



Powerful Places:

Principles for Effective Community-Driven Change

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Introduction

Over the last decade, we have seen disparities grow in our country. Climate disasters and a financial depression and recession detrimentally impacting places from New Orleans to Detroit, from New York to California. Philanthropy has attempted to resource innovation and much needed intervention to bridge some of the gaps. With an active and long partnership between philanthropy and actors within civil society implementing innovation and intervention, the term “high impact philanthropy” has surfaced. Philanthropic entities want to see the maximum social good for the populations they seek to serve, meaningfully improving the lived realities of the many who are being more and more left behind. High impact philanthropy is often also equated with cost-effectiveness and, most of all, scale. Somehow, overtime, an artificial divide has been constructed that has created a parallel between high impact philanthropy, scale and *national* interventions, with emphasis on often times rapid, impact that can be demonstrated by data focused on wide breadth. This artificial divide has created a separation with local interventions where we often see depth and authentic presence in local communities most impacted by the issues foundations seek to address.

We wish not to drive the national vs. local polemic, but rather we want to make the case for place-based grantmaking as an effective way for philanthropy to help transform communities, connecting local and national efforts to see the scale of impact needed to make meaningful change for all. This paper will assert what we mean by *effective* place-based grantmaking, illuminating the principles and practices for foundations to engage in place based methods.

I. Why “place-based”?

When examining grantmaking strategies, many avenues can be taken. Whole sectors can be engaged, such as those focusing on education systems or civic engagement. Place-based grantmaking approaches recognize that places are where disparities are concentrated—they are precisely where the most marginalized are marginalized. Proximity of people in place lends itself to stronger relationships and as such, places are also where social networks are strongest. Engaged and activated networks have the power to move people and institutions for change. For these reasons, places can become a strategic foci for important interventions. If we can see better outcomes in the most marginalized places, we can see changes everywhere. Furthermore, if we can engage strong social networks, places become beacons for impact. Choosing key places can be an important method to drive whole systems of change.

In addition to singling out a place as a point of intervention, places provide a venue to test a theory of change, piloting work that could be taken to scale. Of course replicating models requires a great deal of understanding that simple “copy and paste” methods do not necessarily work everywhere. However, choosing a place to test models and interventions, particularly places where the most difficult of circumstances reside, can mean that a successful test will hold the elements for building solutions at scale elsewhere and/or transforming whole systems.

Places are also platforms for engaging community leaders and the constituencies necessary for advancing a larger scale policy agenda. Often philanthropic interventions see the connection between practice and policy. To advance successful policy requires, en masse, the participation, leadership and drive of the very communities most impacted along with systems and policymakers. Devoid of such leadership and involvement, policies, no matter how strong they are on paper, often fail. Places provide the space to deeply engage those most impacted to mobilize around much needed policy for all and for foundations to engage key players to structure both appropriate relationships between the foundation and these players, and among the players themselves.

II. Place-Based Philanthropic Interventions and Models

After years of working with philanthropy, in multiple ways, we have deciphered three types of place-based interventions: comprehensive community change initiative (CCCI), foundation-in-place and a movement building approach. MSC has worked with multiple philanthropic partners and has developed a fourth way, hybrid approach to philanthropy place-based interventions which we call the Strategic Partnership approach which takes into consideration the broad vision of many philanthropic partners and their internal structures and lines of accountability that need to be considered when doing place-based work.

The comprehensive community change initiative (CCCI) approach is typically characterized by a foundation testing a change model for improving neighborhood conditions. The model is tested in multiple sites with the intent for broader adaptation or replication if successful. This requires the foundation sponsor to be in charge of designing and implementing the major components of the approach in order to maintain model integrity in pursuit of defined outcomes. Thus, the structure and planning process are uniform across sites and highly centralized at the local level—usually operationalized in the form of a collaborative planning table. While CCCIs have been able to realize a number of achievements, a common criticism is that the kind of change they achieve is limited by the variety and number of actors at the table, and by the foundation’s (in some instances, inconsistent) idea of what significant outcomes look like.

