1. The American Dream

But there has been also the American dream ... It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position.

James Truslow Adams, Epic of America (1931)

The American Dream inspires and agitates the American consciousness. In one narrative, the United States is a nation where the least among us enjoys not only justice and liberty but also the opportunity to succeed – “to grow to fullest development as man and woman.” In another, the myth of the American Dream belies the reality of a nation that embraced slavery in its formation and today turns a blind eye to the inequity of chronically impoverished communities – a nation in which, according to one recent study, “there is growing evidence that intergenerational income mobility is actually lower than in many other developed countries.” These two narratives, taken together, create an acute case of cognitive dissonance in the American consciousness.

How, then, do we reconcile the vision of the American Dream with the fact that, in good times and bad, the role of place of birth in determining opportunity for success has been and continues to be grossly inequitable? Is the inequity of chronically impoverished neighborhoods immutable – a fact of life? In light of the significant investments that have been and continue to be made to fight such poverty, its persistence fuels a broad (and growing) doubt that investments will actually produce meaningful and sustainable improvements. In one recent poll, 71 percent of respondents found government anti-poverty programs ineffective. In another poll, 45 percent said antipoverty programs actually increased poverty. As this perspective grows, calls to reduce or abandon our investments in solutions that do not work will become louder and gain traction, eroding the political will to invest in chronically impoverished communities.

This perspective, however, while understandable, obscures another view of our history: one in which those who seek to eradicate gross inequities in the geography of opportunity have been on a learning curve, refining strategies and tools with which to meet the wide array of challenges inherent in this work. From this perspective, there has never been a better, more opportune time to create a reality that matches the American Dream.

2. What We Have Learned

Investments in chronically impoverished communities in America have generally followed one of two approaches: either (1) significant investments in neighborhoods are managed by bureaucratic “command and control,” top-down decision making or (2) multiple funders fund multiple, independent programs and actors with little or no alignment. These two essentially opposite approaches lead to a similar phenomenon: decision making and accountability that is fragmented across organizational “silos.” Command and control bureaucracies do not afford front-line managers either the perspective or discretion to work and innovate collaboratively across their prescribed organizational boundaries. Independent actors typically have neither the
incentives nor the frameworks – the glue – with which to significantly align their efforts. In the end, with either approach, the right hand does not know what the left hand is doing.

Flowing new social change investments and programs through either of these decision-making frameworks is unlikely to produce substantially better results than prior efforts. When these are our only choices, we may be working hard but we are not working smart. Leaders in both the public and private sectors, therefore, have sought to move away from decision making that is either command and control, on one hand, or independent and unaligned, on the other.

This refrain is not new. Fifteen years ago, in her book Common Purpose, Lisbeth Schorr observed that, as a practical matter, we need bureaucracies in the public sector to manage significant resources. Accountability for the stewardship of public funds, however, fosters in these bureaucracies a command and control, mistake-averse culture that is ineffective in confronting dynamic challenges in the social sector, including revitalizing neighborhoods. Schorr reasoned:

“As a society we have no choice but to figure out how to reconcile the protections offered by traditional bureaucracies with more flexible approaches that would enable large institutions and systems – even those in the public sector – to operate more effectively.”

Schorr critiqued and found wanting a series of potential strategies to reconcile these competing demands, including traditional block grants. She observed and cited research evidencing that the theory of block grants creating flexibility was not matched by the reality. In fact, the command and control rigidity found in Federal bureaucracies devolved along with block grants to state and local government bureaucracies administrating those block grants. Additionally, those same bureaucracies often diverted the impact of block grant funding away from the most impoverished neighborhoods.

Schorr ultimately posited what she determined was the only feasible strategy to achieve the necessary reconciliation of competing demands: “[I]f we are serious about taming bureaucracies … our best strategy will be a clear and unrelenting focus on results.”

