Fostering Partnerships for Community Engagement

Community Voice and Power Sharing Guidebook

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About This Toolkit

This toolkit is intended for researchers, policymakers, direct service providers, or technical assistance providers interested in finding and building relationships with partners to facilitate community-engaged work.

In this toolkit, you will learn

- Why building equitable and sustainable partnerships is important

- How to find and evaluate potential partners

- What the best practices are for building good partnerships, including examples from Urban Institute partnerships

Fostering Partnerships

When you build and maintain a good partnership, your work is made not only easier but also more transparent, representative of community interests and needs, effective, and impactful. Working with community members ensures you are asking the right questions, reaching the right people, and conducting your work in an ethical manner. Community partners can provide multiple dimensions of expertise (historical, geographic, technical, etc.) and identify salient cultural differences that project staff might never discover on their own. While you may seek a partnership that can draw strategically upon this expertise for a specific project or initiative, keep in mind that you are building a relationship, not merely developing a project or tapping a consultant. In other words, like other healthy relationships you may have, you need constant communication, accountability, trust earning, and reciprocity.

Pillars of Good Partnership

Adopting and fostering four core principles of understanding, transparency, trust, and equity are essential to creating a sustainable partnership. Across each principle, you should remain accountable to the community's priorities and preferences. Four pillars of good partnership can assist with this: (1) do your homework; (2) create equity; (3) commit to transparency; and (4) build and maintain trust.

`01` **Do Your Homework**

Develop an understanding of the community grounded in its history, issues, and people. Through engagement and research, project staff should understand the community's unique attributes and value. You can "do your homework" through various methods, both formal and informal, but the result should consistently be an understanding of the community that is shared with your partner and other community members.

BEST PRACTICES

▪ **Define the community.** When researchers, policymakers, or practitioners enter a community, they may have preconceived notions at odds with the lived experiences of community members. Therefore, before starting work, the team should sit down with the community to develop a consistent working definition of the community. This may alter the project's trajectory, but an inaccurate definition is both insensitive and a flawed guidepost that misleads every stage of the project, from design, to implementation, to evaluation. It is also a disservice to the community, and the products that come out of the research

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GUIDING QUESTIONS

Doing Your Homework

Develop an understanding of the community's unique attributes and values, share that understanding with your partner and other community members, and see what they believe the community's attributes and values to be. The following are questions to keep in mind when doing your homework.

▪ How would you define the community you are working with? How does your definition differ from how community members define their community?

▪ What historical factors are at play when working with this community?

  o Has the community worked with researchers, policymakers, or practitioners before? In what capacity? What is the community's perception of researchers, policymakers, and practitioners?

  o How will you address that history and establish a relationship built on trust and respect?

▪ What are the social dynamics and internal power differentials in the community? What inequities does the community face? Who are the leaders and influential organizations?

▪ How will this work affect your partner's operations and ability to serve the community? What are your partner's capacities and limitations?

▪ If you are working with multiple partners, how may their priorities and interests intersect or differ? How do you plan to reconcile differences?

will be less effective. If the project scope has a larger or national scale, the project team should work with a demographically representative group of community members to establish a working definition.

- **Learn from the past, especially from community relationships with researchers, policymakers, and practitioners.** Project staff should try to develop a holistic understanding of the community. This understanding can be developed by talking with community members and reviewing literature. A particular focus of this process should be to look at the community's past experiences with research. Understanding the relationship between the community and researchers is key to respectful engagement and avoiding past wrongs. Although community-engaged methods seek to remedy those wrongs, power dynamics and inequality will persist. Thus, recognizing past wrongs is important, but so is understanding how the current proposed work could repeat some of those mistakes. This can stave off inequities before they manifest in your work.

- **Understand internal power dynamics.** Communities have their own inequities and power structures. To truly capture community viewpoints, the project team must hear both the loud and the quiet voices. Although tensions that emerge from differing community voices and internal power inequities cannot be eliminated, the project team must be aware of them so it can avoid reinforcing them. Furthermore, researchers cannot understand the views of all members of the community if they listen only to the community members with the most power or access to power.