In contrast, the foundation-in-place approach is typically characterized by a more organic, resident-based leadership approach. Residents have a large role in designing major components of the initiative, including defining which outcomes would make worthy goals. This approach works for a foundation which is willing to allow residents to define what success looks like and support that vision over time.

The third approach is a movement building approach which is focused on supporting a range of actors and organizations in a sector or region to develop a long-term strategy for deep systems and structural change. The strength of this approach is that because the work develops out of the day-to-day experiences of community members, there is deep and long-term commitment to the goals and outcomes of the movement. Within this approach the foundation identifies and invests in key leaders but plays a little role in shaping or defining the goals of the movement. Such a model is one in which the foundation is relatively “hands off,” choosing to focus on the development of a cadre of leaders who will forward strategies and programs for change. Cadre development is important and, at the same time resources for change need to also include investments in organizations, systems and whole movements beyond leaders.

After examining and working with these multiple approaches, we at the Movement Strategy Center highly support a movement building approach, but for the practical purposes of how many foundations operate, we have developed a hybrid approach, which we call the Strategic Partnership model. This model also addresses the need to expand how foundation's engage in the movement building approach's more singular focus on cadre development. We believe that Strategic Partnership model essentially achieves what "high impact philanthropy" seeks while honestly assessing a foundation's agenda, rules of engagement, transparency with the community. This approach relies on strong relationships with community leaders and organizations, combining elements from the CCCI and embedded funder approaches and a movement building approach. Such a model invests long-term in grassroots and policy organizations with shared vision and values, bridging the artificial divide between national and local presence and impact. The essence of this Strategic Partnership approach is identifying key local trusted partners¹ that are highly aligned with a particular foundation's vision and values; sharing control and strategy development with them early on maximizes local ownership and strategic alignment with the existing local policy and community context. This model is appropriate for funders that are deeply rooted, or seek to be deeply rooted, in a place with deep knowledge and relationships in local communities—an asset we must cultivate to truly impact community change initiatives. This method allows building on the momentum of local partners' current efforts, while also creating a real enduring partnership to advance a foundation's goals.

The Strategic Partnership approach relies on key important partnership decisions early on that will be based on the foundation's knowledge and relationships and additional reconnaissance. Although it will necessarily involve risks, we believe these risks are more manageable than the risks associated with a more conventional collaborative planning approach. It's important to clarify that this approach **does** allow for broad community participation. Rather than leading with this, it is designed in a strategic way that allows for maximum participation in line with the foundation's goals.

This partnership model approach addresses some of the key lessons learned from other CCCIs. With a few exceptions, many previous efforts, frankly, have not been as ambitious with regards to policy and systems changes; nor have they been sharp in engaging the power dynamics that are inherent in community and systems change efforts.

Imperative to the success of any intervention, it is important that a foundation be clear with potential partners about the foundation's goals and the rules of the game from the outset. Key recommended principles that we outline in greater detail below include:

¹ Selection of such key local leaders is a nuanced process that we at the Movement Strategy Center have helped foundation partners design, ensuring that a balance between foundation and community input is taken into consideration. Furthermore, we have worked with foundations that have had to rethink particular partnerships as a strategy is put in place, based on feedback from the community based on how effective actual local leadership is.

Principles to Grow Powerful Places

(1) CLARITY

Clarity, from the outset of an initiative, with all actors in a place about a foundation's intentions, goals, expectations and other factors is paramount to the success of any work.

(2) TRANSPARENCY

A foundations' **transparency about decision-making processes** is also key to success; a process may be highly participatory but ultimately who makes the final decision about how things are done?

(3) ACCURATE ASSESSMENTS

Connecting the people with the wisdom about the places we are working in to **make accurate assessments about the community**, its leadership, challenges, and the opportunities for change is essential: national foundations learning from local ones or taking guidance from long-time grantees who are well respected in the communities you are working to support.

