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Building Equitable Communities: A New Role for City Hall

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What if city hall could leverage its power to address the big urban problems of the day—problems that, at first glance, municipal government would seem incapable of attacking in meaningful ways? Under the auspices of the National League of Cities (NLC), we have been exploring the role of city hall as a lead actor in transforming cities by making them more livable and equitable. The literature on local governance and urban politics provides little guidance for this kind of research, because the prevailing assumption is that city hall is an entity to be acted upon or an institution to be used in service of business and development interests. If city hall is portrayed as an actor, it is only in the sense of acting as a vehicle for the status quo, that is, as an agent of the elite whose primary interest is in maintaining existent power relations. Moreover, in cases where city hall leaders act otherwise, the literature suggests that it is only under pressure from associations and grassroots movements outside of city hall. As a result, little work has been done exploring the capacities of city hall to enhance economic equity, increase political inclusion, and build social capital.

National League of Cities leaders, however, were aware of innovative local programs and policies in increasing numbers of cities that do just this. We received funding from the Kellogg Foundation to document these practices, which resulted in the book *Tapping the Power of City Hall to Build Equitable Communities: 10 City Profiles* (Cunningham, Furdell, and McKinney 2007).[1] In this work, we conclude that "municipal leaders have refused to accept that they are unable to do anything about poverty and other inequities. Examples like San Jose's Strong Neighborhood Initiative, poverty reduction initiatives in Kalamazoo [Michigan] and Savannah

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[Georgia], Burlington's [Vermont] Legacy project and Indianapolis's Peterson Plan all illustrate innovative ideas, strong partnerships and ways that city halls are modeling values of fairness, diversity and inclusiveness" (p. 269).

Our current research develops strategies for helping other city hall leaders use their powers to leverage the entire community's assets in the service of building more equitable communities. Working with the NLC, we mined the data from the 10 case studies

and developed technical assistance roundtables for city officials and their community partners that help them identify the capacities and assets at their disposal and develop specific strategies for making their communities more equitable.

Prevailing Assumptions about City Hall

Joshua Cohen and Joel Rogers helped shape the modern sense of American democracy in their classic work of political philosophy, *On Democracy* (1983). They epitomize the prevailing view of city hall in *Associations and Democracy* (1995) when they claim that "politics is still largely a game of resources, not a forum of principles . . . Unless one is prepared to make the implausible assumption that the state can resist the demands and supplications of organized business interests, in an environment densely populated by those interests, problems of faction will remain" (p. 25).

Similarly, in an article in *Urban Affairs Review*, Eisinger (1998) says, "The absence of a growing stream of federal dollars has meant that city political leaders cannot afford, fiscally or politically, to push an agenda of social and racial reform financed by

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local taxpayers alone. Nor can municipal leaders find much encouragement for defying these realities: left to confront the great urban, racial, and economic polarities, few elected officials would be so foolhardy as to risk inevitable failure by initiating solutions based solely on the modest and limited resources that they themselves can raise. It is far easier—and the outcome more certain—to lower taxes, reduce government employment, and fill potholes" (pp. 322–323).

Archon Fung, a professor of public policy at Harvard, is one of the leading scholars in participatory governance

today. He focuses on how participation and deliberation can make public governance, at all levels, more fair and effective. He and his coauthor, Erik Olin Wright, call for a new paradigm for understanding urban politics and development. They envision "applying the abstractions of democratic theory to concrete situations and then revising theory in light of empirical observation" (Fung and Wright 2003, p. 231).

We contend that the task of applying theory to concrete situations will be difficult because of three flawed assumptions in the theory that hinder scholars from even asking questions about how city hall can be an agent of change in the direction of equity: 1) elected and appointed officials in city hall will never use their power and influence to craft their own equity agendas, 2) even if they wanted to do so, their hands would be tied by the ruling regimes and the institutional and structural arrangements within which they operate, and 3) the caliber and character of local officials are such that they would never think of leading such an agenda. Hence, the idea that city hall would take on an equity agenda remains unexplored.

Using City Hall Capacities to Enhance Equity

Issues of equity—which we define as equal access to the economic, political, and social resources of the community— lie at the root of most of the big, complex problems facing communities today. Underlying homelessness, poverty, and violence, for example, are fundamental economic, political, and social inequities. Increasing equity is a vehicle for chipping away at the systemic and structural bases of these big problems. Building economic equity involves increasing residents' real incomes by reducing their expenses, increasing their wages, and/or building their assets. Enhancing political equity entails creating systems that ensure all residents are treated fairly and can participate equally in local government processes. Increasing social equity entails building social capital at the community, neighborhood, and individual

levels and/or reconnecting people and neighborhoods to the community's social and cultural resources.

Increasing access to the community's resources, however, is constrained (or enhanced) by discriminatory practices. Discrimination based upon race, ethnicity, gender, age, sexual orientation, or other characteristics is embedded in institutions. Dismantling the institutional structures of discrimination is essential to sustaining increases in political, economic, and social equity.