- **Understand organizational capacity.** Project staff should assess and understand the capabilities of their partner. Community organization members may have considerable knowledge and expertise around community research or may be volunteer-driven and inexperienced at working with researchers and policymakers. Therefore, researchers must be cognizant of their partner's capacities and limitations and must not compromise their partner's ability to carry out its own organizational mission.

> **EXAMPLE**
> **Being Present in the Community**
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> When Urban staff began the Housing Resilience in Greater New Orleans project exploring climate resilience and mitigation in the New Orleans region, they partnered with a local organization to help facilitate their work in the community. Their partner guided them throughout the project, providing local expertise and making sure Urban staff acted appropriately. One anecdote from the project stood out to researchers. When Urban researcher Olivia Arena visited a community convening on Tribal land, community members were immediately suspicious of her intentions. When she introduced herself as a researcher, they asked why she was there and how she planned to give back to the community. Although she planned to conduct a focus group at the end of the retreat, she was also there to listen and learn. She was careful not to take notes so she could be fully present in her conversations and interactions. Urban researchers had examined the community's past experiences with researchers to ensure they were being sensitive to the community. It was experiences like Arena's—doing the homework, showing up and listening—that ultimately built trust and laid the foundation for an effective partnership.

02 Create Equity

Equity is essential for community-engaged methods to be ethical and effective. Researchers must establish an environment that allows community partners to make meaningful contributions and to have a voice in determining the project's focus and implementation. Project leads must also recognize the traditional power hierarchies found in community-professional relationships and work actively to minimize their impacts.

BEST PRACTICES

- **Examine your project through lenses of racial, ethnic, and gender equity, among others.** Who is affected by the issue you plan to study? How is power distributed in the community? In what ways does structural racism inform the project team's understanding of the community's experiences, and what is the project's plan for addressing structural racism? These are just a few of the questions you should explore when thinking about equity. By taking an equity perspective, researchers, policymakers, and practitioners can conduct more ethical work and ensure it has a positive impact on the community.

- **Compensate community members.** Paying community members for their work on the project is important. Compensation can take various forms, from contributing funding to your partner organization to giving people money for participating in a survey. Compensating the community makes relationships more equitable and shows that organizations view their partners as equally valued experts and contributors to the work.

- **Address power dynamics.** Do not let power dynamics go ignored. Power may stem from institutional position, authority, race/gender differences, or other factors that provide certain people with greater decisionmaking ability or increase their comfort in speaking up or taking on leadership roles. Identifying these dynamics openly and finding ways to address them demonstrate awareness and a commitment to addressing inequities. You should address these dynamics when your partnership begins and monitor them as the project continues.

- **Make sure community members have strong voices.** Creating an environment in which community members feel comfortable speaking openly and honestly is essential to a good partnership. You cannot simply have a focus group or meeting and expect that community members will feel welcome to express their opinions. Project staff must intentionally include community members in discussions, respond to their input with follow-up questions and discussion, and identify concerns that are actionable and correctable. Project leads can create opportunities to build

GUIDING QUESTIONS
Creating Equity

The project team must establish an environment and culture that allows community partners to contribute to a project and recognizes the traditional power hierarchies found in research relationships. The following are questions to keep in mind for creating equity.

- What power dynamics exist between the staff and the community? How do you plan on reckoning with and addressing differences?

- How does structural racism inform a mutual understanding of the inequities experienced by the community, and what is the team's plan for addressing structural racism in the project?

- How will you compensate community members?

- How will you ensure that community members have a strong voice in your project (e.g., a steering committee, an advisory board, focus groups)?

- How will you demonstrate that community voices matter to your organization? Do you have effective strategies to ensure the community feels heard?

- Can you commit to working on ensuring equity throughout your partnership and at every project stage?

community-based leads for the partnership, ensuring that community representatives have decisionmaking power, are facilitating the discussions, and guide the work at every step. When possible, it is also valuable to ensure community members have space for discussion separate from other team members, so they can have a safe space to work out their questions, concerns, and opinions.

- **Demonstrate that community voices matter.** The best way to ensure community members continue to speak up is by demonstrating that their voices have a real impact on your project. Including community members' comments in a draft of an instrument, even if you disagree with them, or simply responding to their input shows that you care about and value what community members are saying and that you view the project as incomplete without community voices.

