**Engaging Community for Sustainable Revitalization:
Key Trends, Strategies and Recommendations**

A Report Commissioned by Nexus Community Partners

By

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## Executive Summary

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This report was commissioned by Nexus Community Partners (NEXUS) to examine community engagement strategies—an emergent stream in an ongoing effort to address both the social and economic challenges facing impoverished and other marginalized communities. Developed in 2003 as a 10-year collaboration of funders and community groups, and a demonstration of the National Community Development Initiative: Living Cities, NEXUS has been a force for revitalization of St. Paul's Payne Avenue and Minneapolis' Lake Street areas since October 2003. In 2007 NEXUS decided to focus on engagement as its core community revitalization tool. This study describes key community engagement tenets and trends so that NEXUS as well as other funders and intermediaries can use this information to strengthen their local development efforts and national practice in this emerging engagement field.

Understanding community engagement is complicated by the plethora of terms and techniques in community development. A review of the limited scholarship on engagement and interviews with 25 diverse leaders across the country suggest, we conclude that despite different emphases and schools of thought, engagement is being perceived as a participatory philosophy and tool of community building designed to strengthen neighborhood social capital, equity and/or sustainability. Engagement is becoming a specialty area within community building focused on techniques of community participation as well as creative

and alternative community development practices that maximizes the benefit and

inclusion of marginalized and low-income people.

Beyond competing definitions of engagement, we identify four  core

challenges affecting the field, including:

- Engagement programs are highly localized, dynamic and creative sometimes not fitting into funders' programmatic categories.
- Funders have not developed the expertise necessary to consistently support and build engagement organization capacity.
- Outcomes-oriented evaluation of engagement organizations are rare, although the methods exist, making it difficult to legitimate these approaches.
- Primary research about engagement, as well as all of community building, and its role in community systems is quite limited.
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To strengthen its role as an engagement funder, we conclude the study

with the following recommendations for NEXUS:

- Clarify the engagement model that it promotes while avoiding unproductive semantic debates.
- Consider developing a special fund to promote community engagement.
- Connect engagement to sustainable and equitable development movements.
- Pay more focused attention to outcomes evaluation of engagement grantees' work.
- Plan an alternative community revitalization project that anticipates gentrification pressures.
- Revive NEXUS's involvement in policy reform.
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The report ends with an extensive bibliography, interview notes and leaders for

further consultation to support NEXUS's ongoing development as an

engagement intermediary.

## 1. Introduction

Community development in the U.S. is characterized by a series of paradigm shifts. Throughout its history as a field, U.S. community development has swung between the poles of people-driven versus place-driven strategies. It has also created various models to move beyond the symptoms of poverty such as lack of decent, affordable housing and address underlying causes such as limited community capacity, inequity, discrimination and other factors that cause disparity.

With roots in the early 20th century settlement movement, in 1990s the field began a new synthesis, that is still unfolding, to re-integrate people-based and place-based community development approaches while addressing structural barriers but within the context of an increasingly global economy. This report was commissioned by Nexus Community Partners (NEXUS) to examine community engagement strategies—an emergent stream in an ongoing effort to address both the social and economic challenges facing impoverished people and neighborhoods. Developed in 2003 as a 10-year collaboration of funders and community groups, and a demonstration of the National Community Development Initiative: Living Cities, NEXUS has been a force for revitalization of St. Paul's Payne Avenue and Minneapolis' Lake Street areas since October 2003 (see www.livingcities.org and www.Nexus.org). In 2007 NEXUS decided to focus on engagement as its core community revitalization tool. This study describes key community engagement tenets and trends so that NEXUS as well as other funders and intermediaries can use this information to strengthen their

local development efforts and role as a national leader in the emerging engagement field.

### 1a.     Report Organization and Research Strategy

This report is divided into four core sections that clarify key engagement models and provide recommendations to NEXUS:

- From Beyond Semantics Towards an Integrated Model
- Engagement in Action:  Case Examples and Techniques
- Key Challenges of Engaged Revitalization
- Beyond Engagement as Usual:  Recommendations to NEXUS

This study was originally envisaged as a literature review.  But early on it became evident that because the field is so emergent, the literature specifically focused on community engagement is quite limited.  So, to supplement the literature, we expanded the study by interviewing 25 diverse practitioners and thought leaders (see Appendix for Interview Guide and Interviewee List). Prospective interviewees were identified from the literature consulted as well as suggested by the various leaders we contacted.  Although we have made every effort to include the breadth of approaches being used throughout the country, given time and resource constraints, not all the organizations that could have provided useful insights have been included.   Because we are attempting to understand how engagement approaches are developing from the ground up, most of the organizations we consulted are non-profits directly involved in this work.  We include the views of funders and scholars primarily through our literature review, although future studies in this area would be enhanced by

interviewing them as well.   Our interviewee list also identifies other organizations that should be consulted for those interested in learning more about engagement.

    1b.     Grounding Research in Practice

    The road to engagement has many unexpected twists and turns.  So, for some funders and practitioners, engagement has an intangible, grasping at air quality to it.  There are three reasons for this.  First, engagement is both a philosophy and a strategy of social action.  As a philosophy, its proponents are attempting to promote a new way of thinking about development that puts low-income and marginalized people at the center.  But, increasingly, advocates are also elaborating engagement approaches into a wide range of alternative community revitalization techniques that attempt to strengthen residents' social and economic resources.  They are also considering ways to collaborate with others to address policy and other issues that constrain opportunity for lower-income and other constituencies vulnerable to displacement when gentrifying urban neighborhoods develop.

    Thus, this study moves beyond engagement to consider the ways that a variety of alternative revitalization strategies, including, for example, land trusts, cooperative housing, co-housing, social support networks, and microfinance strategies are being incorporated as part of a community engagement toolkit. While most of these techniques have some precedent either in the U.S. or abroad, they, and others we were unable to study in detail due to research resource constraints, are being applied in creative ways as practitioners adapt to

the culturally diverse practices and unique needs of their constituents throughout the country.