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that they can mobilize to dismantle discriminatory practices and increase the access to and availability of the community's economic, political, and social resources. Capacities are the programs, policies, and practices that city halls have at their disposal, and any capacity can be mobilized in service of equity. For example, city hall's economic development capacities can be used in neighborhoods to target commercial corridor redevelopment, fight blight, or assemble property for community development use. Participatory governance can be enhanced by including neighbors in planning processes or by using neighborhood priority boards and citizen academies. Our research has led to the development of an inventory of over 100 capacities that city hall officials can use to identify existing and potential programs, policies, and practices that they can use to increase equity.

Being strategic about the use of capacities ensures real change in both access to community resources and reduction of discrimination practices. Being strategic also leads to the creation of sustainable ways of operating that are both efficient and politically viable. While programs and policies will certainly change as a city's circumstances

change, a strategic approach to the work will ensure that the emphasis on equity enhancement becomes embedded in the way city hall does business. For example, when a city's economic development department evolves into a community and economic development department, a city's understanding of development becomes more comprehensive and linked to issues of equity.

Table 1 shows examples of how strategic city hall officials use their capacities to enhance political, social, and economic equity. In each of these cities,

leaders developed equity agendas in such a way that even though specific programs and initiatives have evolved and changed over time, and city leadership has changed, the focus on enhancing equity has remained.

After studying the capacities mobilized and strategies employed in these and other cities, we wondered if it were possible to use this knowledge to jump-start equity agendas in other cities. In other words, how could an intervention be designed that would help city hall officials generate the political will necessary to prioritize an equity agenda and mobilize, leverage, and maximize city hall capacities to build more equitable communities in a politically viable, effective, and sustainable way?

That question has driven our most recent work with the NLC. To date, we have worked with seven cities as part of the NLC's Kellogg-funded Municipal Action to Reduce Poverty Project. These seven cities differ in demographics, size, region, and challenges and opportunities facing them. The one constant is the steadfast commitment of city hall officials and their partners to build more equitable communities and embed this orientation into city hall programs and practices for the long term. Roundtable participants take stock of the social and political landscape of their city and the capacities at their disposal to develop a strategic action plan to begin the work of building a more equitable community. Our work with these cities confirms a key finding in our earlier work that each city hall "draws on its unique charter responsibilities, legislative authorities, local strengths, and history to create an equity agenda. Most of these equity agendas are neighborhood based and directed at improving the quality of life for low-income residents, and these agendas in turn serve to make the city more attractive to investors" (Cunningham, Furdell, and McKinney 2007, p. 270).

These roundtables also generate additional knowledge and insights about the process of undertaking an equity agenda that we are using to develop materials that can be more broadly distributed to city officials who wish

Table 1 Examples of Equity-Enhancing Programs and Practices		
City	Equity-enhancing strategy	Kind of equity
Baltimore, MD Healthy Neighborhoods Initiative	Pursued a neighborhood-level real estate investment initiative	Economic: "It's at the grass-level that you can intervene and get a vacant or unoccupied house put back into active use. You win these battles block by block, neighborhood by neighborhood." –Councilmember James Kraft
Burien, WA Demographic Project	Using census and other data, engaged the community in conversations about Burien's demographic shifts as a means of building social capital	Political and social: "How do we ensure that as the community changes it remains cohesive? How do we bring new people into our community and help them participate in the civic life?" –Assistant City Manager David Cline
Burlington, VT Legacy Project	Used partnerships and coalitions to create economic security for all families	Economic, political, and social: "We've taken significant steps towards ensuring that Burlington balances and integrates economic development, environmental protection, social equity, and education." –Mayor Peter Clavelle
Charlotte, NC City Within a City Initiative	Used data to mobilize partners and target investments to revitalize and stabilize fragile neighborhoods	Social and economic: "The indicators speak for themselves about the problems—you publish those and decisions revolve around those issues." –Stanley Watkins, Neighborhood Development Key Business Executive
Rochester, NY Neighbors Building Neighborhoods (NBN) Initiative	Created neighborhood-level planning groups to identify each neighborhood's needs, requirements, and issues, as well as the assets available to address these issues.	Political and social: "NBN was a way to begin to reinvent the relationship between government and citizens. If we're going to create any kind of change, it has to significantly involve the people in the community." –Tom Argust, Commissioner of Community Development

SOURCE: Cunningham, Furdell, and McKinney (2007).

to take on this work in a more strategic fashion. The desire to do this work is clearly out there, and city officials are looking for the tools to help them do the work. Examining what is currently being done and using the roundtables to test these tools is producing a toolkit of strategies to help city officials develop equity-enhancing programs, policies, and practices that are politically viable, effective, and sustainable. Any city hall can do an equity-enhancing program. However, by utilizing the whole range of capacities at their disposal, city hall can strategically mobilize the community's assets to address the issues of inequity that underlie most of the problems facing urban areas today.

Note

1. This book is available on-line at http://www.nlc.org/resources_for_cities/programs___services/poverty_reduction_strategy_project/poverty2006.aspx.

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