- **Practice regular member checks.** As you produce protocols, research instruments, and deliverables, you should ensure that community members view them. Community members should provide feedback on virtually all items, especially public-facing work such as briefs and reports. You have an obligation to make these items accessible.

See also *Why Am I Always Being Researched? A Guidebook for Community Organizations, Researchers, and Funders to Help Us Get from Insufficient Understanding to More Authentic Truth*, Chicago Beyond's 2018 guidebook with tools that address "seven inequities standing in the way of impact" when working with community partners.

03   **Commit to Transparency**

Transparency is key to any functioning, trusted partnership. Project staff should understand their community partner's needs and the value they can offer the partner. Conversely, the community partner should understand the researchers' intentions and their own role in the project. Both the project team and the community partner should be transparent about what they can and cannot offer. Transparency should continue across every stage of the project and throughout the development of key planning tools such as timelines and budgets.

BEST PRACTICES

- **Be clear about intentions and goals from the beginning.** When entering into a partnership, project staff must be clear about the project's intentions and limitations. Staff should disclose to the partner the project's timeline, funding and any other relevant information. The partner should also be up-front about what they can offer the project team and what they hope to get out of the partnership. Clear communication from the beginning can help alleviate any potential misunderstandings or tensions. The project team must remain consistent and if something changes promptly, communicate the development to their partner. Transparency also applies to a project's timeline. Partners need to trust that researchers will not leave suddenly after the project needs are met. If project staff are clear about their objectives, timeline, budget, and parameters, neither party will be caught by surprise. Transparency must be established at the start and maintained throughout the partnership.

- **Discuss anything that could lead to tensions, like past research experiences and your organization's institutional role.** When a project team enters a community to conduct research or policy work, staffers must be ready to have difficult discussions. Team members should be clear about the history of research and policy and their plans to act differently. They should also be ready to address any concerns the community has about the work. These discussions are not easy, especially when you are getting to know your partner, but they are necessary to avoid misunderstandings in the future.

- **Work together on budgeting or be extremely transparent about budgeting.** If possible, working with your partner to apply for funding and to create a budget for your project ensures a mutual understanding, which is a key element of power sharing. However, shared financial management may not be possible in all projects. Still, project staff must be clear with their partners and

Committing to Transparency

Project staff must understand their community partner's needs and the value they can offer to their partner. Conversely, the community partner should understand the desires of the staff and their role in the project. Both should be transparent about what they can and cannot offer. The following are questions to keep in mind as you focus on transparency.

- Are you prepared to share your intentions and motivations with your partner?

- How will you discuss the community's past experiences with researchers, policymakers, and practitioners? How will you respect their potential hesitancies but show them that working with your research team will be different?

- How will you clarify your organization's institutional role up front?

- How are you funding this project?
  - Will your partner work with you to apply for grants or other funding sources for your collaboration?
  - Will the partner have a say in how funds are spent or an opportunity to create and manage the project budget or their budget?
  - Will the partner receive any funding directly?
  - Will you fully explain who is funding the project and what the funding can and cannot accomplish?

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community members about what resources are available and how that funding can be used. Some funding may be more flexible and allow staff to help their partner with other organizational needs. However, if that is not the case, your partner must understand what your organization cannot do for them.

- **Establish clear roles and responsibilities.** Researchers and partners should know their responsibilities to minimize confusion and miscommunication. Establishing clear roles for all parties makes expectations clear, affirms accountability, and promotes power sharing.

- **Practice accountability.** This means holding yourself responsible for both the intended and unintended consequences of your actions, involvement, and work on a project. Regardless of intentions, you are human and may make mistakes. Things move more smoothly when transparency guides the work you do. Being up-front about your limitations will make potential mistakes and conflict easier to navigate. Establishing a process or method for addressing mistakes and grievances is recommended. When you inevitably make a wrong move, acknowledge it, state your intentions to remedy the problem and act differently in the future, and thank partners for their commitment to addressing the issue together.

See also "Partnering with Community-Based Organizations for More Broad-Based Public Engagement," a resource that describes types of partnerships, approaches to clarifying purpose and alignment, and approaches to navigating pain points.