The study concludes that engagement is best understood as a participatory philosophy and tool of community building designed to strengthen neighborhood social capital. Engagement is becoming a specialty area within community building focused on techniques of community participation.  There are six different schools of engagement thought that represent degrees of emphases that may be combined or applied  NEXUS can take three major actions that would expand and strengthen the Twin Cities' engagement capacity:  1) better articulate engagement's role within a broader community building toolkit; 2) move beyond engagement as a revitalization philosophy or conceptual model to specify effective practices and  techniques; 3) explore ways to connect engagement to sustainability and social justice interests; and 4) re-design funding guidelines and workplan to development a more comprehensive engagement agenda.


## 2.  From Semantics Towards an Integrated Model

This section explores the various definitional debates about  engagement that we encountered in our research.  Some of these debates are substantive but many are semantic.  To help move NEXUS's engagement agenda forward and recognizing that differing philosophies, concepts and terms will likely always exist in community engagement just as they do in the broader community development field, we propose an integrated model that incorporates various schools of thought.

One of the key challenges in understanding and promoting engagement is that there is much difference of opinion about the meaning of engagement as there is about defining "community," "development" or any number of the concepts that are core tenets of the field. As a concept, engagement is not new and has roots in the community empowerment strategies of the 1970s and 1980s. Furthermore, community engagement has several close cousins, including community outreach, community organizing, community building, and civic participation, all of which refer in some way to resident involvement.

But, despite differing emphases and schools of thought, most thinkers and practitioners today would agree that at its most fundamental level, engagement refers to the capacity of residents to participate in the revitalization of lower-income communities. Distinctive from community organizing, it does not necessarily address explicit issues of power distribution in a financially poor community. Civic participation can be seen more specifically as efforts to involve constituents in the basic decision-making processes and institutions of a democracy, including knowledge of current affairs, voting, or holding political office. It does not necessarily focus on the practice and techniques of community revitalization.

Civic (or community) capacity and civic engagement are two closely related terms that are often used interchangeably and called "engagement" and "participation." Civic engagement is used largely to refer to residents' involvement in their local community (see Stone 2001), while civic capacity refers

to their ability to connect local structures, processes and institutions to external ones that allow them to improve their communities (Williams 2002; Chaskin 1999)

There is very little scholarship about engagement.  In most analyses and most practitioners see engagement as a component of community building For example, Susan Saegert (2008) in a study commissioned by the Aspen Institute identifies eight components of community building, one of which is engagement:

- Communities working together to identify and solve their problems
- Cultivation of socially valuable relationships
- Support for leadership development and
- Increased human capital
- Increased relational and organizational skills of residents and groups
- Sustained stakeholder engagement
- Development of a sense of common purpose and an action agenda
- Increased local institutional capacity

. The meaning of community building has undergone several evolutions. When community building first emerged as a concept in the 1990s, it referred to the holistic process of revitalizing the social, economic, and physical infrastructure of lower income communities.  It emerged as a kind of shorthand for "comprehensive community revitalization" or "complex community initiatives" focused specifically on strengthening the social systems and connections necessary for revitalization.  Resident participation was seen as critical but not the only technique for building community (McNeeley 1999).

For others community building is a philosophy and practice of revitalization that developed in opposition to the deficit-based models that dominated the field especially through the 1980s (see McKnight and Kretzman 1996).  For these

thinkers engagement or community building refers to an asset-based approach to revitalization that recognizes and strengthens local individual and institutional capacity to participate in development.

A term coined in international development, participatory development is another term gaining currency in some U.S. circles to refer to a variety of approaches to involve constituents in developing their own communities (Cernea 1991).

Another challenge in defining community engagement is that the frame of reference for "community" is changing as local U.S. neighborhoods experience globalization.  Community refers not only to places but to new constituencies such as immigrants from Asia, Africa, Latin America and other locales who may have identities rooted in multiple, dispersed, communities of interest and locales throughout the world.  In such communities, as well as U.S. born ethnic communities, engagement is taking on a new meaning to involve including culturally distinctive revitalization practices as well as representation in community revitalization institutions and processes.  Full engagement can mean representing new community demographics in local revitalization leadership, governance and practice of revitalization.

Reflecting current trends in the scholarship and practitioner feedback, it might be most useful to see engagement as both as a philosophy and participatory technique of community building for sustainable revitalization. The following chart provides a model for understanding how engagement fits into a wide range of revitalization strategies.

2a. Engagement: A Community Building Model

From our interviews and literature review, most would agree that community building is an essential foundation to sustain community development across the dynamic and largely unforeseen economic, political and other changes that influence a neighborhood's future. The community building process strengthens community capacity for revitalization creating a pipeline of constituents with the knowledge, skills, and commitment to engage in collective action for continuous community improvement.

Instead of being mired in the distinctions between various community building techniques such as civic participation, civic capacity, community organizing and so on, we propose seeing these and engagement as particular techniques of community building. Specifically, engagement specializes in the ways that residents, building on their assets and abilities, can participate in the revitalization process. In particular, engagement specialists focus on developing informal social relationships, structure s and leadership that enable community participation, self-help and empowerment.

Building on the work of Robert Putnam (1995), engagement recognizes that social structures and relationships are a resource or a form of capital that can be developed to promote collective community aspirations such as revitalization. However, engagement involves constituents themselves defining what the appropriate goals, criteria and process are for developing social or other forms of capital. The changing demographics of increasingly globalized U.S.

neighborhoods has highlighted that diverse groups have distinctive historical experiences, worldviews and practices that are a form of knowledge that can be successfully used for revitalization. Thus, understanding and strengthening cultural knowledge, a form of intellectual capital, particularly as it is related to revitalization is a component of contemporary community engagement.

