TOWARD AN ANTI-RACIST PARADIGM
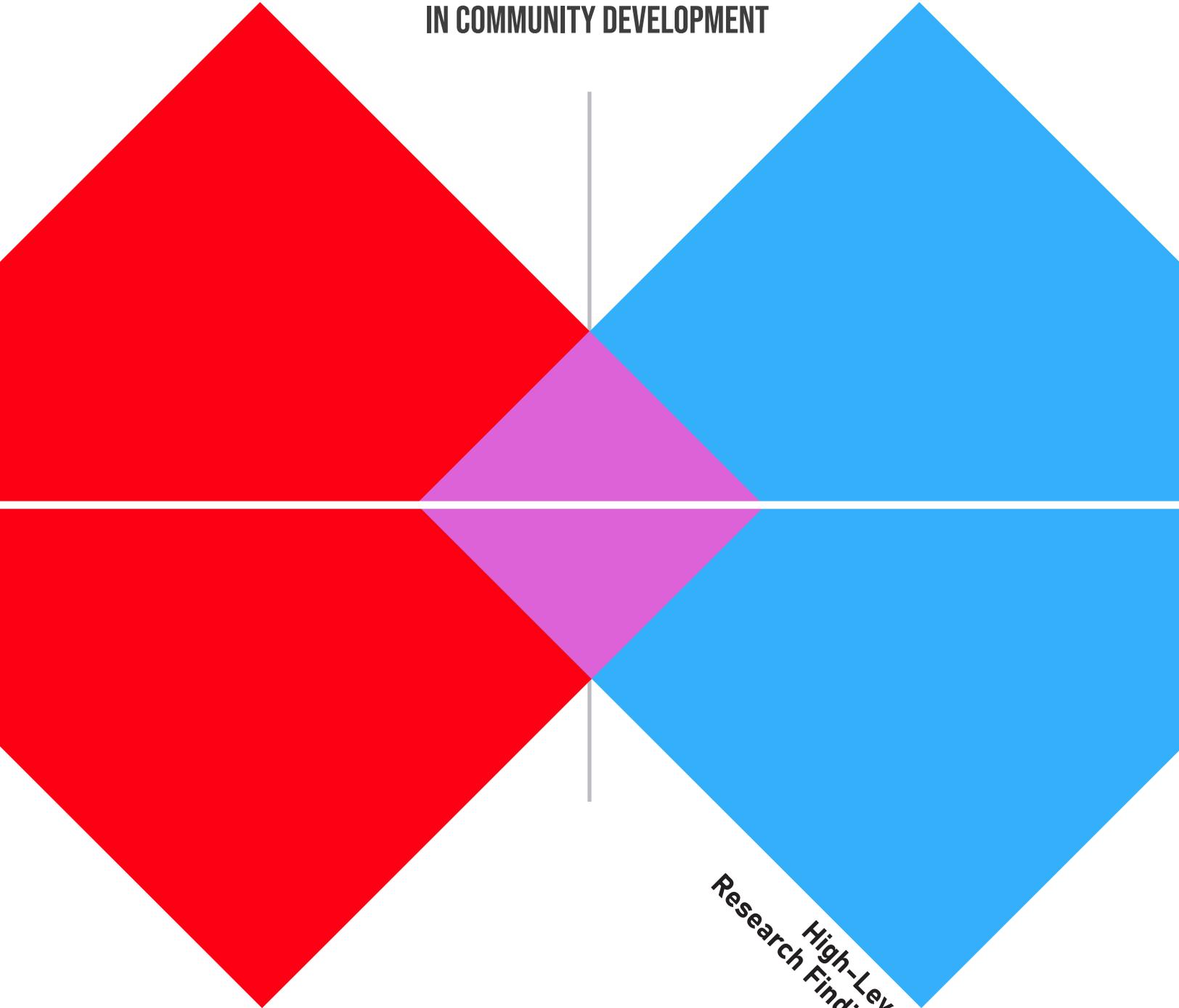# IN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

High-Level
Research Findings

ABOUT THIS PROJECT

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) contracted ThirdSpace Action Lab to lead a research project to increase understanding of how structural racism shows up in the community development sector and to begin to identify specific ways to increase the sector's embrace of explicitly anti-racist approaches in order to achieve health equity.

The project is grounded in a large-scale literature review and a set of interviews with a broad range of community development practitioners (a full list is available at the end of this document). The present publication captures key findings from ThirdSpace's research, drawing from the extensive analyses surfaced in the literature review and interviews. In this document, ThirdSpace provides a high-level overview of what the research demonstrates about why focusing on racism in community development matters; what dominant narratives are underpinning racism in the sector; how structural racism specifically manifests; and what a more explicit, more affirmative anti-racist approach might look like.

A single learning product on its own cannot do justice to the full nuance of all the findings that were surfaced, and the information shared by ThirdSpace in the following pages is intended as the beginning, rather than the end, of a series of materials intended to help facilitate long-term conversations about anti-racist community development.

ABOUT THE ROBERT WOOD JOHNSON FOUNDATION (RWJF)

RWJF is committed to improving health and health equity in the United States. In partnership with others, we are working to develop a Culture of Health rooted in equity that provides every individual with a fair and just opportunity to thrive, no matter who they are, where they live, or how much money they have.

One way the Foundation advances this mission is through targeted investments in community development policy, practice, and systems. By directing resources to communities that historically have experienced a lack of investment, RWJF is able to support improvements in health equity and increase attention to conditions of place.