Committing to Transparency

- How will you establish clear roles and responsibilities among the project team and the community partner? What is the staff's plan for community participation in key project stages, including design, planning, data collection, analysis, recommendations, and reporting?

- How will the partner be recognized in published products?

- What are your procedures to ensure accountability when mistakes, conflict, or harm occur?

`04` **Build and Maintain Trust**

If you and your partner trust each other, partnership can be easy. However, building trust takes time and effort. The community partner must trust that your organization's staff cares about the community, can operate respectfully within the community, and will not leave when it is convenient. Project staff must trust that partners can fulfill their roles and responsibilities in the project. Building trust must be an intentional process.

BEST PRACTICES

- **Make a plan.** Trust is not built without effort. Project staff must be intentional in their actions to create trust within their community of interest. This means creating a plan and following through.

- **Show up.** One of the best ways to convey to community members and partners that you care about the community is by showing up. Attending community events or gatherings allows community members to see project staff and allows project staff to get to know the community. Showing up when you do not have to be there demonstrates that you have different intentions than past researchers and affirms your personal interest in the community.

- **Leverage resources to assist community partners beyond the scope of the project.** While your project may benefit the partner, helping your partner on issues separate from your project will help build trust. Project staff have unique skills and resources, and offering them to your partner establishes interdependence.

- **Offer ideas for how you can help your partner; do not wait for them to ask you.** Your partner may be too busy to think about how you can help them. Do not be reluctant to provide examples of ways you can assist, such as using project data or resources creatively, helping your partner apply for funding, or helping with social media accounts.

- **Be prepared for missteps and misunderstandings.** Your partnership will experience issues. Your partners may not have previously worked with an institution like yours. The team should know that lapses in communication may occur and should have a plan for addressing them. Your partners may not fulfill their responsibilities, and project staff may act inappropriately in the community. However, by preparing for these missteps or challenges, addressing issues honestly and openly, and agreeing jointly on a plan forward, you will strengthen your collaboration and build trust.

GUIDING QUESTIONS
Building and Maintaining Trust

The community partner trusts that the project team will care about the community, operate respectfully, abide by IRB-established guidelines for conducting research, and not leave when it is convenient for the team. The following are questions to keep in mind as you focus on building and maintaining trust.

- How will you establish and maintain trust between the team and the community?

- Do you have time to consistently show up and help your community partner even when doing so may not be relevant to your project?

- How will you measure how the project will benefit the community and advance the community's self-defined needs and interests?

- Is the team willing to offer the partner support beyond the scope of the project and provide the support necessary for partners to reap the full benefits of the collaboration?

- Do you have ideas for promoting sustainability, or the longer-term potential for maintaining and expanding the collaboration?

- Can you demonstrate early on that you are listening to the partner and showing commitment, follow-through, and reliability?

- If a misstep or misunderstanding occurs, are you prepared to take ownership, facilitate an open conversation, and seek resolution?

See also "[Building and Maintaining Trust in a Community-Based Participatory Research Partnership](#)," an *American Journal of Public Health* article co-written by community and academic partners that describes the process of building trust.

> **EXAMPLE**
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> **PASS Partnership with Exodus Treatment Center**
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> Urban partners with Exodus Treatment Center to provide programming at the Woodland Terrace public housing site in Washington, DC, as part of the Promoting Adolescent Sexual Health and Safety (PASS) program. Exodus is a comparison program provider in the PASS evaluation: its programming is used to see whether PASS is effective or whether any detectable effects are the result of positive youth development services generally. Exodus's role was primarily to coordinate survey implementation with program participants. In return, Urban staff helped Exodus in several ways. In spring 2020, Urban researcher Ellie Lauderback helped Exodus with grant writing for a local funding opportunity. Working collaboratively with Exodus leaders and creating a funding application that accurately represents Exodus and appeals to funders took a significant amount of time and effort. Additionally, Urban staff and interns worked with Exodus several hours a week to provide office support and create a website. Although this work has little to do with PASS surveys, it creates a more productive and sustainable partnership and has led to new joint work opportunities.