2b. Six Engagement Schools of Thought

Concerns are increasing across the country about growing social isolation and the disconnection of leadership from the realities and needs of their constituents. Scandals in the corporate and nonprofit sectors, the current financial crisis being only the most current example, are strengthening calls for public accountability. Engagement is becoming more prominent as a field in response to the crisis of social disconnection and public accountability.

As engagement emerges as a specialty within community revitalization as well as other fields, six schools of thought are developing articulating distinct but interrelated engagement goals. These represent overarching philosophies or degrees of emphases that can combined within a particular engagement strategy. One approach is not superior to another and together comprise a toolkit of approaches that may be used in diverse circumstances and communities.

- Engagement as a Development Technique

For some engagement is primarily a tool to promote resident participation. Participation allows practitioners and funders to design and deliver programs and services that are more effective because they not only accommodate

constituents' needs and interests but also build on their assets and strengthen a community's capacity for revitalization.  In addition, community participation increases the probability that projects and programs will be sustainable over the long-run, adjusting to changes in local conditions and resources while still acting as revitalization agents.

Participatory development can open the entire revitalization process to residents at multiple levels, including defining community vision and priorities, program planning and design, implementation, service provision, funding, governance or evaluation.  And community organizations using participatory approaches vary in the way that they engage residents.

However, the primary aim of such approaches is to improve the quality and sustainability of community revitalization through resident involvement. Resident involvement is also seen as a means to improve overall community capacity for sustained revitalization.  Through participation residents are seen as better able to hold institutions and leaders accountable for the community's future.  Participation increases human and social capital, that is, the self-improvement capacity of individual residents as well as  community processes and institutions.

- Engagement for Public Accountability

Particularly as community demographics have shifted in the U.S. many mainstream nonprofits, not just community revitalization organizations, have been critiqued as not reflecting their constituencies in either their governance,

staffing or programming.  And historically marginalized constituencies such as women, Native Americans and African Americans, to name a few, are holding mainstream and other nonprofits accountable for excluding them.  Thus, for example, controversial pending legislation in California, resulting from a critique of a coalition of people of color-led nonprofits, would require foundations to report diversity statistics in their funding, governance and staffing.

As public scrutiny and calls for accountability grow, nonprofits, funders, and even various scientific and various other disciplines are increasingly engaged in internal debates about how to work in the public interest.  Among all manner of nonprofit, large and small, including universities, hospitals, public funders, there is a movement towards an expansive community engagement process that would re-connect these institutions to their community constituents and the public interest.  This involves developing programs and hiring staff to move beyond traditional community outreach or extension services whereby an expert brings his or her knowledge to constituents.  It also involves opening up these institutions so that community knowledge and priorities can be reflected and exchanged in ways that residents consider useful and respectful.  Expanding community relevance and engagement are also seen as fundamental to expanding a constituency to advocate for public and private funding in a period of declining government funding or many nonprofits, such as state universities, and ethnically diverse donor markets.

- Engagement as a Human Right

Some engagement leaders see engagement as a means to improve and sustain revitalization but also view substantive participation in community decision-making about revitalization as a fundamental human right. These theorists and activists are critical of what they see as a conventional community development practice whereby funders and policymakers determine community priorities without meaningful resident participation. They even critique the practices of what they see as superficial participatory development efforts that hold community planning meetings at inconvenient times, only in English or in technical jargon, thereby effectively excluding some constituents from decision-making. Although they understand the practical value of engagement for improving revitalization, they focus more on advocating for rights of substantive inclusion in the process.

*Rights* is used to include a sense of rights of cultural determination as it refers to revitalization. Thus, residents with distinctive cultural practices such as interest-free mortgages or alternative conceptions of community health have a right to have these practices recognized and supported if they promote sustained revitalization in a particular geographic and/or ethnic community. Furthermore, these cultural practices are a form of indigenous knowledge, a kind of intellectual property, which although shared with the broader community should be attributed and not appropriated by funders without attribution.