Seven years later, inspired by Schorr’s vision, Mark Friedman, in his book Trying Hard is Not Good Enough, provided a framework for institutionalizing a clear and unrelenting focus on results. At the heart of Friedman’s framework, known as Results-Based Accountability™, is the principle that decision making should begin with the ends to get to the means. Friedman reasoned that we must distinguish accountability for the quality of life conditions we want in our communities, our ends, from accountability for the performance of programs, agencies and services systems, our means. For example, asking whether a program is well run is meaningless if the program is not what is needed in the first place. Instead, we must first identify the factors influencing the quality of life conditions desired in a given community in order to determine what are the right strategies, and corresponding programs, to pursue for improvement. By contrast, the program-centric approach sometimes taken in government bureaucracies begins decision making with the means – presuming, a priori, a program’s existence with no
opportunity to assess whether the program is what a community needs. Friedman’s framework also challenges the notion that a single agency or program can or should assume sole accountability for improving quality of life conditions in our communities. With Friedman’s framework it becomes clear that such accountability can only be held jointly among multiple stakeholders, including but extending beyond government. A jobs program cannot and should not use as a measure of its performance the employment rate in its community.

Friedman’s framework also makes clear that accountability requires data. Ends-to-means decision making inherently requires feedback to gauge the extent to which we are achieving the ends to which we aspire. First and foremost, we need to know the extent to which we are achieving the quality of life conditions we want in our communities. Without such data there cannot be accountability. When the Maryland General Assembly applied Friedman’s principles to improving school readiness in communities across the state, they implemented a statewide system to gauge whether children were entering school ready to learn. As the chair of a key legislative committee commented at the time: “The Joint Committee has changed the equation in Maryland; up until now we had not confronted the fact that a system that does not measure and report whether its children are entering school ready to learn is inherently unaccountable.”

3. Trailblazers

Schorr’s vision and Friedman’s framework reconcile traditional bureaucratic roles with the need for greater discretion and flexibility for communities in place-based neighborhood initiatives. The capacity to turn their insights into reality in revitalizing neighborhoods, however, stems in no small part from the work of trailblazers in the field of poverty initiatives.

Lyndon Johnson’s command center for the War on Poverty, the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) headed by Sargent Shriver, was the catalyst – and battleground – for seminal initiatives in the history of anti-poverty work in the United States. OEO’s Community Action Program (CAP) promoted the “maximum feasible participation” of residents in the governance of its Community Action Agencies. In the process, CAP served as an incubator for “action research,” an approach to research designed to engage and empower community members. This empowerment led to bottom-up innovation and problem solving and, in some communities, conflict with local governments and voter organizations, which made the Community Action philosophy and approach to research highly controversial.

In time, OEO replaced the controversial Community Action philosophy and approach to research with what was perceived to be a more objective or at least politically neutral and less controversial approach favoring systems analysis. Indeed, OEO’s 5-year antipoverty plan would eventually omit entirely any political and community-organizing role for Community Action, instead relegating it to the role of delivering and coordinating services. As described by Alice O’Connor in her book, Poverty Knowledge, the new approach of systems analysis:

… would take the agency far away from its troubled career as an agency representing political empowerment and action at the local level. It was a vision that emphasized planning, not direct political action, as the agent of change, efficiency, not local
empowerment, as the standard for judging program priorities, service delivery, not ‘maximum feasible participation,’ as the objective behind CAP. It preserved the idea that poverty, defined as an income deficit, could be eliminated without resorting to major political or economic restructuring.\textsuperscript{11}

The new strategy, however, also held profound implications for poverty research and policy. Systems analysis brought into poverty policy making and programming unprecedented rigor and analysis, including a cost effectiveness system – modeled on the Pentagon’s method of choosing between weapons – in which program proposals would be informed by poverty profile analysis, research studies, cost effectiveness studies, and program evaluation, all in the context of OEO’s five year antipoverty plan.\textsuperscript{12} The conviction that data and analysis would drive policy making at OEO fueled these gains. Over time, this conviction was tempered by political reality: as one OEO leader commented in a 1968 congressional statement, “[at OEO] decision making is not an analytic process, it is a political one.”\textsuperscript{13} He later added that, at most, analysis would be “an influence … that’s all” on policy decisions, and at times that influence would be overlooked entirely.\textsuperscript{14}

OEO championed at different times, on a grand scale, community empowerment and data-driven decision making. While stymied by political realities and conflict, each initiative was a significant catalyst for future advancements in the field. More fundamentally, OEO made plausible the eradication of poverty, at least until political struggles and the fiscal demands of the Vietnam War caused dramatic cutbacks in the funding originally promised to wage the War on Poverty. In the final analysis, however, OEO’s greatest impact may well have been its role as a major impetus for and funder of poverty research. In seeking to address a gaping hole in its capacity to wage a war on poverty, the lack of data and statistics on poverty – OEO launched what would become the poverty research industry.\textsuperscript{15}

Two decades later, on the two coasts of the country and far removed from the halls of the Federal bureaucracy, two community-based initiatives would help to move forward the “democratization of data,” a critical component of place-based neighborhood initiatives.