(4) UNDERSTANDING POWER

Understanding power both in terms of the weight a particular institution holds as well as holding to the tenet that altering power dynamics in a place is key to needed community outcomes.

(5) PARTNERSHIP

Deep, intentional **partnerships with local community**, in which exchange, dialogue and real relationship is cultivated is a great asset to successful place-based grantmaking. Catalytic philanthropy should be a pathway to true partnership and for that to occur it is critical to **balance power for true partnership** both between community and philanthropy and within communities.

(6) COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP

Investing in **building community leadership** builds capacity at the local level and has the power to break down silos, creating powerful connections to create real change.

(7) COMMUNITY DRIVEN CAPACITY BUILDING

Taking the lead from community around who are appropriate **capacity builders** and technical assistance providers is also highly recommended and what kinds of capacities need to be built

(8) LONG-TERM COMMITMENT

Place-based change is a marathon-- not a sprint.

(9) LINKING SYSTEMS AND PLACES

While local capacity must be built to **transform places**, an eye to **transforming larger systems** create large-scale must be considered and designed simultaneously.

(10) LEVERAGING NETWORK STRATEGIES

Decentralization of planning an initiative allows for a higher level of participation from the foundation's partners because it allows for trust-building

Another advantage of the partnership model approach is that it allows a foundation to use the foundation's technical expertise, relationships, resources and social capital to directly engage and influence systems leaders. By developing the strategy in partnership with community organizations, a foundation can move that strategy directly with systems leaders, support community organizations to push for change from the outside, and use its convening power to get the systems leaders and community leaders at the same table at appropriate stages of the approach.

III. Key Principles That Can Make or Break Place-Based Grantmaking

Our recommendation is that grantmaking priorities and practices include the principle that an investment agenda should include and elevate the need for resourcing “translocal” and place specific work and actual capacity in specific places. An intentional strategy must be developed at the outset of any philanthropic initiative and local leadership must design that strategy. Furthermore strong place-based grantmaking strives to build field alignment across silos ensuring strong coordination and that the sum is greater than the parts.

- 1. Clarity:** At the outset, a foundation must be very clear about what it wants to achieve: clarity around agenda, model and strategy are key to effective place-based grant making. With this clarity, a foundation can structure relationships at various levels with partners to maximize investment. This type of clear role for a foundation is based on past lessons learned from place-based initiatives and successful social movements. In a Strategic Partnership place-based model, a clear role for a foundation would be to share leadership and ownership with partners. This is different from a model where a foundation would lead strategy and find partners to shape the project on a purely tactical level.
- 2. Transparency about decision-making:** Often it has been the case in the past that foundations engaged in place-based strategies have had ultimate and periodic decision-making power. The role of community partners and the limits of their authority become confusing in the decision making table as foundations shift boundaries. Funders often want to be highly participatory to local communities but the reality is that the practice is difficult with the foundation's own internal needs for accountability. Our hybrid Strategic Partnership model merges the culture of philanthropy, as we have known it, with stronger partnership with community in decision-making powers. In this case, a foundation would set the framework with clear boundaries about what is relevant to the project in a place and how it works. Implementation would result from negotiations with the foundation and its partners.
- 3. Make Accurate Assessments:** Knowing how you are defining community and understanding the history and dynamics of trust, leadership and capacity are critical to assess what strengths and networks exist that can be leveraged for change, what long standing animosities and district must be addressed and what hidden community assets may hold the key to supporting a community in building the power to advance structural changes needed to revitalize communities.