- Engagement for Social Equity

Closely related to the Engagement as a Human Right philosophy are those who emphasize the importance of engagement to ensure that all residents benefit from revitalization, especially the most vulnerable and underrepresented. In this school of thought, resident disengagement is not only a matter of residents not knowing how to be engaged.  There are structural inequities in communities that may be based on income, class, race, gender, national origin, gender, sexual orientation or physical ability that perpetuate inequities in society overall. In this emerging critique, much of community development has meant the removal or gradual displacement of low-income people as they are priced out of revitalizing local housing markets.  Engagement should not only remove barriers to participation in revitalization processes.  Furthermore, while engagement is a basic human right, its core value is to ensure that marginalized people, people, particularly the lowest income, also benefit from community development.  For these activists, engagement is desirable not as an end in itself, but as a tool to promote equitable revitalization.  Engagement strategies should also include policy reform, organizing or alternative development strategies to remove structural barriers to equal participation in community development's benefits and expand access to opportunity.
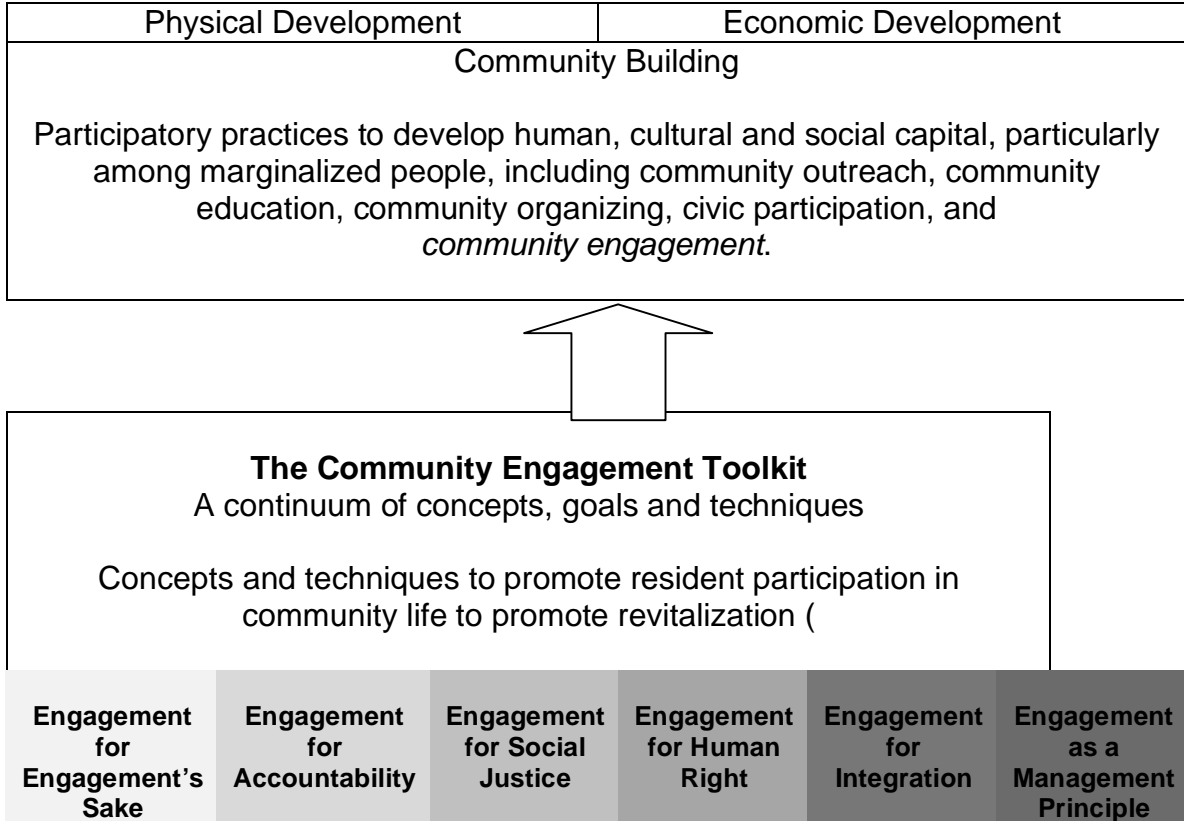
- Engagement as a Management Principle

Organizational management is embracing engagement as a core principle.  "Engagement managers," particularly in technology companies are responsible for cultivating client relations helping them problem-solve and

navigate company services.  The engaged manager or company is deeply involved in advocating for client interests and continuously accesses and interprets information that improves organizational performance.  A technology scholar, Jane McGonigal, refers to an emerging "economy of engagement," whereby people and organizations, openly share and communicate innovative ideas to resolve social problems using "crowd-sourcing" internet or other tools such as electronic games (see McGonigal 2008 and  www.socialedge.com).

These are not mutually exclusive categories.  These schools of thought can and do overlap, as the examples below show.  And they do not represent in any way evolutionary stages in engagement practice.  Instead they reflect differences in emphasis that can influence engagement program design and results.  This is an emergent and highly creative field and not all organizations or practices will fit neatly into the categories and models presented here.  However, this is a framework to understand the distinctions between the engagement approaches that are developing.

**Figure 1.     Engagement:  A Community Building Strategy**

| Physical Development | Economic Development |
|---|---|
| Community Building<br><br>Participatory practices to develop human, cultural and social capital, particularly among marginalized people, including community outreach, community education, community organizing, civic participation, and *community engagement.* | |

**The Community Engagement Toolkit**
A continuum of concepts, goals and techniques

Concepts and techniques to promote resident participation in
community life to promote revitalization (

| Engagement for Engagement's Sake | Engagement for Accountability | Engagement for Social Justice | Engagement for Human Right | Engagement for Integration | Engagement as a Management Principle |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|

The model suggested here represents all emerging trends in the community

engagement field that we encountered in our research.  It recognizes that

particular emphases, for example, a focus engagement as an end in itself or for

public accountability, may be represented in particular regions, institutions or

neighborhoods because of unique histories or local circumstances.  Thus,

engagement philosophies and techniques used in one region or organization do

not necessarily represent the mix of strategies that are emerging in other areas

or groups.

**3.     Engagement in Action:  Case Examples and Techniques**

These trends in community engagement theory and practice reflect the
on-the-ground work of visionary funders and practitioners experimenting with
these approaches.  This report was not commissioned as a case study but
examples of the wide variety of ways that leaders are combining engagement
strategies is instructive and we highlight a few here.  The examples are drawn
from the literature, our practice as well as interviews with leaders in the field.
The examples are not exhaustive and, representing NEXUS's primary interests,
we focus on community-based revitalization non-profits, not those serving the
broader public such as universities and hospitals.  Unless permission was
specifically granted, we do not attribute the insights of the organizations
interviewed for these case examples.  A summary of interview findings, without
interviewee attribution, is available in the appendix.

For the overwhelming number of organizations identified in the research,
engagement was a core strategy, but not the mission focus.  Community
revitalization was a priority for all the organizations, but not necessarily the
mission focus.  In fact, the groups studied had a wide range of program focus
areas, including human rights, supportive social services, bartering, affordable
housing, community development, health and wellness, and domestic violence
prevention.  All focused on marginalized people.  And each was involved in
working either with informal social groups or institutions to strengthen individual
social relationships for various ends, including economic self-sufficiency,

affordable housing, improved social support or family life, educational

achievement.

3a.     Building Collaboration among Community Institutions

Identifying gaps in a community's social system, disparities in

socioeconomic indicators, interethnic tensions, fragmentation among public,

private and nonprofit sector institutions, and then convening constituents to

review data, define common interests and inform plans to address issues, are

key engagement techniques.  Gap analysis, community visioning/planning,

cross-sector and inter-ethnic convening are common in community building

whether outreach or organizing techniques are used.  However, organizations

with an engagement focus go one step further and also involve the community's

most marginalized and isolated in the earliest phases of issue identification with

an emphasis on ideas or skills that they can initiate or contribute to resolve the

concern.  Instead of starting with a pre-determined solution to a community

challenge, an engagement strategy would involve constituents in analyzing why

the problem exists; exploring alternative solutions; building a shared vision for

addressing it; and possibly creating a coordinated strategy to resolve it that

builds on the resources of all involved.

