The J. McDonald Williams Institute, research arm of the Foundation for Community Empowerment, is dedicated to conducting non-partisan outcomes research and public policy evaluation related to comprehensive community revitalization of low-income urban areas.

Defining Community and Empowerment

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This is the duty of our generation as we enter the twenty-first century — solidarity with the weak, the persecuted, the lonely, the sick, and those in despair. It is expressed by the desire to give a noble and humanizing meaning to a community in which all members will define themselves not by their own identity but by that of others.

— Elie Wiesel, Winner of 1986 Nobel Peace Prize

The Foundation for Community Empowerment (FCE) was established in 1995 with the goal of revitalizing low-income neighborhoods in Dallas. Believing that all communities, regardless of how distressed, have some assets, typically human assets, FCE takes an inside-out approach to comprehensive community revitalization, primarily through community organizing and community empowerment. The objective of this research brief is to give an explicit explanation of how "community" and how "empowerment" are traditionally defined, and how both are relevant in helping FCE carry out the mission it adopted in 1995.

DEFINING COMMUNITY

According to Minkler and Wallerstein (2002), community organizing can be defined as the process by which community groups are helped to identify common problems or goals, mobilize resources, and in other ways develop and implement strategies for reaching the goals the community has set. Implicit in this definition is that relevant stakeholders have come to some consensus of what makes up the community—both in terms of geography and cultural and social norms. This consensus allows a community to have a more coherent plan for community organizing and community building.

Defining the Term "Community"

While many may think that a community is defined simply by geographical boundaries, a variety of elements comprise a community. Community members derive a sense of belonging from their association with the community. This sense of belonging stems from community members having at least one shared characteristic. Some common attributes may include residence in a particular area, occupation, or religious affiliation. However, the fact that people live near each other does not mean that a community exists (Lee and Newby in Smith, 2005). Whether or not the residents have a relationship with each other determines the existence of a community.

Ferdinand Tönnies, considered the founder of the theory of community, described three possible definitions of community:

1) Physical boundaries, or types of population settlements.
2) "Ideal-typical" lifestyles of these physical communities.
3) "Social networks whose members share some common characteristic apart from or in addition to a common location (such as ethnicity or occupation)" (Marshall, 1998, p.97).

Communities are often defined not only by geography, but also by social, political, and economic alliances, as evidenced by the recent strong-mayor ballot referendum in Dallas. According to Preservation Dallas, a local nonprofit organization dedicated to the preservation and revitalization of Dallas' buildings, neighborhoods, and other historical, architectural, and cultural resources, the city of Dallas has more than 160 different neighborhoods (Preservation Dallas, 2005).

To pinpoint the essential mark of a community, one might simply turn to the study of ecology. From an ecological perspective, a community may be defined as "a group of interdependent organisms inhabiting the same region and interacting with each other" (Dictionary.com, 2003). Because of a shared physical and sociocultural boundary, the ecological perspective takes the approach that a community's members are united by shared purposes that will benefit all involved. In order to unite as a community, however, members of a community must be able to organize themselves.

Defining "Community Organization"

In order for a community to develop and achieve its collective objectives, and in fact even become a community, some form of structure must exist. *Community organization* is an effort to define and reach the goals of a community. The term community organization was coined by U.S. social workers in the late 1800s in their efforts to assist newly arrived immigrants in the U.S. and poor U.S. citizens (Glanz et al., 2002).

Research has shown that individuals show greater improvement socially, emotionally, and physically when involved in a community setting—civic engagement—as pointed out by Robert McKnight (1995) in his seminal work *Careless Society*. Therefore, for the well-being of a community and its residents, community organization and collective efficacy is imperative. As Austin (2005, p.108) wrote, "The investment of all community stakeholders—neighbors, human service personnel, community organizations—is essential to build communities."