Building a Partnership

The key to effectively engaging communities in research, policy, and practice is building strong partnerships. While community-engaged research has various approaches, all are built on the strength of the relationship between project staff and community partners. Finding a partner to work with may take time and serious effort: A good partnership requires time be devoted to establishing mutual understanding, trust, and equitable collaboration.

Finding a Partner

There are various ways to form relationships with a partner. Often partnerships are formed through existing relationships held by you or by someone in your extended network. Reflect on potential candidates that you or a relevant stakeholder (i.e., existing partners, colleagues, government organizations, funders) might already know.

Partnerships can arise from anywhere, so building relationships with organizations and community members can pay off months or years later. Your organization's network can provide start-up opportunities—a colleague can make an introduction for you, or you can build off contacts you made during an existing project or engagement.

BEST PRACTICES

- **Scan relationships within your community of interest.** Inquire about your team's contacts to spot relevant community organizations, local government offices, and community members. If you have existing relationships, leverage them to find additional contacts and organizations. Start building a network within the community.

- **Leverage contacts within your organization, government agencies, and past partners**. If you do not have contacts within your community of interest, use your network to make connections. Talk with other staff at your organization to see if they know anyone within the community. Arrange meetings with people from past projects to see whether they have contacts in the community. Your organization's network is likely extensive and may include various organizations and government agencies whose staffs may have community contacts. An introduction from someone the community knows can help you establish trust from the onset of a potential partnership.

- **Take time to build relationships before turning to project planning.** When you meet someone in a community who may interest you, establish and foster a relationship. This can take as little effort as an email every few months or showing up to a

Finding a Community Partner

Relationships with a partner can be formed in various ways. The following are questions to keep in mind when seeking community partners.

- What are your motivations in selecting a particular community or organization to partner with?

- Are you an ideal partner for this community or organization? If so, how?

- Do you have existing relationships with organizations or people in, around, or associated with the community you want to work with? Do you have contacts within your community of interest? Can you secure partner recommendations and recruitment guidance from community leaders?

- Do you know people who could introduce you to someone within the community, such as a contact within an organization or local government agency from a current or past project?

- Can you identify leaders in the community who could work with you on your project?

- How is the potential partner situated in the community, and what interests do they represent?

- If your project is operating on a larger or national scale, how will you develop a partnership in a way that represents multiple geographic areas and demographics?

- Do you have time and resources to help local community organizations with their internal priorities (help scan literature, create maps, write grant proposals, etc.)?

community event or public meeting. If you want to invest more into the relationship, you could take time to help community groups and organizations with small tasks, such as scanning literature, creating maps, or crafting funding applications. If you work with a community before realizing you need their support for a project, partnerships will be easier to find and will benefit from an existing foundation.

- **Identify leaders within the community.** Once you establish contacts within the community, work with those contacts to meet community leaders. These people could include members of community organizations, coaches in youth sports leagues, or leaders within a place of worship. If you are trying to build a community advisory board, these leaders may fit well into that board. Even if not, meeting leaders within the community can result in connections to potential partners and a greater understanding of the community. While it is important not to bypass or leave out any existing community leadership, you will also want to reach beyond these existing leaders to ensure you have robust community participation. (See Community Advisory Board Tool)

See also *Engaging Your Community: A Toolkit for Partnership, Collaboration, and Action*, a guidebook that includes resources on building strategic partnerships, effective outreach strategies, and how to craft clear communication with community partners.

> **EXAMPLE**
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> **PASS Partnerships at Benning Terrace and Beyond**
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> In 2012, Urban embarked on its first community-based participatory research project: Promoting Adolescent Sexual Health and Safety (PASS) in the Benning Terrace community of Washington, DC. Through an existing relationship with the District of Columbia Housing Authority, we formed partnerships with community leaders and community-based organizations. Sue Popkin, who had worked with public housing staff and communities for decades, used her relationships with the DC Housing Authority and organizations from another project to meet members of the Benning Terrace community. After scanning through community leaders, Urban put together an initial cohort of community members who became partners. Years later, when that project was looking to expand, Urban researchers reached out to organizations they had encountered during a previous scan of sexual health providers. Partners at Benning Terrace were willing and able to serve as references to facilitate the new relationships. It was particularly helpful to have a community leader—Tia Newman—as a part-time staff member at Urban to help create these new collaborations. For more information, see the 2021 report *Promoting Adolescent Sexual Health and Safety, a Community-Based Collaboration*.