In the 1980s, Federal policy was shifting away from funding community-focused anti-poverty programs while poverty persisted in some neighborhoods, including neighborhoods in Washington, D.C. In seeking to address this phenomenon, local leaders faced an information gap: data on economic conditions was almost uniformly reported regionally whereas the pockets of poverty were in specific neighborhoods. Regionally aggregated data masked neighborhood disparities. What community leaders knew first hand could not be shown with the data available.

James O. Gibson, formerly Washington, D.C.’s city administrator for planning and development, headed a local foundation at the time. Leveraging the advent of desktop computing and the corresponding ability to manage databases, Gibson led an effort to fund locally the technical capacity to disaggregate regional data. As the regional data was disaggregated, a different story began to be told. Not all poverty was the same: while poverty was episodic in the suburban region, it was chronic in certain neighborhoods in Washington, D.C. Further, with the
disaggregation of regional data came the opportunity to examine geography and demography as variables in understanding chronic neighborhood poverty.

With his experience in Washington, D.C., Gibson moved to the Rockefeller Foundation. In time, he would head the Foundation’s Community Planning and Action Program (CPAP). Gibson saw CPAP as a way for community organizations to help mend the frayed social fabric, develop skills and capacities, and influence local policy—all in ways that were entrepreneurial, data-driven, results-oriented, and racially and culturally relevant. One goal of CPAP was to understand why race was a variable in chronic neighborhood poverty despite the gains of the civil rights movement. Were we settling into a permanent black and Hispanic underclass in the United States? Data disaggregated to the neighborhood level along with a scope and diversity of perspectives was necessary to figure out the nature of the problem and what would work to solve it.

In 1986, Angela Glover Blackwell, a successful partner at a national public interest law firm based in San Francisco, was inspired by the Bill Moyers documentary, *The Vanishing Family – Crisis in Black America*, to leave the world of class action lawsuits and pursue a different pathway to change. In 1987, Blackwell was introduced to Gibson and, with his support, founded the Oakland Urban Strategies Council, a community-based nonprofit, to eliminate persistent poverty by working with partners to transform Oakland’s low-income neighborhoods into vibrant, healthy communities. With her legal training, Blackwell knew the story of Oakland’s chronically impoverished neighborhoods would need to be understood and told if there was any hope to change those neighborhoods. She needed data. The data she could find, however, was either regional or census data collected by census tracks. The first was too broad, the second reported too infrequently. Therefore, with a graduate student from Berkley, Blackwell doggedly disaggregated and reassembled the data available to tell the story of persistent poverty in Oakland neighborhoods. In 1988, the Oakland Urban Strategies Council published *A Chance for Every Child: Oakland’s Infants, Children, and Youth at Risk for Persistent Poverty*. The report explored the risks that threatened to trap children in Oakland in a cycle of persistent poverty. At the back of the report a map of Oakland highlighted the neighborhoods in poverty. Attached to the map were four transparencies. Each transparency overlaid onto the poverty map a different poverty-related issue, portraying visually the story of neighborhood poverty in Oakland. The report reverberated instantly, in Oakland and nationally, and Blackwell, whose maps foreshadowed the important role of user-friendly geo-mapping software in the democratization of data, would go on to bring greater sophistication and rigor to the use of data in community-based decision making.

Blackwell’s experience was not unique. CPAP also operated in Boston, Cleveland, Denver, San Antonio, and Washington, D.C., organizing community residents and helping them use data on poverty factors to build consensus for change and devise effective strategies. In 1995, Gibson approached the Urban Institute with six local organizations, each working as an “information intermediary” in one of the six CPAP communities. The Urban Institute agreed to house what became the National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership (NNIP), which, under the leadership of G. Thomas Kingsley, has grown to a network of information intermediaries in 34 cities, each developing and maintaining a neighborhood data warehouse. NNIP has championed and played
a pivotal role in the democratization of data, supporting the achievement of critical milestones by its partners, including systematically entering into long-term data sharing agreements with local governments, linking data to individual addresses and land parcels, and making data available online to local organizations.