4. **Understanding power:** Effective place-based grantmakers are clear about the power they will exercise in the process of an initiative. It is also important that a place-based funder understands that *altering* power relationships is key to community outcomes. The foundation must be willing to support efforts that engage in changing power dynamics at the community level in order to be impactful and effective in place-based work. Once such a clear commitment is made a foundation can incorporate power analyses² into every level of planning. Paying attention to power shifts also means that investments need to be made connecting local power shifts to larger levels of change. (See below).
5. **Partnerships with local community:** For a foundation to see success in a place, deep relationships need to be built and sustained with systems leaders and community based organizations, centered on alignment, momentum and synergy. These types of partnerships require connecting closely to existing efforts moving in communities. Therefore foundations working in a place need partners who are connected to goals, places, and key constituencies directly related to a foundation’s agenda who are, at the same time, really pushing the envelope on the issues most crucial to the success of place-based work, and as emphasized above, this needs to be made clear with the community in which a foundation is working. As a grantmaker enters into place-based grantmaking, the reflexive and reflective question needs to be answered: how to engage key partners in an authentic and strategic way, while still maintaining an appropriate level of oversight and control?
6. **Community leadership and capacity:** One of the stumbling blocks of place-based work is that it further reinforces silos that exist in communities across sectors or actors. Sometimes these silos are simply created because local leadership is not engaged and equipped to work outside of their own particular sector. Strong place-based work supports the leadership development and capacity of local leaders across multiple sectors in a place, speaking across barriers and silos, addressing the leadership of areas such as the economy and gender as well as climate and community organizing. Working with community leadership ensures that there are on-the-ground implementers for a particular initiative with a track record of success in their community as opposed to the “fly by night” approach that does not connect to the local reality for any extended period of time. Strong place-based grantmaking builds deep relationships with systems and community leaders in addition to aligning their work across sectors and building capacity. Furthermore, foundations engaged in place-based grantmaking can help shift the practice of planning and policy support to the leadership and participation of the very communities impacted by the issues they seek to change. Enhancing the capacity of local leaders to engage in policy will also help move the constituencies to which they are connected to impact policy planning, setting and successful implementation.
7. **Selecting capacity builders:** Place-based grantmaking recognizes the need to shift power in a place and in order to shift that power, capacity needs to be built and infrastructure developed and/or enhanced. How that capacity is built, in the past, often depended on what the foundation thought best. Intermediary organizations, outside consultants, and

² A typical power analysis creates shared understanding of key players, along with their position on key issues; conceptual approach and indicators; data; and, analysis and communication in order to map the informal political landscape (including its rules and structures). In addition, it’s critical that the foundation teams in each place understand how system cooperation and the allocation of resources are influenced by this landscape and how the landscape of power shapes their activities.

other partners would be selected by a foundation to go into a community and build capacity. As a foundation builds deep relationships with community leaders and CBOs in designing an initiative, it is more effective to consider the recommendations of local partners around who and how to implement capacity building support. This ensures that the culture of working in a place is prioritized over the agenda and culture of an intermediary organization.

8. **Investing long-term:** Helping to advance change in the places most impacted by societal inequities takes time. While foundation cycles may be structured in 2-3 or even 10-year initiatives, the type of change sought in some of the hardest hit places requires a long-term approach. While the majority of comprehensive community initiatives have a similar capacity-building goal, experience from past efforts have shown that long-term capacity must be built in a manner that is complementary to the community's existing goals and infrastructure. This is the reason that a common criticism of CCCIs is that the foundation is more invested in building its own structure than in being open to alternative structures that work best for the community. Furthermore, the question has been asked "Is it ethical for a foundation to even engage in infrastructure building if it is only going to be in a place for x years?" The answer is, without infrastructure, locally built, owned and operated, no long-lasting or transformative change can take place. At the same time, without enough time and sustainable long-term resources, such infrastructure is unlikely to be built.
9. **Transforming places *and* systems:** The misnomer about place-based grantmaking is that it is singular. Perhaps it can, if done well, have a depth of impact, but it is not wide reaching; it does not hit the measure of scale. In fact, the CCCI approach may have pursued systems change on a parallel track to transformation of a place but the two were not in concert. Through a Strategic Partnership approach, borrowing heavily from the movement approach, there is great potential to coordinate major systems across multiple cities to create large-scale change. While we need to build local capacity and local hubs of change, we also need to be transforming larger systems such as energy, water and food to work for all. Utilizing the strengths of local communities to be at the center of these transformations is vital and to take simply a reform approach would not be enough; as large systems transform to truly respond to and include all communities, local hubs also need to be created. So, for example, as we transform large-scale energy systems to be holistic, non-extractive, green, how are we also building local power systems? Transforming systems will require that both local solutions be created alongside large-scale change. Such a design allows for grassroots efforts to inform policy and systems changes that are put in motion. It also amplifies the impact of grassroots, local efforts by creating a mechanism for broader policy implications to filter back to the place-based efforts.
10. **Coordinating and decentralizing planning process:** Key to the success of any kind of initiative is the true, authentic buy-in from "beneficiaries." We know all too well that top down approaches can be deeply flawed. Decentralization of planning an initiative allows for a higher level of participation from the foundation's partners because it allows for trust-building. Other approaches attempt to share the planning process by bringing key partners around one table centralizing the process. While a decentralized process takes time and more effort, in the end it yields stronger outcomes. A balance needs to be struck such that a foundation feels it has sufficient measure of control over the process and, again, this needs to be clear with partners.