ABOUT THIRDSPACE ACTION LAB

ThirdSpace Action Lab was created to disrupt the vicious cycle of disinvestment + displacement that negatively impacts the vitality of communities of color with low incomes. ThirdSpace is a grassroots solutions studio dedicated to prototyping creative, place-based solutions to complex socio-economic problems. The organization works as institutional + community organizers, turning multidisciplinary research into evidence-based strategies and activating "third places" to co-create more liberated spaces for people of color.

ABOUT THE RESEARCH APPROACH

To support the project, it was important to ground that exploration in the practical experiences of community development practitioners. ThirdSpace's goal was to organize + conduct what we believe to be the largest research project ever conducted on structural racism in the community development sector. ThirdSpace reviewed a total of 85 information sources in a comprehensive literature review and conducted a total of 87 one-on-one, semi-structured, 60-minute stakeholder interviews using 6 different discussion guides. This enabled engagement of participants in different conversations about the overall state of racial equity in community development, as well as deeper dives in community development financing + funding; community health; community organizing + planning; community wealth-building + small business development; and real estate development + property management. We intentionally controlled for diversity of practitioner experience, including participants' racial identities, job functions, length of time in the sector, geography served, and location in the United States.

THIS DOCUMENT DRAWS FROM THE RESEARCH WORK OF

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So why is it important to address structural racism in the community development sector in the first place?

Literature + interviews pointed to the many reasons that we can't ignore matters of race in community development – whether you care about the community development sector specifically, about community outcomes, or about the success of the movement for racial justice more broadly.

Why Anti-Racist Community Development Matters for the Success of the Sector

If organizations attempt to address urgent needs in communities of color without analysis around the systemic reasons that those needs are there, that **reduces the effectiveness of community development to fulfill its mission**.

If we don't acknowledge + understand that there are extractive + predatory market forces in communities of color, then we **won't be well-equipped to disincentivize harmful, speculative investment or incentivize positive, resident-centered investment**.

If we don't recognize that these kinds of financial actors also hold a lot of political power in how communities are developed, we won't be able to position community-based actors to compete or to advocate for themselves, and we'll **continue to be subject to policy choices that make it difficult to do slow but important community development work like relationship-building + trust-building**.

If we don't grapple with the fact that the same finance + policy barriers that happen at a neighborhood level also occur at a city level in places where there are more residents of color, then we will **continue to see large-scale disparities in how different communities fare across geography**.

If we don't address these challenges, then the community development sector will **continue to experience declining trust + engagement from the residents it seeks to serve**.

Why Anti-Racist Community Development Matters for Advancing Community Outcomes
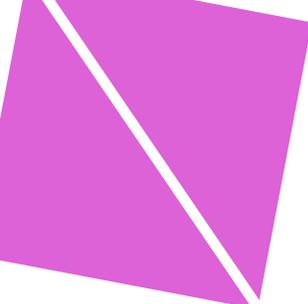
Historic community development + planning policies have ended up concentrating the impacts of structural racism + poverty within narrow geographies. Without a strong, effective, and trusted community development sector, we **won't be well-equipped to address the consequences of decades of intentional segregation**.

If we don't address the consequences of segregation, it's **going to be difficult to address large-scale wealth disparities between white people + people of color in the United States**, particularly when so much wealth in our country is tied to homeownership + small business ownership.

If we don't address the consequences of segregation, it's **going to be difficult to address disparities in health between white Americans + Americans of color**, especially in a country where so many of your health outcomes – from infant mortality to likelihood of disease + illness to access to quality healthcare to average life span – are tied very specifically to the conditions of the community you live in.

If we don't address the consequences of segregation, it's **going to be difficult to prepare for the impacts of climate change, particularly as communities of color are most exposed to climate impact + least resourced to address its consequences**.

If we don't address the consequences of segregation, it's **going to be difficult to address fundamental challenges to preserving democracy,** from building social capital across communities of different backgrounds to facing issues like gerrymandering or Senate representation.

**Why Anti-Racist Community Development Matters for
the National Movement for Racial Justice**

Because racist community development + planning policies
+ practices concentrated the impacts of structural racism +
poverty in narrow geographies, **combatting racism + poverty will
require anti-racist community development + planning policies +
practices grounded in those geographies**.

The experiences of structural racism + poverty are experienced
differently at a block-by-block level, so a sector that **focuses
on block-by-block change is going to be critical to addressing
racism + poverty**.

The more intimate scope of community development work
**lends itself to relationship-building, trust-building, and nuanced
understandings required to do meaningful racial justice work**.

Particularly (but not exclusively) for residents + practitioners
who have less direct lived experience of structural racism +
poverty, community development **can be an important platform
for increasing awareness of, and appreciation for, existing
inequities + more equitable solutions, which expands the
coalition of people dedicated to doing racial justice work more
broadly**.

Particularly (but not exclusively) among younger Americans,
**technology advances are increasing the prominence of place in
racial justice work**. Issues that previously were experienced in
a very local context can now be shared with national + global
audiences, and technology platforms are also making it much
easier for grassroots leaders advancing racial justice work at a
community level to self-organize across geographic lines.

"I'm **SEEING THINGS AT 50
I NEVER SAW BEFORE**, you
know, and you're like 'if I
had only seen these when
I was 20' . . . It's **KIND
OF INVIGORATING**, and
at the same time, it's **SO
PERSONALLY DEPRESSING**
. . . you just realize **HOW
LONG A ROAD WE HAVE**
to go in this country . . .
For a brief moment after
George Floyd's murder, I
**THOUGHT WE MIGHT HAVE
THIS PIVOT**, but . . . **THAT
MOMENT HAS ALL BUT
PASSED**."