Evaluating a Potential Partnership

When you have found potential partners for community-engaged work, evaluating the potential partnership is important. Considerations include the partnership's perceived value and importance, how representative your selected group is of the larger community, estimations of time commitment, and partner and project readiness. The evaluation can help predict challenges that may arise and ensure the partnership is best for both the project team and the community partner.

BEST PRACTICES

- **Consider how your work may affect the community. This includes both potential benefits and potential harms.** Your work should be important to the community and not negatively affect it at any stage. Take the time to consider past harms the community may have experienced (owning that you may be part of an institution or field of work that has a problematic history) and unintentional ways that your proposed work might harm the community. Ask community leaders for their perspective on how to ensure that "do no harm" is a guiding principle of your work. When working with a community, providing its members with benefits (e.g., access and support using data collected, curricula developed, materials published, or other products of your work) is essential. A project's value to the community might not be from research or data; instead, it might be coauthorship of a blog post, support in writing a grant proposal or other in-kind services, or access to your organization's expertise and resources. Ask the community what it would like to gain from the work. Although you may enter into the work with clear goals, the community should be given time to define their objectives, and, together, you can align your visions through a mutually beneficial partnership.

- **Value the community partner's expertise and potential contributions.** Your partner's value could manifest in several ways, including through expertise about and access to the community; knowledge of important history and cultural norms; translation of your research, policy, or technical assistance for community members; support in recruiting community members; or the ability to contextualize or analyze information. Each is a unique contribution that only a true community partner can offer, and such skills, access, and fluidity should be recognized with financial compensation, public acknowledgment, and shared decisionmaking power.

- **Consider the time and resources required to build a good partnership.** Building effective partnerships can be time

Evaluating a Potential Partnership

Thinking both objectively and subjectively is important when evaluating the merits of a potential partnership and challenges that could arise. Considerations should pertain specifically to your project, but they should also be thought of in the context of the more fundamental relationship between you and your partner. The following are questions to keep in mind when evaluating a potential partnership.

- Are your project's targeted issues and goals important to the community?

- How can your community partner provide value to your project?

- How can you provide value to your community partner? How will your project benefit the community?

- Are partners aligned around issues related to diversity, equity, and inclusion? If not, can differences be easily navigated?

- What subsets of the community does our partnership represent? What subsets are not represented?

- Do you have the requisite time to devote to building a good partnership? How will you ensure you allocate ample time and adequately prioritize the partnership?

- Can your project provide reasonably anticipated financial compensation (or nonmonetary compensation) for community participation?

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consuming. The project team must ensure they have the time and long-term dedication to put forth the effort needed to build a successful partnership. The team must also ensure the project's budget allows for relationship development and compensation of community members.

- **Consider how your partner is situated within the community and the interests they represent.** Communities are not monolithic; they can contain many concentric groups, or subcommunities, with differing interests. Together, the concentric groups form the whole of the community. Partners may represent a subset of the community, and engaging with them could have a marginalizing effect on other community members. Project staff must be aware of partners' divergent perspectives and make sure to respectfully consider other viewpoints.

- **Consider the community partner's experience and capacity.** Before beginning a partnership, project staff should understand the potential partner's ability to effectively work with the team. Community organizations can be limited in scope and resourcing and have little experience with your type of work. Although this does not disqualify potential partners, the project team should ensure their partners have the bandwidth to take on the project. The partner's engagement with the project should not distract from the organization's ability to fulfill its mission of serving the community.

See also *Toolkit for Developing Community Partnerships*, a manual that describes community-engaged research through tips for both researchers and community members, case studies, and sample materials.

Additional Resources

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Acknowledgments

About the Urban Institute

The nonprofit Urban Institute is a leading research organization dedicated to developing evidence-based insights that improve people's lives and strengthen communities. For 50 years, Urban has been the trusted source for rigorous analysis of complex social and economic issues; strategic advice to policymakers, philanthropists, and practitioners; and new, promising ideas that expand opportunities for all. Our work inspires effective decisions that advance fairness and enhance the well-being of people and places.

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