Community Quality of Life Conference

"Advances in the Science and Practice of Community Indicators"

Opening Plenary Remarks

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Piton and Neighborhood Facts

I'd like to start my presentation by telling you a little bit about my own journey with community indicators. The organization I work for, The Piton Foundation, is a 30-year old foundation that was formed by a wildcat oilman in the early 1970s. In the late 1980s, when the bottom fell out of the oil industry, Piton went from being the largest grant-maker in the state of Colorado to one of the smallest. We did two things to try to keep ourselves afloat and relevant. First, we changed our status from a grant-making foundation to an operating foundation. Second, we narrowed our focus from statewide to Denver's poor inner-city neighborhoods.

But we soon learned that we really didn't know very much about these neighborhoods, a problem we had to remedy before we could implement our new identity. I approached Piton with the idea of creating a "neighborhood data initiative" to routinely collect and disseminate data about all Denver neighborhoods, both to fuel our own learning but also to help others similarly engaged in targeted neighborhood efforts. This may sound like a simple notion today but at the time the idea of indicators, or neighborhood specific data, or producing information in anything other than a phone book sized research report was virtually unheard of. The leadership at Piton said, "We don't know what you're talking about and we have no funds to support it even if we did understand." But they knew me and trusted me and said that if I could find the funds, I could go ahead. So I went to a friend at the Rockefeller Foundation, which had plenty of money, and he also said, "I don't know what you're talking but I trust you." And so Piton's data initiative, now called *Neighborhood Facts* was launched in 1991 with an operating budget of $35,000.

Formation of National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership

Remember the time. This was nearly 15 years ago. Hardly anyone around the country was working with neighborhood data. GIS was just emerging as a field, technology was nowhere near as advanced as today, data were very hard to come by, and there were very few models or tools or practitioners. There were just a handful of us, people and cities doing neighborhood indicator work. We managed to find each other, often through foundation connections such as Rockefeller. We helped each other as best we could. For example, Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland was my mentor and invaluable to the development of our project in Denver. We began talking to each other about what if we developed a formal network so we could learn faster, avoid reinventing the wheel, and help others who were sure to come to the same conclusion we had about the power of data to community change.

We approached possible funding sources (Rockefeller, Annie E. Casey Foundations) and research organizations that might be willing to serve as administrative home to the network. And in 1996 the National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership, NNIP, was launched by five cities in partnership with the Urban Institute. We are now up to 21 formal partner cities. Many of them are presenting at this conference.

The NNIP cities are incredibly varied in their approach and accomplishments. They are housed in a variety of organizations (universities, foundations, nonprofits, United Ways, government). They collect a wide array of diverse administrative data, some like Philadelphia and LA have developed incredibly sophisticated parcel based systems, others like Washington DC have developed training and technical assistance strategies, many have written and published articles and reports, performed special research, developed and operate websites, perform policy analysis, provide interactive mapping, and so on.

Despite its name, the National Neighborhood **Indicators** Partnership, not all NNIP partners operate what you might consider an 'indicators' system. Most NNIP partners operate more of a one-stop data shop or data warehouse. This allows different groups in different communities facing different challenges to identify and select their own indicators most relevant to that place at that moment. The indicator aspect of the work is emerging more strongly in recent years and I would point you to Boston and Baltimore as two wonderful examples of neighborhood indicator work.

But despite our differences, and the variety of practice models contained in NNIP, what unites us is an absolute commitment to the democratization of data, facilitating the direct use of data by those most affected by the conditions the data speak to.

Annie E. Casey Foundation's Making Connections Initiative

In 1999 the Annie E. Casey Foundation launched a major new cross-city initiative in 22 cities designed to improve the life chances of vulnerable children by helping to strengthen their families and neighborhoods. In significant ways, the Casey Foundation was influenced by its involvement in and learning from NNIP. When Making Connections was launched, each city was charged with developing what is known as a "local learning partnership" to emphasize the Foundation's belief that the effective use of data is essential to affect change.

Like NNIP, the local learning partnerships have different structures, participants, and priorities shaped by their own distinct community politics and environment. But all try to stay true to the concept of partnership rather than a single data intermediary. All are trying to engage community residents in different ways. And all have been given the same charge by the Casey Foundation, to:

- Develop a "data warehouse," a comprehensive, integrated easily accessible database of neighborhood-level information;
- Document change in the *Making Connections* process; and
- Build local capacity to use data to inform and propel change**.**

I have been involved in a number of major foundation initiatives but this is the first time I've seen a major foundation place data and learning central to the work rather than as an evaluative afterthought. More importantly, Casey moved to the forefront of the thinking in these cities the concept that it is not just about improving community **access to information** but rather about enhancing community's **ability to use data for change**.

Relevance of my journey to this conference

While my journey may be different from yours, I think it reflects in many ways what is happening to the community indicators field at large.

- ***Technology*** is no longer sluggish and slow to keep up with our needs but in many ways now drives the work.
- We have moved from a finite list of indicators that serve a single purpose to ***comprehensive indicator and data systems*** that can serve multiple purposes by multiple groups all at the same time.

- We have in many ways moved from the concept of a single data intermediary to ***meaningful partnerships*** not just between people like those of us in this room but between communities of data users, data providers, and policy-makers.

- We have come to understand the limitations of purely quantitative data and now work to supplement that with qualitative data, locally produced surveys and information gathering techniques that ***place the numbers in the context of images and stories*** about the issues we care about.

- And we have moved from an isolated handful of practitioners to an accepted and much sought after ***field of practice***.

But I think my journey also points out some of the flaws I believe are present in this field.