- ANTI-RACIST COMMUNITY
DEVELOPMENT INTERVIEWEE
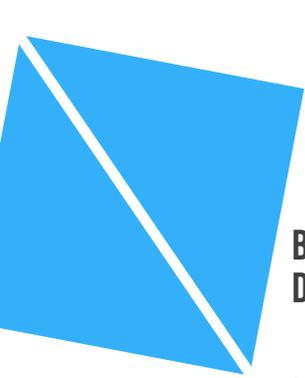
BELOW THE SURFACE:
DOMINANT COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT NARRATIVES + STRUCTURAL RACISM

Undoing structural racism clearly matters for a variety of reasons, and it's important to understand how that racism shows up. However, before we jump straight into what our research revealed about structural racism in community development, we think it's important to step back + look at some of the fundamental mindsets that shape the sector.

Here, we want to outline the dominant community development narratives that authors + interviewees have lifted up. The stories we tell about ourselves + about others contribute a lot to how we show up – in our priorities, the ways we spend our limited time + money, our practices, our processes, and our systems. Community development narratives show up across all kinds of different functions within the sector – and they are long-standing + hard-wired into community development work.

Across our literature review + interviews, we heard detailed perspectives on how community development history continues to reverberate in the field today. Some have pointed to the community development sector's roots in the racial justice movement of the 1960s, particularly the Black Power Movement, and the emphasis on community development as a vehicle for self-determination + for intentional disruption of past racist approaches to policymaking. These individuals were more likely to point to hyper-professionalization (including prioritization of technical expertise + advanced education) as steering the sector away from more equity-oriented roots.

Others have described community development (and urban planning) as inherently racist in its origins, which would suggest a much harder time getting to sector-wide adoption of anti-racist practice + intent. These assessments have generally revolved around four core elements:

- Systems being built intentionally to segregate + marginalize communities of color (and other groups), with an explicit interest in separating people of different racial identities + precluding opportunities for cross-racial social networking + organizing.
- Systems explicitly targeting investment to white households + white-majority communities, with corresponding generational + systematic underinvestment in communities of color.
- Systems intentionally extracting resources from communities of color even as they withhold investment.
- Systems operating from a primary place of paternalism that prioritize (overwhelmingly white) technical experts far removed from lived community experience, which has carried forward in how community development organizations formed + developed their operating structures, priorities, and practices.

Opposite those different interpretations of community development history, we found widespread recognition that dominant narratives in the sector continue to perpetuate notions of community deficit, scarcity, and risk in communities of color – narratives that can lead to practices that perpetuate issues the sector aims to address. We identified eleven.

Risk + Risk Aversion Narrative. Investments in leaders of color + communities of color are inherently risky, while investments in white leaders and white-majority communities (and/or gentrifying communities) are less risky. Funding innovative work is inherently risky, and we should focus on funding work that is already proven. Averting risk is an important (and even driving) feature of long-term community development funding. When presented with a choice between two clearly different risk levels, a community development funder should choose the less risky, even if the "riskier" investment offers more potential for long-term social impact.

Trickle-Down Narrative. If functioning properly, markets will eventually address inequities, including among the most marginalized residents + organizations in our communities. Responses need to be regional or statewide in order to make substantive change. National organizations are better equipped to build field infrastructure than local organizations. It is important to standardize best community development practices across the entire field, rather than allowing for variation or local contextualization of approach.

Bootstrap + Public Dysfunction Narrative. Public benefit recipients will take advantage of the system if they're not incentivized to improve their own situation. People who are poor should be satisfied with whatever they get, even if that means cheap, substandard, and toxic housing. Residents ask for too much + dream too big. Public housing has been a universal failure; it's a money trap and doesn't warrant additional investment. Public investments in failing schools, distressed public spaces, and poorly attended arts + sports programs aren't prudent uses of public funds.

Sanctity of Scale Narrative. Resident solutions might work well in a small geography, but they're not easily scalable. The affordable housing crisis is so urgent that the sector really needs to focus on production of units over community planning or power-building work. The level of economic need in communities of color means we need to bring in whatever kind of development that we can (without attention to what kinds of businesses + jobs residents are actually seeking).

Incremental Change Narrative. If community demands are too great or we push too hard, we'll scare people away from longer-term coalition work. If we call out the bad behaviors of major community development players + private market players too directly, they might not invest here over the long haul. Community members need to recognize that work can't happen that quickly. The numbers suggest there isn't displacement pressure here now, so we don't need to think about anti-displacement strategy yet.

Universal Opportunity Narrative. Race-neutral community development approaches can do a lot of good + with a lot less friction. We should be less concerned about being race-explicit + more about ensuring that there's equal opportunity for all (without an acknowledgment of how systemic inequity has manifested + continues to manifest in access to opportunity). If people are given equal opportunity, over time, that will be enough to address disparities in outcomes by race.

Blank Slate Narrative. The level of disinvestment in communities of color make them ideal places to test new ideas (with an attention to outside visionaries rather than resident visionaries). Communities of color tend to have a deficient base of assets (without attention to assets that aren't valued by markets or to how resources are in fact extracted from communities). The largest institutions in communities of color are the ones that we should really build our strategies around + leverage, even if they are disproportionately white, affluent institutions, and even if this means less investment or attention for smaller anchors + assets led + developed by people of color.