> **Casa de Esperanza:  Making Connections for Community Transformation (Twin Cites, MN)**
> For this 25 year old nonprofit was created Latina Twin Cities Latinas to end domestic violence in the community.  For Casa strengthening social capital is the key to ending violence.  Domestic violence is a sign of weak social capital.  Casa builds social capital by building connections, that is social networks, across all levels of community, individuals, and families.  Priorities and strategies are driven by Latinas and supported by partners from a wide variety of communities.  Casa's process for developing initiatives demonstrates how community engagement works to involve the people affected by a community problem in envisioning and then implementing solutions.
>
> Instead of implementing off-the-shelf "programs" Casa has developed a process to create work areas rooted in culturally appropriate and community-driven solutions.  In 1999 Casa held a series of listening sessions with 169 Latinas in Minneapolis to understand their goals and dreams.  The listening sessions, designed and facilitated by Latinas, who received training, was supported by a diverse planning group of community partners.  A community-based Latina advisory committee was also created to ensure that the planning group's work continued to reflect Latina priorities.
>
> One of the key needs identified through the listening process was for accessible information about services to help Latinas and their families.  The planning committee worked with Casa to develop ***Centro de Información y Recursos***, information and resource centers, which include computerized information kiosks as well as trained bilingual volunteers to help Latinas access services.  Other, community-grounded initiatives resulted from these listening sessions, including a survey of Latino's in St. Paul's Eastside to identify community interests and priorities.  The survey was designed and conducted by Latina volunteers.  Trained Latina volunteers, who conduct listening sessions and other community research, not only provide information but strengthen their social networks and involvement in community.  Casa trains government and mainstream nonprofits in its engagement process and has published a training manual on engaging Latinas to end domestic violence (see www.casa.org for more information).

3a.    Involving the Socially Isolated and Excluded

While engagement organizations work with institutions, they also work as informal levels of community to involve people who are socially isolated or excluded from community decision-making.  This may involve convening people across racial, ethnic or other community demographic groups as well as building social relationships within them. The convening process is specifically designed to not only expand resident social networks but to build feelings of mutual trust, belonging, shared commitment and values, while reducing social isolation.

In addition to strengthening affective feelings of community and social relationships, many engagement-oriented programs also help constituents

provide mutual aid and other forms of self-help.  This may involve the formation

of a giving circle to fund community projects, a network to provide care to

neighborhood elders or children, or a system of bartering to exchange services

among neighbors.  This support system is seen as complementing not

supplanting nonprofit services so that they extend the natural supports, family,

friends and other social groups, that would exist in a high functioning community

social system.

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**The Phillips-Powderhorn Cultural Wellness Center:**
**Unleashing Cultural Know-How for Community Revitalization (Twin Cities, MN)**
The Phillips-Powderhorn Cultural Wellness Center (CWC) operates the Invisible College whereby
residents with knowledge or skills in particular areas teach other residents.  College participants
often create groups called "CHATs," Community Health Action Teams, support groups that focus
on common concerns such as transitioning from welfare, diabetes, or business development.
CHATs can also become forums for analyzing and then addressing broader community concerns
such as increasing African-American businesses.  The CWC also holds community dinners and
other special events so that diverse residents can build relationships.  The CWC uses what it
calls a scale of engagement to assess how well its members are building community, from uses
services for self-improvement to  providing support to others and then, ultimately, providing
leadership for overall community improvement.  For the CWC, its resident-driven engagement
activities help residents identify and sustain their cultural knowledge; develop their skills and build
mutual social supports, creating an organic community care giving system essential for
community development.  With funding from NEXUS and others, CWC has expanded its work
from Minneapolis to St. Paul focusing on cultivating culturally-specific community revitalization
strategies among African-Americans. For more information on CWC engagement philosophy,
principles, models and practices see www.cwc.org.

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Thus, engagement techniques not only build resident and institutional social

relationships or capital, they also address more affective issues at the level of

community psychology such as recognizing and learning cultural practices and

traditions as well as a shared sense of identity, belonging and commitment to

community.

3c.     Linking Place-Based and People-Based Development

Many of the organizations, although not all of them, have adopted engagement strategies designed to connect people-based development such as leadership development, social services and job training to housing or facilities development.  Although a longstanding practice in the community development field harkening back to the settlement house movement through the comprehensive development strategies of the 1990s, the contemporary efforts attempt to represent "deep diversity," that is, move beyond racial, gender and ethnic inclusion, to also provide equitable means for people of a wide range of difference, including class, sexual orientation, national origin, lifestyle and other factors.  Equity and inclusion are considered in terms of program participation but also involves inclusion in staff, board membership and volunteerism.  Furthermore, such approaches often have an explicit social justice perspective in which engagement is seen not only as a tool of revitalization but a way of ensuring economic equity and opportunity.

3d.     Linking Engagement to Revitalization:  Alternative Strategies

Engagement-oriented revitalization strategies do not presume that conventional community development strategies are appropriate for their particular constituents. Instead, as marginalized constituents, often beginning with an analysis of how their circumstances are influenced by both personal choices and larger social or historical forces such are market changes, racism, xenophobia, ageism and so on, determine which strategies would be most effective in addressing their concerns.  Engagement organization leaders support

residents in this process, including information about conventional community

development practice.  What often results from this process is a unique set of

strategies that adapt, or even sometimes reject, conventional practices for

alternatives that are believed to better fit their circumstances.