It is with this approach that FCE seeks to revitalize low-income neighborhoods in Dallas. FCE has partnered with community groups such as the South Side Quarter Development Corporation, Vision/Regeneration, and many local community development corporations to engage in community organization.

Features of Community Organization

To be effective in serving all community members, a community's structure must include several features. Maton and Salem (1995) researched three successful community settings and identified characteristics evident in each. One is having either a *strengths-based* or *assets-based* community setting. A strengths-based perspective espouses the belief that each member of a group is capable of contributing to the success of the group's goals, in addition to, or possibly as a means to accomplishing, his or her own personal goals. Others (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993, in Austin, 2005; Sherraden, 1991, in Austin, 2005) have discussed a similar concept, the *assets-based* structure, where each member is seen as a resource and valuable part of the whole. In addressing child welfare workers, for example, Austin (2005) noted that a strengths-based perspective helps workers view recipient families as being able to use their assets to solve their own problems, along with the help of agencies.

FCE continues to engage in capacity building and leadership training with individual community leaders as well as local grass-roots faith-based and community-based organizations. During 2004 and 2005, FCE has provided extensive capacity building training to over 100 local grass-roots faith-based and community-based organizations through its Compassion Capital Building Grant that it received from President's Bush Faith-Based and Community Initiative.

Another key component of community organizing as described by Maton and Salem (1995) is an *opportunity role* structure. The roles of members of successful communities encompass large numbers of tasks, which require various skills and lead to opportunities for developing current skills, learning new skills, and increasing personal responsibility.

A third characteristic found in effective communities by Maton and Salem (1995) is a *support system*. Support ought to reflect a range of types and should be peer-based. As such, the component of the belief system that all members

have value is reinforced. Another indicator of an efficient support system is regular contact between members. Furthermore, members experience a deeper sense of community or belonging when benefiting from the group's support system. Some even experience a familial sense of belonging.

Maton and Salem's (1995) fourth component of community organizing is *leadership.* Part of FCE's philosophy has been to encourage the leaders of its partner community organizations to see themselves as servant leaders. Servant leadership, as highlighted by Maxwell (1993), is an inclusive leadership where the decision-making process surrounding what is best for the community and how the community should organize itself is one of shared responsibility between community members and community leaders.

As a result of these processes and beliefs, individuals within a community begin to feel empowered. When individuals are empowered, the community as a whole is stronger, and thus able to achieve more of its goals.

DEFINING EMPOWERMENT

Empowerment can be defined as the ability of a given community to engage in social action process in order for the community and the individuals living in that community to gain control over their community and their own individual lives. Typically, distressed communities in the U.S. feel a lack of empowerment because of a lack of social, political, and economic clout—e.g., a lack of social capital.

It is important to note the differences here between certain terms related to empowerment and empowerment itself. Empowerment, social capital, and community-driven development are terms that may at times seem to be used interchangeably, but can have fine differences that may be difficult to grasp.

Anirudh Krishna, Assistant Professor of Public Policy Studies for the Hart Leadership Program at Duke University and frequent consultant to the

World Bank, an organization devoted to global poverty reduction and the improvement of living standards, explained the differences clearly in a "Summary of Think Pieces" posted by the World Bank (2003):

- Social capital: Features of social organization such as networks, norms and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit. It is by nature a stock.
- Community-driven development: A methodology of undertaking development enterprises that gives control of decisions and resources to community groups. It is by nature an activity.
- Empowerment: Increasing the capacity of individuals or groups to make effective development and life choices and to transform these choices into desired actions and outcomes. It is by nature a process and/or outcome.

We will now focus in more detail on the term *empowerment* and its significance by exploring how various entities define it and looking briefly at a model built around community empowerment.

Exploration of the Term "Empowerment" and its Meaning

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), a specialized United Nations agency that exists to promote international cooperation among members in the areas of education, science, culture, and communication, defines empowerment as:

How individuals/communities engage in learning processes in which they create, appropriate and share knowledge, tools and techniques in order to change and improve the quality of their own lives and societies. Through empowerment, individuals not only manage and adapt to change but also contribute to/generate changes in their lives and environments. (UNESCO, n.d.)