Problematizing Residents Not Systems Narrative. Community members lack the technical capacities to do community development work. Community members don't seem well-prepared to go through basic government processes. If we want to seriously address community safety, we have to start by acknowledging Black-on-Black crime. A big part of the problem with distressed properties is residents not paying attention to upkeep or paying their bills.

Equating Direct Service and Support Infrastructure Narrative. Community Development Financial Institutions are the modern evolution of community development. Community Development Corporations are too geographically limited to do the real work of community development. Economic development can accomplish everything that community development does but at a greater geographic scale.

Magic Leadership Narrative. If we can get more community practitioners of color in positions of leadership, that by itself should solve a lot of the structural inequities in the system. Leaders of color are well-situated to support the learning + racial equity journeys of white staff, board members, and community members. Leaders of color can thrive in pushing reform in community development, even without a lot of professional or financial supports or broader attention to structural racism.

The Prototypical Community Narrative. The community development sector is focused almost exclusively on Black + brown communities of low incomes in larger cities. The vast majority of community development funding already goes to these communities. Supporting the movement of residents of color into predominantly white communities, particularly suburbs, should by itself solve a lot of structural inequities. Community development either doesn't exist or doesn't work in rural, suburban, or tribal settings. Indigenous communities are too sparse for community development infrastructure + are supported anyway through federal treaties.

"I think community development + urban planning in this country was **WIELDED TO CREATE THE GHETTO**, was wielded to segregate particularly Black folks, but also other folks of color, into specific neighborhoods, and then … **EXTRACT RESOURCES** from those neighborhoods … and **NOT INVEST IN TANGIBLE WAYS**, not provide public services to those neighborhoods … So that's kind of the legacy of community development. Today … it just means it's **HARD TO USE THE TOOLS + LEVERS OF COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT** in service of community … We know we **HAVE TO TAKE A RACE-FORWARD APPROACH**, but that can be challenging, both in terms of political context + the willingness of the political environment [for] the time it takes to allow a race-forward approach."

- ANTI-RACIST COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT INTERVIEWEE
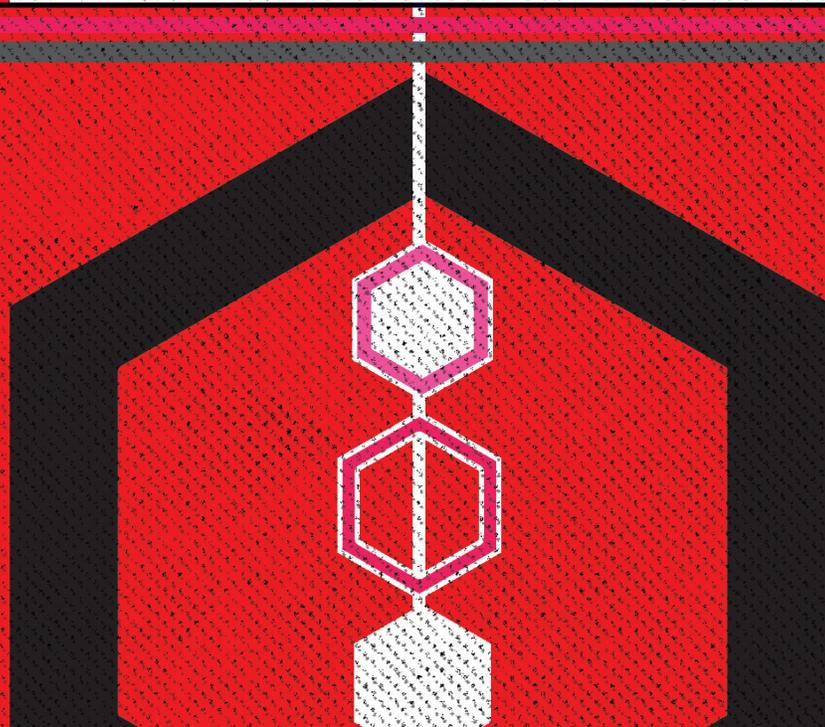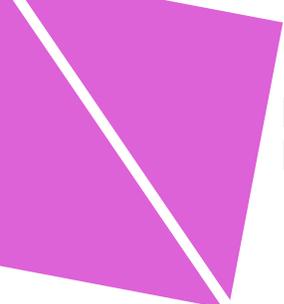
HOW STRUCTURAL RACISM MANIFESTS
IN THE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT SECTOR

These eleven narratives are not always visible as rationales for decision-making, nor are they always spoken out loud (although they frequently are). Nonetheless, if such worldviews are underpinning a sector's strategic direction, it's not hard to imagine how they could bolster + defend racist practices – not just in the distant past but in the status quo of today. The overwhelming consensus within our research was that structural racism continues to show up in virtually every facet of community development. Some of this works at a sector level in determining what success + failure look like and what the expectations are for how to do community development work. Other trends are more specific to particular groups of actors, like real estate developers or community development funders. Below, we outline the themes we heard across both categories.

Over time, community development has shifted to focus almost exclusively on market returns. Notions of community development organizations' capacity is largely tied to their ability to develop real estate at scale + quickly, which has profound impacts on which organizations + neighborhoods receive sustained funding. This dynamic perpetuates inequitable capital access at a household, neighborhood, and municipal level; an emphasis on transactional services to residents over more sustained relational work; an overemphasis on real estate development + an underemphasis on organizing + advocacy; and an emphasis on quantity (of units, of residents served, etc.) over both quality + impact. Community development's increasing reliance on private markets has also happened opposite a long-term, large-scale decline in national philanthropic + federal government support, which has created even more of a scarcity mindset + political in-fighting within the sector.