The democratization of data has also seen significant progress at the national level. For example, the U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey is now releasing data on many traditional census variables on the tract level on an annual basis.16

Where do we stand today? From Kingsley’s perspective, at a threshold:

“… [W]e are at the beginning of an era in which data will play a much more influential role in comprehensive community development... [U]nless the past year or two, collecting and using data has meant too much hard work for busy practitioners.... [T]here have been truly dramatic improvements in the availability of data relevant to neighborhood work and in the development of new tools and technologies that make it much easier to apply this information to practice... The key to making it work will be: (1) more simple and straightforward data presentations and software applications that community development practitioners will find easy to use and (2) an expanded number and capacity of national and local ‘data intermediaries’ who assemble relevant data and facilitate its use by practitioners working in neighborhoods.”17

Are we at a threshold? Might a community use data to drive decision making, sustain an unrelenting focus on results, and with greater discretion and flexibility do what works rather than what has been prescribed by risk-averse and stove-piped bureaucracies? These aspirations have become reality in the Harlem Children’s Zone® (HCZ), the educational enterprise led by Geoffrey Canada and serving nearly 100 blocks of Central Harlem.

In his book about HCZ, Paul Tough pinpointed as the genesis of HCZ a waiting list Canada created in 1999 in response to demand for a popular program he ran in Harlem. What first Canada recognized as unmet demand for a program evolved into deeper concerns about the disconnection between the needs of the community and the programming provided.

Canada became less and less sure of what his programs really added up to. Each one was supported by a separate short-term grant, often on a contract from one city agency or another, and in order to keep the money flowing, Canada was required to demonstrate to the foundations and agencies that paid for the programs that a certain number of children had participated. But no one seemed to care whether the programs were actually working. In fact, no one seemed to have given a whole lot of thought to what, in this context, “working” might really mean.18
Canada decided he needed to change the way he and others were making decisions about the public good.

Canada began to wonder what would happen if he reversed the equation. Instead of coming up with a menu of well-meaning programs and then trying to figure out what they accomplished and how they fit together, what if he started with the outcomes he wanted to achieve and then worked backward from there, changing and tweaking and overhauling programs until they actually produced the right results? When he followed this train of thought a little further, he realized that it wasn’t the outcomes of individual programs that he really cared about: what mattered was the overall impact he was able to have on the children he was trying to serve.”

Canada went on to implement HCZ, “a pipeline of services that support children from birth through college graduation, and create a critical mass of engaged adults who understand what it takes to ensure a child succeeds.”

HCZ has achieved unprecedented results, with students in the HCZ charter schools consistently outperforming their peers in New York State, New York City, and the local school district, despite living in far more challenging social conditions than most of those peers.

As noted in HCZ’s description of its project model, data-driven decision making has been central to the success of HCZ, institutionalizing “a feedback loop that cycles data back to management for use in improving and refining program offerings.” Also key to the success of HCZ is the fact that Canada backed his vision with prodigious fund raising. In 2009, HCZ had a reported $200 million in assets and its 2010 operating budget was a reported $80 million, two-thirds from private donations.

President Obama has described HCZ as “one of the most successful anti-poverty programs in history.”

4. Crossing the Threshold: A New Narrative

The time has come to write a new narrative – one in which the vision and reality of the American Dream are one and the same. The path forward is clear. With the Results-Based Accountability™ framework, beginning with the ends to get to the means, we know how to manage investments in chronically impoverished communities with a clear and unrelenting focus on results. We know how to do so with analytic rigor, community engagement, and meaningful data, due in no small part to trailblazing initiatives like the community empowerment and analytic sophistication of Sargent Shriver’s OEO and the democratization of data by James Gibson, Angela Glover Blackwell, and Tom Kingsley’s National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership. For evidence that results-focused, data-driven, and holistic programming can be done and, indeed, works, we need look no farther than the work of Geoffrey Canada in the Harlem Children’s Zone.

Transcending traditional boundaries and collaborating – with discipline, data, and a relentless focus on results – place-based neighborhood initiatives can achieve unprecedented “collective impact.” We still have much to learn about collaboration, the strategic use of data in decision making, and the complexities of communities but we stand on the threshold of a new era, one in which the geography of opportunity will become equitable, where the least among us will enjoy the opportunity “to grow to fullest development as man and woman.”
The work has begun. Seeking to replicate the remarkable success of HCZ and foster even broader community transformation, the Obama Administration has launched Promise Neighborhoods. With funding from the Department of Education, a dozen distressed communities are on the path to measurably improving the educational and developmental outcomes of their children and youth by integrating programs, breaking down agency “silos,” and building a complete continuum of cradle-to-career solutions of both educational programs and family and community supports.