Conclusion

Place-based grantmaking is a vital tool for transforming the lived realities of the millions of local communities across the country at the doorsteps of poverty and of the large-scale systems that keep discrepancies in check. The biggest problems arise when the most basic of components, like clarity and transparency on the part of the foundation are not constancy present, which then creates in the initiative that communities often take the blame for. Grantmakers that understand that selecting strategic places, particularly those places where our hardest problems reside, allow for local solutions to flourish from local communities. And, if knitted together, these local experiences may hold the key for transforming the large-scale systems that impact us all. Place-based grantmaking contains a set of principles and practices for foundation to engage in place-based methods—methods that involve community investments. To see success, clear practices need to be engaged in the relationship between foundations and communities.

Powerful Places: Principles for Effective Community-Driven Change is the fourth in a series of MSC mini publications called ***What We're Learning***. Through these papers – each produced in conjunction with a specific movement gathering or action – MSC seeks to name and explore questions and challenges that we are hearing and observing throughout the social justice world. As the title implies, these papers represent “what we’re learning,” offering our words and thoughts to on-going dialogue among partners, allies, and friends we have not yet met. ***What We're Learning*** is a place we share significant updates and shifts in our learning over time with updated versions of previous frameworks and approaches.

Powerful Places: Principles for Effective Community-Driven Change was developed by MSC out of our collaborations with the California Endowment in the design and launch of the 10 year Building Healthy Communities Initiative, in which MSC designed and helped manage the process of selecting the 14 communities in which the Endowment would invest. This collaboration has been grounded in an understanding of the 4 Ps—Place, Policy, Partners, and Power. Place is important because it is where health disparities are concentrated, where interventions focus, and communities and leaders are engaged. Policy is important because sustainable, effective policy change requires engaging community based leaders, advocates, and systems and policymakers. Partnership is important because strategy and collective impact depends on it. Power is important because systematic approaches to building community leadership require a power analysis that builds a clear agenda, identifies organized opposition to and support for the agenda, and allows for the creation of change models that build support for the agenda.



About Movement Strategy Center

MSC is dedicated to transformative movement building: helping individuals, organizations, and alliances build their capacity to be strategic, collaborative, and sustainable. MSC works with over 300 partner grassroots organizations, alliances, and networks that operate at local, regional, and national levels. MSC works across sectors and within sectors. MSC supports local alliances that bring people in one place together across issues and constituencies, and supports national alliances that unite groups working on common issues.

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About the Powerful Places Project

Through our Powerful Places Project MSC partners with communities, governments and philanthropic institutions to leverage the power of place for social change. As a part of this initiative MSC has worked with the Akonadi Foundation, The California Endowment, The Kresge Foundations and others to design and launch place-based initiatives.