Hyper-professionalization of the field has had profound impacts on how racism shows up. As the sector has increased its focus on technical activities like real estate development + complex financing work, there's been a growing expectation of advanced degrees + ongoing credentialing, even for entry-level staff. This serves as a considerable barrier to both paid + unpaid roles in community development + contributes to a large-scale underrepresentation of leaders of color in senior positions + on nonprofit boards, public boards, and other decision-making bodies. Emphasis on highly technical skills also leads to hiring primarily from outside of neighborhoods served, particularly in communities of color + low-income communities of lower incomes. The continued emphasis on production leads to the elevation of those with technical skills, rather than relational skills. Clear race analysis remains limited among community development practitioners, particularly among senior leadership, and race analysis is rarely a consideration in appointments to planning commissions + other community development public decision-making bodies.

Community development has become HIGHLY compartmentalized. The sector's focus on market returns + technical expertise has also led to siloed functions in community development, reducing opportunities, for instance, for real estate development professionals to collaborate with community organizers or resident service providers in meaningful ways. Compartmentalized work operating on very tight timeframes also robs the sector of the ability to take more deliberative, holistic approaches to addressing issues across systems. This has left the sector less able to fully address issues like disparities in community health + community wealth.

Community development organization boards have varying + often inequitable levels of decision-making authority. Where practitioners of color are in positions of leadership, there is often a dynamic where boards have broader decision-making authority than in organizations led by white leaders. Within community development organization boards, those with financial expertise + the greatest ability to do relational fundraising tend to have more decision-making roles than other board members, particularly those that are participating primarily as resident representatives. This tends to lead to disproportionate decision-making authority among white board members. An underappreciation of structural racism by board members reduces organizations' ability to address the needs of those most impacted by structural racism + poverty.

Even though community development is theoretically set up for bottom-up creativity, it has increasingly been organized in top-down ways. That distance between community members + decision-makers can reinforce patterns of paternalism – technocratic solutions move forward without much community input; really promising community solutions are dismissed as not scalable; and top-down mandates fail to take into account the lived experiences or priorities of people most impacted by structural racism + poverty.

Rural, suburban, and tribal communities are chronically underserved by community development. In the United States, rural poverty is often treated as a shorthand for impoverished white communities, which has invisibilized poverty in rural communities of color, including Native Americans on sovereign lands. Community development organizations do exist in rural areas but are relatively few + far between. They often must handle a wide range of issues with less resources, bandwidth, and capacity. The lack of attention to race in rural community development can have dire consequences, such as a dramatic decrease in Black farmers being able to acquire + maintain farmland, a lack of housing + employment protections for migrant workers, and an embrace of prisons as a rural economic development model. Meanwhile, there has been relatively scant investment + resources devoted to suburban community development, and that lack of infrastructure has important racial equity implications, as suburbs increasingly attract more residents of color without grappling with their histories as places of intentional + explicit racial exclusion.

The people that community development intends to serve, particularly residents of color + residents living with low incomes, are not sufficiently empowered in community development work. Lack of legal accountability around required "community engagement" makes it an ineffective tool for racial equity, and "community" is ill-defined, leaving room for engagement to exclude people of color living with low incomes. As a result of this, interviewees + authors pointed to a general lack of substantive engagement of residents; engagement of residents too late in process to meaningfully inform what priorities are addressed or how they are addressed; chronic under-resourcing of longer-term organizing + planning work; and a general prioritization of affluent residents (whether existing affluent residents or making community development investments intended to attract new affluent residents). Where residents of color + residents living with low incomes are engaged, there are still a lot of barriers to meaningful leadership, including technical language + technical skill barriers; a lack of compensation or supports like transportation or childcare; little concerted effort to address community distrust; and a general unwillingness to engage on addressing issues that face the very poorest residents, such as homelessness.

Expectations placed on community development organizations are increasing, even as financial resourcing of community development has been decreasing. The broad definition of community development lends itself to organizations taking on multiple bodies of work simultaneously. This dynamic is even stronger in communities of color + communities of low incomes, where chronic underinvestment in basic services has led community development organizations to a sense of social obligation to address issues outside of their historic or core mission purpose, filling government + nonprofit service gaps that are not present in more affluent communities. Community development organizations must hold a tension between holding to racial equity vision + practices within their community, while being subject to decision-makers outside of their community who lack the same attention to race or poverty. Decreasing funding support for community organizing work in particular has decreased organizations' capacity to advocate against such inequitable investment + policymaking.

Communities of color, and particularly Black communities, are subject to narratives of financial risk that white communities + more affluent communities do not face, even controlling for things like revenue + expenses. This dynamic results in significant barriers to investment at a household level (e.g. with mortgages or small business credit lines) to financing of community development projects (e.g. with affordable housing development) to financial institutions themselves (e.g. Minority Depository Institutions + Community Development Credit Unions being undercapitalized but still held to similar standards as larger, traditional institutions). Inequitable financing + investing has curtailed equitable community development trajectory overall, resulting in concentrated geographies of debt + depreciating assets, all of which reinforces the racial wealth gap instead of reducing it.