The *American Journal of Community Psychology* (1995) devoted an entire special issue to the concept of empowerment theory, research, and application. Perkins and Zimmerman (1995), in

their introduction to the special issue, refer to Rappaport (1981, 1984 in Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995), who defines empowerment as "a construct that links individual strengths and competencies, natural helping systems, and proactive behaviors to social policy and social change." Perkins and Zimmerman went on to write that empowerment research focuses on capabilities instead of risk factors, and on studying how the environment influences social problems rather than blaming the victims.[1]

Perkins and Zimmerman (1995) indicated that while the authors of the articles in the special issue were not instructed to adhere to a specific definition of empowerment, a common thread among the authors' work was present—that empowerment is a process that is ongoing, intentional, and centered in the local community. It involves "mutual respect, critical reflection, caring, and group participation, through which people lacking an equal share of valued resources gain greater access to and control over those resources."

In the *American Journal of Community Psychology* special issue, Rich, Edelstein, Hallman, and Wandersman (1995) contended that *community empowerment* can succeed only when *both the community's individuals and institutions are empowered* to reach sustainable and acceptable outcomes, because a community is made up of both the individuals and the institutions. The authors stated that when only one or the other entity is empowered, community *disempowerment* may actually occur. Additionally, if both entities are empowered and act together, but choose an ineffective method, disempowerment may occur.

The premise here is that only when the "various elements come together in just the right way" can community empowerment be achieved (Rich et al., 1995, p. 668). Rich et al. further stated that community empowerment cannot occur unless institutions not only inform citizens and listen to them, but also respond to their concerns, with final decisions being made jointly among the citizens and institutions, both public and private.

An Example of a Model for Community Empowerment

Fawcett's (1995, p. 679) article in the issue defined community empowerment broadly as "the process of gaining influence over conditions that matter to people who share neighborhoods, workplaces, experiences, or concerns." The article described a model for community empowerment that suggests three dimensions which must have reciprocal influence to effect change and desired outcomes—person or group factors, environmental factors, and empowerment capacity or outcome. Fawcett also identified four strategies for facilitating empowerment and its related outcomes:

1) Enhancing experience and competence;
2) Enhancing group structure and capacity;
3) Removing social and environmental barriers; and
4) Enhancing environmental support and resources (Fawcett, 1995, p. 680).

Finally, Fawcett (1995, p. 681) described a framework for the empowerment process in the context of collaborative partnerships. It has five interrelated elements:

1) Collaborative planning;
2) Community action;
3) Community change;
4) Community capacity and outcomes; and
5) Adaptation, renewal, and institutionalization

Since its inception, FCE has in one way or another been involved in these types of collaborative partnerships—from playing a key role in establishing and raising a private equity fund (the North Texas Opportunity Fund, which raised over $27 million to provide equity capital and entrepreneurial assistance to underserved market sectors, minority- and woman-owned businesses, or those in or willing to relocate to the inner city) to helping start and organize neighborhood associations in the South Dallas/Fair Park area.

Bringing Together Community and Empowerment: The Catalyst for Revitalizing Low-Income Communities in Dallas

Dallas, the eighth largest city in the United States, is a tale of two cities. The northern sector has experienced significant economic and social growth in the past 10 to 15 years, while the southern sector of the city has essentially been excluded from the economic boom. The northern sector of the city enjoys stable employment, affluent neighborhoods with strong social capital, numerous opportunities for recreation and leisure activities, and low crime rates. Over the same period, the southern sector of the city has experienced high unemployment rates, population declines, high crime rates, low rates of academic performance, and very low private investment in the area.