The Northside Achievement Zone (NAZ), a Promise Neighborhood in Minneapolis, is the site of one of the worst achievement gaps in the country. A few years ago, 50 organizations and schools in Northside banded together. “We realized that even with all of the good work that we were doing, we were not making a big difference when it came to turning things around,” explains Sondra Samuels, CEO of NAZ. “That made it easier for us to come together. We looked at national models like the Children’s Zone and others who had closed the achievement gap. We asked the question whether it was possible here. The answer was, ‘Why Not?’”

Samuels’ vision is that of a new narrative: “I want the Northside Achievement Zone to be a thing of the past that is no longer necessary, and for the promise of the Zone – that all kids would graduate from high school college-ready – to burst beyond the borders of our community and city to be realized by all of us irrespective of our race, income level or zip code.”

The White House has also launched, along with Promise Neighborhoods, the Neighborhood Revitalization Initiative (NRI), a White House-led interagency collaborative to help neighborhoods of distress transform themselves into neighborhoods of opportunity. Other Federal efforts involved with the NRI include Choice Neighborhoods with funding from the Department of Housing and Urban Development and Byrne Criminal Justice Innovation Program with funding from the Department of Justice. NRI’s most important role is to transform Federal decision making itself, to implement among Federal agencies an approach to federal engagement in distressed neighborhoods that is interdisciplinary, coordinated, place-based, data-and results-driven, and flexible. Echoing Sondra Samuels, Luke Tate, Senior Policy Advisor, White House Domestic Policy Council and a lead on NRI, envisions a society where “you no longer can accurately predict [children’s] outcomes simply by knowing the zip code they grew up under.”

Similar transformations are also taking place at the national level outside Federal government. Recently, a group of national nongovernmental organizations launched an unprecedented collaboration, the National Results and Equity Collaborative (NREC). As Nina Sazer O’Donnell, Director of NREC, explains: “Ironically, as national organizations we were promoting collaboration to community organizations while working in our own ‘silos.’ With NREC, we have, paraphrasing Ghandi, committed ourselves to becoming that change we seek in our communities.” The NREC members – philanthropic, research, intermediary and technical assistance-providing organizations serving communities and community-based organizations – rather than being fragmented, will all use a common framework and tools, Results-Based Accountability™ and corresponding technology, in their work with the communities and constituencies they serve. In so doing, the NREC members, often serving the same communities and community-based organizations, will be aligned – facilitating collective impact, data-driven...
strategy development, and a systematic, data-driven approach to measuring progress and results and adjusting strategies based on what is learned.

Some argue that because gross inequities in America’s geography of opportunity have persisted it would be irresponsible to continue investing in strategies to eradicate those inequities. This perspective focuses on the enormity of the challenge but fails to take into account the unprecedented capacity we now have to meet the challenge – capacity made possible by the investments of others over time and across fields and sectors. Today, we have an historic opportunity – and responsibility – to leverage those investments. Indeed, there has never been a better, more opportune time to invest in the American Dream, to do our part so that in every community and for the least among us the American Dream and the reality of America are one and the same.


Delegate Mark K. Shriver, presiding Chair, Maryland Joint Committee on Children, Youth and Families, 2000 Maryland General Assembly


This section on the OEO is drawn in large part from O’Connor’s history.


NREC Founding Partners include BCT Partners (Technical Assistance providers for Choice Neighborhoods), Campaign for Grade Level Reading, Center for the Study of Social Policy, Coalition for Community Schools, Literacy Funders Network, Promise Neighborhoods Institute, Results Leadership Group, United Way Worldwide

Results Scorecard 3.0 software, www.resultsscorecard.com
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Philip L. Lee, president of the Results Leadership Group, consults, teaches, and coaches in the public and non-profit sectors in Results-Based Accountability™, organizational development, leadership, and negotiation. Lee’s clients run the gamut from major Federal agencies to local governments and nonprofits, in subject areas including health and human services, education, intelligence, public safety, and environmental protection. Lee formerly served as a senior fellow at the University of Maryland School of Public Policy and as an attorney at an international law firm in Washington, D.C.