"This is **NOT A THREE-YEAR GRANT, AND YOU'RE OUT**. This is **DEEP WORK**. That requires 10, 20, maybe more **YEARS OF CONCENTRATED EFFORT TO REBUILD A NEIGHBORHOOD**. Now that sounds like a long time, in people years. But the reality is, when you think about **THE ARC OF A CITY**, the arc of a community, the arc of our country, **WHAT'S 25 YEARS**, right? We should be planning [and] always . . . **THINKING 25, 50, 100 YEARS AHEAD**."

- ANTI-RACIST COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT INTERVIEWEE

Traditional for-profit entities have an outsized impact on community development because they have far greater financial resources + less attention to equitable financing than their nonprofit + mission-oriented counterparts. Large corporations have continued to extract wealth from communities of color + communities of low incomes through predatory lending, housing, and retail practices. While there is a need for a shift in mindset change across the community development ecosystem, authors + interviewees pointed to a particular need to invest time, energy, and resources toward educating for-profit players, including for-profit developers, about their role in creating + sustaining racially disparate community outcomes.

The focus of philanthropic grantmaking continues to prioritize relatively short-term initiatives, despite the reality that transformational community development requires systems change + a long-term commitment of resources + support. Interviewees + authors pointed to community development philanthropic practices that can reduce organizations' ability to address structural racism in the sector. This included overly complicated application + reporting processes organized around funders' shifting strategic focuses; short grant periods + lack of long-term, patient support; and an emphasis on very prescribed project funding that can restrict certain kinds of important grantee activities (particularly relating to organizing, advocacy, and other focuses related to policy shift). Funding also continues to flow to the largest, already most well-resourced, and disproportionately white-led community development organizations, even within funding opportunities specifically targeted toward addressing racial inequity.

While there is growing awareness of the historic context of racist planning + development policy, elected + appointed officials, funders, and other key decision-makers remain hesitant to support race-explicit policy remedies. Fear of legal repercussions has left many decision-makers, particularly government officials, wary of using race-explicit language, even within programs specifically designed to address racial disparities. Even where geography is used as a proxy to try to get around naming race explicitly, guidelines + regulations can reduce the ability of organizations led by people of color from accessing needed community development resources (e.g. real estate development funding targeted geographically to communities of color is still disproportionately accessed by larger, more affluent, and disproportionately white-led organizations due to concerns about capacity + risk among organizations smaller + less affluent organizations, disproportionately led by people of color). Policies + processes that are race explicit, such as registration of Minority Business Enterprises, continue to be cumbersome + largely inaccessible to residents + organizations with low incomes.

State- and local-level control over the distribution of federal funds to local communities contributes to racial disparities + underinvestment within communities of color. Even where there is a shift in federal community development funding intended to reach historically marginalized communities (during certain Administrations + certain Congresses), the reality is that many federal funds allocated for community-centric issues are distributed by state + local governments. This process, therefore, lends itself to the influence of bureaucratic + political environments, which can perpetuate the historic pattern of certain communities, including communities of color, receiving less than their fair share of federal funding.

There is not sufficient investment in practical community development research + learning, and the research that does exist is not focused enough on racial equity. Community development research could be more robust + more centered on the priorities + practical needs of practitioners, policymakers, and residents. There is a great need for community development research that emphasizes racialized experiences, disparities, and priorities. This kind of research needs to be very nuanced in how data is both aggregated + disaggregated so that it doesn't flatten the experiences + outcomes of people of color + communities of color but also doesn't lead to artificial distinctions or overinterpreting findings when disaggregated data sets are small.

The volume of organizations focused explicitly on community development communications + narrative remains relatively small, and community development coverage in mass media tends to be shallow + lacking an equity lens. A small number of media outlets focus on community development practitioners (and adjacent practitioners, like planning professionals) as a core audience, producing news stories, op-eds, webinars, and podcasts. While they are producing strong content + increasingly focusing on racial equity in the sector, they're also chronically under-resourced. In the absence of a more robust community development media ecosystem, national community development networks + intermediaries play a large role in sector communications through convenings, newsletters, how-to kits, and other communication vehicles, but these organizations have a vested interest in promoting their own programs + members. Meanwhile, few mass media outlets attempt to explain community development, let alone racially equitable community development, to a lay audience. Instead, mass media + pop culture have arguably played large-scale roles in perpetuating stereotypes + damaging narratives about communities of color, in topics like entrepreneurship, housing, health, and crime + violence prevention.
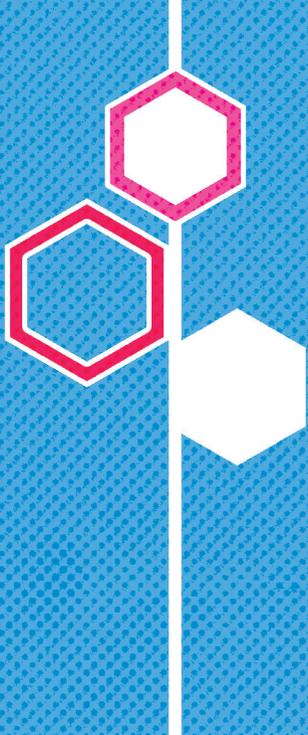
"**WHO REALLY HAS POWER** in those organizations? . . . **WHO [EVEN CAN AFFORD] TO DO COMMUNITY WORK?** ... We're talking about **COMMERCIAL REAL ESTATE JOBS** basically . . . but **NONPROFIT SALARIES**. That's not . . . community development's fault as a field or industry necessarily . . . Why is it that **A BLACK WOMAN MAY BE MORE LIKELY TO HAVE TO TAKE CARE OF** grandmothers or sisters or . . . **MULTIPLE GENERATIONS OF A FAMILY**? . . . Black + brown households are more likely to have multigenerational households where you have the younger generation taking care of both their kids and their . . . parents."