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**Chhaya Community Development Corporation:**
**Together We Grow  (New York, NY)**
Chhaya is a housing justice and advocacy organization that serves primarily south Asian immigrants and immigrants of the Indo-Caribbean diaspora, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Guyana.  It provides culturally specific tenant rights advocacy, landlord/tenant mediation, homebuyer and rental assistance, financial literacy and credit counseling.  In addition to these services, Chhaya attempts to promote active participation of South Asian Americans in neighborhood, citywide, and regional planning of their communities.

In the Chhaya program model, community services are driven by constituents' holistic needs and which necessitate an integration of multiple services.  Chhaya emphasizes that the needs of immigrant and other culturally specific populations may be unique, meaning that organization may need to create unique, unconventional ways of addressing them.

Engagement refers to how an organization works internally as well as its external relations and work.  Having a staff that is from the community being served is critical, as it must have the language and cultural capacity to do effective community outreach.  Addressing gaps of understanding between marginalized community members and decision makers is another critical engagement strategy.   Getting multi-year funding for growing new communities and their nonprofits is a critical capacity barrier.

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      3d.    Transferring Low-Income Country Engagement Tools to Low-Income U.S. Communities

As U.S. income disparities grow, poverty concentrates in particular

neighborhoods, and as people from developing countries migrate to

to this country, community revitalization techniques from international

development may be increasingly useful in the U.S.  Thus, throughout the

country, microfinance, one of the most successful international development

techniques, are being used as a tool to engage low-income people the

mainstream economy.  Although microfinance has some precedent in U.S., until

recently it was not a common development strategy.  Obviously, the regulatory

involvement and start-up business costs in the U.S. are quite different in the U.S. than in a developing country.  Nonetheless, some initiatives suggest that the same basic strategy of small business development loans with technical assistance as well as supportive services can move people out of poverty (Microfinance Gateway 2008; Bernake 2007).

**ACCION USA:  Transferring Microfinance from the Developing World to the U.S.**
ACCION USA, ACCION Texas and ACCION New Mexico each earned a $1 million grant from the 2008 Community Development Financial Institutions (CDFI) Fund of the U.S. Department of the Treasury. The grants enable the nonprofits to continue boosting access to capital and financial literacy for low- and moderate-income individuals in the wake of increasing U.S. unemployment.

The U.S. ACCION Network, comprised of ACCION USA and five licensees – ACCION Chicago, ACCION New Mexico, ACCION New York, ACCION San Diego and ACCION Texas – is the largest microlending network in the United States. Since launching in 1991 in New York, the U.S. ACCION Network has made a total of 33,202 loans to 20,619 low- and moderate-income clients in the United States, totaling $214 million.

3e.     Developing the Non-Cash Economy through Engagement

Some nonprofits are promoting non-cash forms of exchange such as bartering, time banking and community volunteerism that draw on skills and resources abundant in financially poor communities.  Also, referred to as dual or shadow economies because they co-exist with money-based economies, such efforts formalize, to varying extent, informal forms of exchange and reciprocity that exist in some degree in all communities.

Bartering is the exchange of services between two or more individuals. Bartering markets, called time banking, are being developed using internet-based tools to allow people to donate and trade volunteer time and in-kind services.  As explained by (Hodroff 2008:11), there is a growing worldwide movement promoting a variety of non-cash, financial instruments, such as time dollars,

barter credits, local currencies and social incentives. There is also a growing

body of literature and websites explaining how new currencies can be used to

enhance economic cooperation (Emarita 2008).

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**Community Weaving:   Linking Social Support Networks with Economic Opportunity**

A 2007 winner of the prestigious Jefferson Award for Public Service, Cheryl Honey started Community Weaving/Family Support Network International in 1993 to provide mutual aid for herself and other single mothers.  Through a process called "Community Weaving," Family Support Network International (FSNI) helps communities build cohesive and sustainable networks through an innovative approach that combines in-person networking with a web-based interactive social networking technology. *Community Weaving* has successfully enabled participants to organize their own social support systems called *Family Support Networks (FSN).*

FSN participants create grassroots social support systems; pool resources; volunteer in the community and spearhead community improvement efforts. Volunteers have created innovative solutions to address issues impacting their lives and communities. They have organized safe havens for victims of domestic violence, provided transitional housing for the homeless, initiated childcare cooperatives, started-up food banks and organized furniture exchanges.  Local agencies provide specialized trainings to FSN volunteers who provide direct support services to their clients.

Combining social networking with mutual social support and non-cash based exchange systems, FSNs have been replicated in Washington, Michigan, and Florida.

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Engagement is becoming understood as a distinctive tool of community

building in low-income communities.  A participatory development strategy,

community engagement is a more intense and all-encompassing tool for

involving marginalized people in revitalization than community outreach,

education or civic engagement.  Constituents are involved at every level of the

revitalization process through methods such as self-reflective learning and

structural analysis; inclusive convening that is representative of marginalized

community members; identifying and exchanging cultural practices; multiple

participatory development methods such as community-driven research, problem

and asset identification, program planning and design; social network

development and support; community-based volunteering, philanthropy and

evaluation; and inclusive staffing and governance

**4.      Key Challenges of Engaged Revitalization**

4a.      No Cookie Cutter Programs Here

The type of ground-up revitalization that engagement enables is dynamic and highly creative, often not fitting into neat program silos that can define funding institutions.  A community-based organization continuously tuned into emerging community concerns, interests and assets will have an evolving program focus and perhaps provide multiple services over time that make it seem unfocused or ephemeral compared to bricks and mortar community revitalization funding programs.  Also, as residents become engaged, funders may have concerns that they may wish to create new nonprofits seeking operating support from an often limited pool of available resources.  More conventional community development organizations may be unsure of how to collaborate with an engagement organization focused on involving the community's most marginalized and under-represented members. Engagement-focused organizations may need to have the capacity to flexibly retrofit programs and strategies to accommodate culturally specific and other local needs and assets.