- There is just no way to keep up with the ***technological advances***. I remember the old bumper sticker that read "He who has the most toys wins." I think we are at risk of convincing ourselves the toys are the goal.

- There are many, many more of us doing the work but we are ***less connected by our early democratic goals***. Those goals once ensured we were connected by more than our common field of practice but more importantly by guiding principles. But the field has become instead more about our own survival, the competitive nature of our organizations, and the ability to generate revenue than about building democracy.

- Look around the room. Look at us on the stage. We are ***not reflective of the communities we serve***. We do not look like them, we do not share common class experiences, we are for the most part well-intended outsiders making most of the decisions for the very people we had hoped to empower with data.

- Most importantly, while we have a respected field of practice and despite all our skill and resource, we have not been able, in my opinion, to realize the potential of all this data in ***effecting meaningful and sustainable change*** in real communities by real people. With all our advances our biggest challenges lie ahead, not behind us.

Making an argument for advancing the use of data, not its production, as our common cause

Those of you who know me know that I have a persistent refrain. I believe it is less important what data we provide and in what pretty package than in how those data are put to use to improve community and society.

So how do we do that? What does it take to move data to action? I've been at this now for fourteen years. I've made pretty much every mistake there is to make. And I've learned some things along the way.

1. I've learned ***you have to be in relationship with those who need your data***. You can't do this work from an ivory tower. Trust me, I know. I work on the 53rd floor of a downtown office building. This may be our job but it is personal in community. We have to be willing to humble ourselves, to view ourselves as a learner, not the expert; to be as comfortable talking about data in a church basement or someone's living room as we are in our own office.

2. I've learned ***it is not up to us outside community to decide what is relevant or meaningful to people inside community***. We do not know what is best for them.

3. I've learned that ***one size does not fit all***. The most elegant, scientifically sound indicators have limited use when they are all you have to offer. Literally every discussion I've had in community about the data or indicators I've brought them, including ones where I walk in with exactly what they've asked for, ends up a conversation about what is missing, and what else they need. Our grab bag needs to be very, very large and deep.

4. I've learned ***the process is not linear***. We tend to think the process goes something like this: you engage citizens in selecting indicators, you produce and make available those indicators, and you hold people publicly accountable for improving on those indicators. But we in this room know that we must constantly be engaging citizens, defining and adapting indicators, and being accountable ourselves to whether those indicators are proven meaningful.

5. I've learned ***there is no action without ownership***. People own data that they've asked for, that they've produced, that they themselves analyze, that they themselves communicate. The more we do for them, the less it belongs to them and the less they are able to use it in meaningful ways.

6. I've learned that the task is even larger than one of creating data and tools. It is one of ***broadly diffusing the data, tools and skills*** that communities need. Poor communities are even more disenfranchised than most in this age of information because not only are the data, tools, and skills held by a few, but those few typically exist outside their community. This makes the challenge of diffusing one of not only moving knowledge and tools from the hands of the few to the hands of the many, but also moving knowledge and tools from outside community to inside community. This is no small task. But at the end of the day, if more people do not know what we know and have access to what we have access to, then we will have failed.

7. I've learned that we need to find ways to ***credential community wisdom both within and beyond community***. Communities have lost their voice. Providing data about community is not the same as lifting up their voice. I was in a meeting recently with resident leaders from cities around the country and one woman said, "I don't care how many initials you have after your name. Your four or more years of college are not worth more than my 40 years of experience." We need to find ways to place a value on and elevate their wisdom.

8. And finally, I've learned we need to ***actively address issues of power and within that the role of race, class, culture and gender***. We are not smaller if others around us gain or find their own power. Democracy is not something we consume; it is something we practice. In a vacuum, those comfortable and experienced with power will always step into the void. The inequality of a racist society will always place those with opportunity and privilege at the table first. Our responsibility is not just to act and express ourselves democratically but to also resist the temptation to fill the void, to fight for the rights of others to have the same opportunity to express democratic values.

<u>Conclusion</u>

When invited to present in this plenary session, I was asked to talk about what efficiencies exist in getting the data into use. I thought hard about this but I'm afraid I've got bad news. While there are enormous efficiencies that have emerged over the years in producing and disseminating data, I have discovered no efficiencies in getting it used. I would have hoped that we take advantage of the efficiencies we have achieved in production to free us up to pay more attention to use. On the contrary, I believe we are spending less time on use than ever. This work is messy, complicated, time intensive, and takes us way outside of our comfort zone.

I think of this work as a race, a race for our communities, our nation, and more. But we in the community indicators field treat it more like a relay race. We see our job as running the first leg of the race in which we collect, produce and disseminate data and then we hand off to those who use the data to run the last leg of the race. We tell ourselves it is their job to use the data to promote equity and justice, to affect meaningful change in communities. We have convinced ourselves that our job is done once the hand off is complete. But the hand off is NOT the finish line. Anyone who has ever run a relay race will tell you that the first runner is as responsible for what happens at the finish line as the last runner. We in this room have got to hold ourselves accountable for what happens after the hand off.

Over the years I've been in many, many discussion about how our indicators are too focused on community deficits; about how we need to provide a balance of measures that reflect a community's assets and the positive things that exist in all communities. So one day I asked one of the residents from one of the low-income communities I work in for an example of what she would consider a positive community indicator. And she answered, "One that makes a difference." So as you go through the next three days of this conference, in whatever setting you are in, whatever conversation, whatever workshop, whatever plenary, ask yourself, "Does this presentation, this person, this knowledge, this data, this skill, this tool have the ability to cross the finish line and make a difference?" Because in the end, that's all that matters.