– ANTI-RACIST COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT INTERVIEWEE
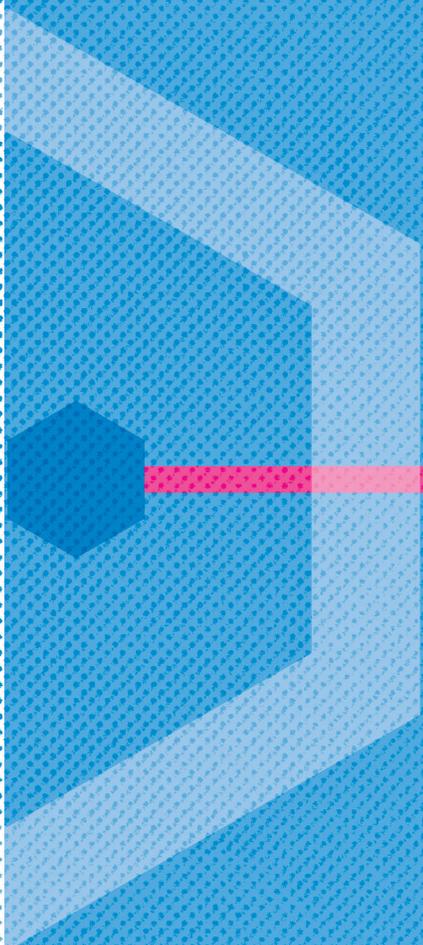
WHAT ANTI-RACIST COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT
LOOKS LIKE (OR COULD LOOK LIKE WITH RESOURCES + RESOLVE)

We know that's heavy, and we know that it might read as a great deal of criticism. But we also think it's important. In order to set community development up for success, we sometimes need to hold up a mirror + reflect on where we've come from + what we look like today.

So that's the mirror that the authors + interviewees provided. But what about windows? It's important to reflect, but it's equally important to be able to look out + see what things could be, what new approaches would accomplish, and what signals there are along the way that we're collectively moving in the right direction.

Authors + interviewees named a number of promising but early signs of that kind of traction. Over the past several years, they noted that there has been considerably more dialogue about, and attention to, racial equity in community development, even if that has not yet resulted in large-scale, tangible changes in practices or outcomes. There's greater appreciation for multi-sector, holistic approaches to community development. There's greater willingness among foundations to invest in community development organizations led by people of color + serving communities of color (as well as more grant funding that's long-term, flexible, and with few requirements), and there's greater willingness among large banks to invest in CDFIs led by people of color + serving communities of color. There's more financial resourcing of residents of color's leadership, capacity, and decision-making authority. In the pandemic era, there's been a greater willingness to quickly implement race-conscious policy + practice reforms, as well as at least some acknowledgment that these reforms have been recommended by community development practitioners of color for a long time.

These signals speak to the even bolder visions that authors + interviews offered about what a future anti-racist community development sector could look like.

An anti-racist community development sector rewards bolder, more creative approaches that are deeply rooted in community context + built from the priorities + solutions of the people that live in those communities, particularly residents of color + residents living with low incomes. Rather than measure success solely around a set of standardized real estate metrics, the sector incentivizes an abundance of race-conscious + race-explicit approaches. That could look like new strategic frameworks – cross-sector + holistic strategies that integrate arts + culture, environmental justice, and public health; healing, reparative, and reparations strategies; asset-based + abundance-based strategies; and history-, narrative-, and culture-centered strategies. It could also look like leveraging existing approaches + tools to move in more equitable directions, such as applying Indigenous land management practices to community development acquisition, development, and stewardship, or using Tax Increment Financing to specifically support anti-displacement infrastructure. In order to foster more meaningful cross-sector + holistic work, authors + interviewees noted that it's important to invest in organization-level infrastructure, but also to create local, regional, and national infrastructure, such as through programs that increase capacity + knowledge sharing about cross-sector work; onboarding + recruitment of thought leaders from sectors outside of community development; increased capacity at intermediaries + networks around cross-sector approaches; and policy reforms that knock down statutory + process barriers that keep work siloed. It also requires an authentic appreciation for (and resourcing of) perspectives coming in from outside the sector, such as the relevance of community health workers in organizing + wealth-building work or the perspective that environmental justice practitioners can bring to equipping communities of color's resilience in the face of climate change.

An anti-racist community development sector recognizes organizing + advocacy as core work + makes sure it has the resources it needs. Reestablishing organizing + advocacy at the center of community development was named by many interviewees as being critical to advancing anti-racist practice. This would require funding + financing for dedicated staffing + more field infrastructure to support + coordinate organizers, such as support of organizations + communities with shared issues + interests to collaborate on advocacy across geographies. Authors + interviewees noted that it's important that community organizing work is more firmly focused on systems change; advocacy needs to be about shifting power, not just shifting resources.