4b.      Funding Challenges

Engaged revitalization organizations tend to be highly entrepreneurial as they experiment with alternative strategies that may be more appropriate for the cultural and other contexts in which they work.  Because these strategies are not necessarily mainstream, funders and others may have less knowledge and comfort with them, making consistent funding more difficult.  Organizational

leaders have difficulty developing proposals that fit their work into funder guidelines and priorities.  Leaders also have some ambivalence about growing funding from large foundations, government agencies or heavy-handed "venture philanthropists," who may have requirements that undermine the program flexibility engaged organizations need to be fully responsive to their constituents.  As a result, engagement and other types of community building organizations tend to be more undercapitalized than revitalization nonprofits.  It compounds the typical problems of recruiting and retaining community development leadership.

        4c.     Outcomes and Evaluation

        Much of engagement organizations' work focuses on strengthening various methods for involving residents in revitalization.  Although the work is heavily process-oriented, these activities are important for determining whether a community's human, social and cultural capital is being strengthened.  Furthermore these inputs over time can result in concrete changes in family and community socio-economic status.  Because engagement organizations hope to influence both community processes and outcomes, evaluating success and impact are particularly complex.  Evidence-based evaluations that quantify engagement outcomes are rare, although methods exist and some studies are underway (see Greenberg in press; Durand and Fredericks 2006; Kubisch *et. al.* 2002; Warren 2001).  The predominance of qualitative and anecdotal evidence undermines acceptance of engagement strategies and community building more generally (Saegart 2008).

4d.    Building Capacity of Engagement Organizations

Operating supporting programs, combining funding for general administration, professional development and other technical assistance have been critical in strengthening the capacity of community development corporations.  This CDC-based operating support model has also been adapted to non-CDC revitalization organizations.  However, the field has not developed expertise to identify and then strategically strengthen the capacity of the diverse, typically multi-service organizations that specialize in engagement.

While more detailed research is needed in this area, this study suggests that engagement organizations generally have the same capacity building needs as other nonprofits.  The specific set of needs is dependent upon the usual factors such as the nonprofit's age and experience.  However, because of the highly process-oriented, multi-service and diverse nature of many engagement organizations, there is a particular need for technical assistance to develop diverse funding pools, use of technology for project management, communications assistance to translate culturally specific initiatives for broad audiences.

Engaging the community's most marginalized residents in revitalization is desirable but not typical for the field.  More research into the specific engagement techniques, and community building more generally, identification of cutting edge practices and organizational development needs is necessary if these community building institutions are to be sustained.  Supporting

engagement organization research and evaluation would add to the field's

knowledge of their work.

## 5. Beyond Engagement as Usual:  Moving NEXUS's Agenda Forward

We conclude this report with seven recommendations for guiding

NEXUS's development as a community engagement intermediary.  NEXUS's

evolving engagement agenda serves a unique and critical role at this point in the

Twin Cities community development history.  Changing demographics, declining

markets, increasing foreclosure rates, growing socioeconomic disparity all point

to the need for funding focused on expanding opportunity to as many people as

possible.  Engagement is an essential building block of sustainable community

development, preparing people to direct and benefit from revitalization.

Because of its new strategic commitment to engagement as a tool of

revitalization, NEXUS is in an ideal position to collaborate with others to build the

Twin Cities' capacity for engaged revitalization.  Building on this study's findings

as well as work that NEXUS has already put in place, we recommend the

following 8-point strategy.

### 5a. Clarify the engagement model that NEXUS promotes while avoiding unproductive semantic debates.

Too much of the engagement discourse is stuck in debates about defining

engagement.  This report offers one model of community engagement that

identifies the common ground across a wide range of terminology about what

constitutes community building and it role in revitalization.  Promoting

engagement as a toolkit of methods and concepts all oriented towards building community social capital will help legitimate the model.

**5b.** **Consider developing a special fund to promote community engagement.**

A Community Engagement Opportunities Fund could provide technical assistance grants to a variety of nonprofits attempting to implement engaged revitalization strategies or partnerships. Support for technology, fundraising, professional development, research, publishing and perhaps even internal consulting practices will help build these organizations' capacity as well as the field's. Grants should include resources for needs assessment and should consider grantees outside of the Payne and Lake Street areas. Small grants to community projects focused on discrete engagement activities, for example, matching grants to local voluntary groups such as rotating savings clubs in immigrant communities, youth sports leagues and other support groups identified by NEXUS's engagement grantees should be considered.

**5c.** **Connect engagement to sustainable and equitable development movements.**

The study findings suggest that engagement is valuable because it is not only the right thing to do for funders committed to equity and inclusion; it is also necessary to build the social capital and leadership necessary for long-term revitalization. NEXUS has addressed early concerns about constituent representation and should continue efforts to represent the multiple dimensions of its community's diversity in all aspects of its work. The engagement-and inclusion will help build a grassroots constituency to advocate for community

development, especially during the increased competition for declining

government resources in our faltering economy.

### 5d. **Pay more focused attention to outcomes evaluation of engagement grantees' work.**

More discrete outcomes evaluation of the engagement projects NEXUS funds

at Casa and CWC would be instructive for the Council and distinctive in the field.

The evaluation should document goals, community processes and tie them to

program and community outcomes, answering the fundamental question: What

did these engagement organizations produce with NEXUS funding?.  Applying

NEXUS's engagement commitment, the evaluation strategy should be

participatory, involving grantees in every aspect of the evaluation's design and

implementation.  They should have input into report writing and can even co-

author some reports.  Participatory evaluation methods designed to document

complex processes and changes in social structure should be used.

### 5e. **Plan an alternative community revitalization project that anticipates gentrification pressures.**

NEXUS has a history of applying alternative development strategies for

inclusive development.  In particular, the Payne area residents newly engaged as

a result of NEXUS's work, understandably expect some practical assistance in

improving their opportunities.  At the same time NEXUS's resources are limited.

