to our core ideas about our responsibilities and identities. Exercising flexibility, affirming the difficulty of change, and communicating clearly with those who are resistant are all important to creating an environment where community members can address resistance together.[149]

For instance, Conner suggests that the anxiety that people feel when confronted with fundamental change calls for those advocating for changes to answer their questions about why the changes are needed before any negotiation about how the change will begin.[150] When we treat those who disagree as colleagues instead of enemies, we are more likely to hear their loss and confusion that naturally occurs during times of change and treat those feelings as legitimate.[151]

Navigating change as a community means acknowledging the difficult emotions inherent in change. Nonetheless, if we navigate change intentionally, we can move forward with trust, openness, and shared opportunity.[152] Likewise, navigating change can be equally as challenging for organizations. As discussed before, ISAIAH went through a transformative restructuring when the organization decided to champion issues of race and inequity. These changes were not only difficult; they were also met with resistance, ultimately resulting in a handful of member congregations leaving the organization. However, through this transformation, ISAIAH has been able to diversify its membership, strengthen its organizational power, and become a leading voice for equity on a statewide level.

> **Try This!** | **Refresh Meeting Charter to Meet Existing Realities**
> Many meetings are slow to change because their procedures, vocabulary, and emphasis are tied to a meeting charter that may not be suitable for the current community. If you are a meeting official, suggest that the leadership of the meeting take a fresh look at the meeting charter or rules and compare them to the concerns, realities, and cultural realities of the current community. This may also be a time to talk with new community members or those who have felt slighted by the process to offer feedback for new processes that may be more equitable and inclusive.

Adaptability to Community Change

In *The Abundant Community*, **Peter Block** and **John L. McKnight** compared healthy communities to a collective of jazz musicians, who all join together to create highly improvisational music together starting from a small amount of structure.[153] Communities, like jazz music, are not static compositions. Much like the people within them, they change over time and with different circumstances. By focusing on values and principles rather than tactics and activities, we can create just the right amount of order needed for a wide variety of dialogues and relationships, without being tied to limiting ideas. In order to tap into this flexibility, we must allow for the long-term adjustments, and the personal transformations, that are necessitated by change.

Deeper Understanding

1. Look back over the answers that you've collected in the previous sections. What changes would you make to your community engagement environment given the answers to those responses? Who and what would have to change for the environment to be different? How would those changes affect community members? What do you see as the changes (i.e., structural/institutional/emotional/cognitive, etc.) that would have to occur in your community to make those changes a reality? What are some ways to support those who would make those changes?

Conclusion

Healthy community-based civic engagement starts with our relationships to each other. In order for a democracy to be authentic, the well being of all citizens is paramount. People benefit from truly democratic structures and institutions; the primary units of democracy. The quality of the connections formed by neighbors at every level of community interaction represents the fibers that hold our democracy together. The ability to come together as community members is so important to a functioning democracy that the founders of our nation made it the subject of our first amendment.[154] The guarantees of speech, assembly, and association are the foundations of our democratic nation.

Unfortunately, in many of our communities, people of color and low-income residents, and many others, have often not been invited to speak, assemble and associate in an authentic way. Their gifts have gone unappreciated, their voices have been ignored, and their experiences have been repeatedly disregarded. This is the cumulative effect that long-term racialized inequality has wrought on the civic engagement environment.

To move beyond isolation and separation, we need to realize our diverse, shared strengths and vulnerabilities as well as our common yearning to move beyond divisive issues.[155] A healthy civic engagement environment is the space we need to hold our most difficult conversations, and where we can find sustainable solutions by acknowledging our common fates. As Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. pointed out:

I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly.[156]

"People's own self worth and ability to feel like agents of change is hugely important in our whole endeavor of trying to creating more inclusive, deep, broad, meaningful civic engagement."

Dessa Cosma – Economic Justice Across Michigan

Likewise, the equitable civic engagement principles presented here are "caught in an inescapable network of mutuality." In order to embrace the gifts of diverse communities, we must face the effects of race, history, and power inequities in our communities. In order to practice radical hospitality, we must first build trust that can be achieved in part by demonstrating commitment, and so forth. Furthermore, no equitable civic engagement can occur without strong and vulnerable leadership.

Fundamentally, equitable civic engagement is about leveling the power dynamics of a place, giving voice to those previously alienated and excluded from the civic process. The importance of understanding power structures, how to build power, and how to leverage power are all vital to creating equitable civic engagement initiatives and facilitating real community change.

The time has come to strengthen and enliven our local relationships between community members. Restoring our civic engagement environment is the pathway to ensuring that policies reflect the diversity and worth of our experiences, enabling more people to contribute to the community in which they are a part and live meaningful lives.[157] When community members come together in a healthy, empowering environment, we can engage each other in ways that not only produce better outcomes for our communities, and ourselves but also produce a critical investment in civic capacity for communities.[158] This increased civic capacity supports holistic, community-driven investments in the neighborhood, which increases social capital and helps make community development as much about people as it is about place. **An engagement environment that is healthy, equitable, inclusive, and provides opportunities for everyone to share their gifts is the beating heart of our democracy. Through this environment, our communities can produce prosperity, freedom, and limitless possibilities for ourselves, our families, and our neighbors.** ■

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