The city of Dallas currently has a total population of more than 1.2 million residents (American Community Survey, 2005). The northern sector of Dallas accounts for roughly 58% (or 700,000 residents) of the city's population, while the southern sector of accounts for about 42% (or 500,000 residents). The population of the southern sector of Dallas alone is greater than the populations of Miami, New Orleans, and Atlanta. More than 80% of the residents in the southern sector are African American or Hispanic, while the population of the northern sector is predominately White.

A number of other disparities exist between the northern and southern sectors of Dallas. For example, the college graduation rate for the population of the southern sector is 12% compared to a 40% college graduation rate for the population of the northern sector (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Similarly, the overall poverty rate for the city of Dallas (17%) is well below the 30% or higher poverty rate reported in many areas of the southern sector. Between 1990 and 2000, the population of most of the neighborhoods in the northern sector of the city grew, while many neighborhoods in the southern sector experienced decreases in population during the same time period—especially of middle and upper-middle class minorities.

Additionally, there are significant disparities in northern and southern Dallas communities regarding civic engagement—a measure that Putnam (2000) and Schneider (2005) believe is the most salient measure of community empowerment. In many South Dallas communities, the rate of civic engagement is far below the city's overall rate. Low rates of civic engagement tend to be indicative of communities that have experienced disenfranchisement and a lack of empowerment.

The Foundation for Community Empowerment's vision is that all communities in Dallas will have the resources needed for both community organization and community empowerment. Increasing social capital attributes, such as economic and political capital, that typically encourage community organization and community empowerment is at the heart of FCE's endeavors in revitalizing low-income communities.

Historically, low-income communities, both in Dallas and nationwide, have not had the resources to empower themselves. FCE seeks to change that by revitalizing low-income communities in Dallas and letting those efforts serve as best practice models for other low-income communities across the country, especially in some of Dallas' peer cities, such as San Diego, Miami, and Atlanta.

In sum, FCE's model of change and opportunity is under the umbrella of three core strategies:

1) Community empowerment through strengthening neighborhoods and community-based leaders and organizations in low-income neighborhoods;

2) Systems change through reforming public and private institutions and systems to accomplish their mission for all citizens, especially the poor; and

3) Mobilization and organization of both grass-roots constituencies and influencers, or power groups (such as business, philanthropy, political, media, and special interests, or advocacy, groups), to achieve substantive and enduring change.

NOTES

[1] It is notable that interest in empowerment as a research topic has consistently increased, as demonstrated by Perkins and Zimmerman (1995) and research for this paper. Their research indicated that a search of the psychological literature from 1974 through 1986, via the PsychLit database using "empower" as a root word to search titles and abstracts, identified 96 articles, and a search from 1987 through 1994 yielded 686 journal articles and 283 edited book chapters. A present day search of PsycINFO (formerly PsychLIT) using the same search parameters yielded a total of 5,109 items (PsycINFO, 2005). It is obvious that interest in empowerment as a research subject has increased dramatically in the last decade or so. Perkins and Zimmerman indicated a similar or more dramatic increase in the use of the word in the other social sciences, including sociology-related and education-related research. The increase in the literature continues to support Zimmerman's (2000, in press when quoted in Perkins and Zimmerman, 1995, p. 571) further statement: "As this surfeit of interest and the present issue both make clear, empowerment has become a vital construct for understanding the development of individuals, organizations, and communities."

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Analyze Dallas seeks to become a catalyst toward real progress and change in the city of Dallas and is based on the philosophy that measurement is followed by impact.

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Analyze Dallas seeks to democratize information by making it widely available to all citizens and making it understandable to non-researchers and non-statisticians.

FCE, a 501(c)3 non-profit organization, was founded in 1995 by J. McDonald "Don" Williams, Chairman Emeritus of the Trammell Crow Company. FCE is a catalyst for the revitalization of low-income neighborhoods in Dallas through the empowerment of individuals, community- and faith-based organizations, and entire communities. FCE seeks to build bridges of opportunity, and to foster relationships where investments of money, time, people, and resources should be made.

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