Bartering/dual economy, microlending and business cooperatives can be

relatively low-cost means for meeting some residents' interests, providing tools

that enhance the chances that the community's most vulnerable residents also

benefit from NEXUS's revitalization investments. And there are established

models and partner organizations with the expertise to help NEXUS and

interested grantee partners implement such initiatives.

In the aftermath of the current foreclosure crisis, NEXUS may find increasing

speculation and gentrification pressures in Payne and Lake as investors look for

property bargains. In addition its current innovative work to prevent foreclosure,

NEXUS should begin considering other tools to preserve affordable homeownership

stock. Land trusts may be such a tool and represent a possible point of collaboration

with Twin Cities LISC. As noted by PolicyLink, and Oakland-based national

community development advocate, land trusts are increasingly used as an equitable

revitalization tool, particularly in areas at-risk for gentrification and displacement.

A community land trust (CLT) is a private, nonprofit corporation created to provide

secure, affordable access to land and housing for community members. In particular,

CLTs attempt to meet the needs of those least served by the prevailing market.

Community land trusts help communities to:


- Gain control over local land use and reduce absentee ownership
- Provide affordable housing for lower income community residents
- Promote resident ownership and control of housing
- Keep housing affordable for future residents
- Capture the value of public investment for long-term community benefit
- Build a strong base for community action

Community land trusts are distinguished from other nonprofit housing and

organizations in two ways: (1) how they separate the ownership of land and

housing, and (2) how they are structured and controlled. These two distinctive

features contribute to the effectiveness of the CLT model as a tool for dealing with the problems of gentrification.

Case studies and interviews of community land trusts demonstrate that various community building techniques, including outreach, organizing and engagement, are important for success (see PolicyLink's examples of the Sawmill, Portland and Burlington Community Land Trusts at http://www.policylink.org/EDTK/CLT/action.html). Cultural conceptions of homeownership must be understood and accommodated within program design; educating prospective owners about the land trust concept and creating buy-in is critical, as is some level of owner participation in governance.

**5f.      Re-consider NEXUS's involvement in policy reform.**

Multiple policy barriers exist to equitable and sustainable development, the ultimate goal of engagement work. Now that NEXUS has more staff capacity, this may be the right time to consider how to strategically engage in policy reform work that promotes its mission and engagement strategy. For example, this may involve staff participation in coalitions to address predatory lending or reduce racial disparities or it may involve funding others for policy reform, for example funding training for engagement grantees to strengthen their policy advocacy work. Another idea is to fund advocacy organizations working on issues of particular interest to NEXUS.

With all these recommendations and others that may be considered, detailed attention should be paid to updating NEXUS's workplan, budget and

fundraising strategy to maximize success.  NEXUS has made great strides in

advancing its own capacity as a community engagement funder.  With further

clarity about its engagement model along with the increasing capacity of

nonprofits supported through its core and demonstration programs, it is in a

position to scale the impact of engagement in the Twin Cities.

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**COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT PRACTITIONER INTERVIEW GUIDE**

1. Community engagement is an emerging area of focus in the field. How does your organization define "community engagement?" How is it distinctive from other strategies such as community organizing, civic engagement and community building?

2. What are your organization's key programs and how do they promote engagement? Do you collaborate with community development corporations or others that do physical and economic development? Please describe a collaboration that typifies your working relationship with such organizations.

3. What are the key challenges and best practices for community engagement?

4. Which are the other organizations doing compelling community engagement work? What is the organization and is there a key contact with whom we could follow-up?

5. Does your constituency present culturally distinctive practices that impact your work? If so, does your organization create programs or other activities to address them? Please describe how you address culturally specific issues in your community engagement work.

6. What are the institutional and other barriers to successful community engagement?

7. What are the attributes of a community-based non-profit with strong community engagement capacity?

8. FOR INTERMEDIARIES (FUNDERS, TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PROVIDERS, POLICY GROUPS OR PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS ONLY): How can community development intermediaries promote community engagement work and what are the barriers, if any, to doing so?

9. For every interviewee as well as groups whom they refer, we will need a basic profile, year founded, including organizational name, contact name, contact phone number and E-mail address, web address, if available, street address, one sentence describing their work or a mission statement. For organizations to which you are referred, if the interviewee is not able to provide this organization, do follow-up research on the web, perhaps using Guidestar, to identify this information.

**ALTERNATIVE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT ORGANIZATIONS INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

These questions are only for U.S. microfinance, land trust, co-ops, shared or co-housing, bartering/time exchange as well as ethnic-based community development organizations. Groups that define themselves as focused on community engagement should be asked the questions above.

Introduce yourself as a team member of CCA helping NEXUS, a Twin Cities community revitalization project, identify cutting edge community engagement practices so that it can improve its work in a diverse, low income community.

1. What are your organization's key programs?  What do you think the value added of this approach is?

2. What are the key challenges and best practices in _____ (U.S.-based time exchange, microfinance, giving circles, etc. including strategies that are unknown to us that may be raised in the interview)?  Why do you think this approach to community development is not more widespread?

3. Are there other organizations, either in your local area or in another city, doing similar work whom we should contact?  What is the organization and is there a key contact with whom we could follow-up?

4. Does your constituency present culturally distinctive practices that impact your work?  If so, does your organization create programs or other activities to address them?  Please describe how you address culturally specific issues in your _____ work.

5. What are the institutional and other barriers to successful _____?

6. What are the attributes of a community-based non-profit with strong community engagement capacity?

7. FOR INTERMEDIARIES (FUNDERS, TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PROVIDERS, POLICY GROUPS OR PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS ONLY):  How can community development intermediaries promote _____ work and what are the barriers, if any, to doing so?

8. For every interviewee as well as groups whom they refer, we will need a basic profile, year founded, including organizational name, contact name, contact phone number and E-mail address, web address, if available, street address, one sentence describing their work or a mission statement.  For organizations to which you are referred, if the interviewee is not able to provide this organization, do follow-up research on the web, perhaps using Guidestar, to identify this information.