An anti-racist community development sector creates opportunities for true resident leadership + governance, with a specific attention to residents of color + residents living with low incomes. Interviewees + authors noted that there needs to be far greater emphasis on true community leadership of community development, with greater emphasis on self-governance + self-empowerment through financial compensation + other supports like long-term knowledge-building, technology access, childcare, and transportation. Such an approach might involve moving from existing resident capacity building around household-level needs like homeownership counseling + soft skills training toward resident capacity building around systems change work, such as around how public resources are allocated or how different community development decision-making processes work. It might also involve more governance infrastructure that requires resident participation, such as policies that require public elections of community development organization boards, statutory requirements around resident involvement in the selection of certain public officials, or investments in different kinds of decision-making bodies like community impact funds. Ultimately, the goal of this resourcing + support infrastructure would be to begin to redistribute community development power to include those who are most proximate to structural racism + poverty at a community level.

An anti-racist community development sector invests time + resources into internal organization practices + approaches. Interviewees + authors noted that local, state, and national community development organizations need to pay attention to their external racial equity practices but stressed that they also need to invest considerable time + resources to their internal racial equity work. This includes increased focus on building the racial equity competencies of existing staff + board, as well as consideration of those competencies in future hiring + selection of board members. Staff + board, including senior leadership, need both general baseline awareness around structural racism + bias, as well as more technical knowledge about racial equity practices, such as how to integrate race consciousness into complex policy or financing work. Prototyping such internal practices + processes can build early group competencies that can ultimately increase organizations' ability to do external racial equity work. Examples cited of internal racial equity practices that warrant consideration include race-conscious hiring practices, implementation of equity-centered professional development budgeting, staff tuition supports, explicit reconsideration of minimum degree requirements, development of racial equity onboarding materials, and required board engagement around racial equity learning.

An anti-racist community development sector is resourced by community development funders + investors that steer investments to those most impacted by structural racism + poverty and that examine their own policies + practices to ensure that they are equitable. Authors + interviewees frequently noted that how capital currently flows through the community development sector in highly inequitable ways is a major impediment to anti-racist practice across the sector. An equitable shift in community development capital would require entities like foundations, community development financial institutions, and traditional banks to interrogate their own institutional biases; consider the perspectives of grassroots practitioners that might differ from their own; prioritize support of nonprofits + businesses led by + supporting people of color (but also vetting such organizations for the state of their internal + external racial equity practices); interrogate continued default reliance on predominantly white, well-resourced service providers + partners; integrate resident engagement into funding + financing decisions; increase investments in Community Development Financial Institutions led by people of color; and routinely evaluate the impact of institutional rules + expectations, such as around reporting + data collection, on practitioners + residents. For community development investors, there may need to be particular reevaluation of how to build wealth within communities instead of relying on service providers outside of communities; consideration of how to better leverage Environmental-Social-Governance metrics; increased use of capital tools like low- or zero-interest loans; and more innovation in financial tools that can be used to support collective ownership + collective governance efforts, such as land trusts + worker cooperatives. For community development philanthropy, there may need to be more willingness to consider longer grant terms, operating support awards, investments in advocacy + organizing, exploration of participatory grantmaking, and facilitation of relationship-building among like-minded grantees.

An anti-racist community development sector is incentivized to do race-conscious work by supportive public policy. Community development funding + financing is shaped tremendously by public policy, meaning that policymakers need to be active partners in the efforts listed above. At the same time, government + quasi-governmental organizations play substantial roles in the sector beyond just dollars + cents. From zoning to permitting to real estate disposition to standards around public processes, governments set the terms not just for what gets funded but also where + under what conditions community development work can occur, who can do it, and what happens if that work doesn't meet certain minimum standards. Community development is a highly regulated sector, and its ability to implement anti-racist work is influenced by local, regional, state, and national governments' own attention to racial equity. Interviewees + authors suggested that supportive community development policy at different levels would target funding to communities + organizations with both demonstrable need + proven equity practices; create statutory requirements around resident engagement, including greater attention to policy priorities of those most impacted by structural racism + poverty; streamline + remove technical language from public processes to reduce barriers to resident participation; and incentivize or mandate the creation of community equity plans. A number of interviewees + authors pointed to the promise of both federal legislation + Executive Orders of the Biden-Harris administration in supporting more explicitly anti-racist community development work but also noted that the good intent of policies like the American Rescue Plan Act still can result in inequitable outcomes unless there is strong enforcement of accountability, particularly when such policies are implemented by local + state governments that have less explicit equity intent.

An anti-racist community development sector makes strategic, recurring investments in developing + amplifying the leadership of those most impacted by structural racism. While interviewees + authors noted the importance for existing senior decision-makers in the sector to be more proximate to those most impacted by structural racism, they also shared that longer term, the sector needs to ensure that those most impacted *are* senior decision-makers. This is important in different kinds of job functions + different kinds of organizations across the sector but was felt to be particularly important in larger bureaucratic systems, in real estate development, and in senior federal community development–related positions. Supporting this kind of senior leadership requires both investments in the ongoing development of experienced community development leaders of color + building a pipeline of future field leaders of colors. It also requires investments in facilitating knowledge sharing, relationship-building, and succession planning between emerging + established practitioners, particularly as the sector faces a historic generational shift with retirements of long-time leaders. At a sector-wide level, interviewees + authors noted a need to reexamine degree + credentialing requirements in hiring + promotion practices, including exploring where they are unnecessary for work to proceed + also how structural barriers to community development education can be reduced. They also suggested more targeted investments in leadership development, including sustained, long-term engagements in anti-racist, cohort-style leadership development programs; the offering of finance, participatory budgeting, systems change, and racial equity training, regardless of functional roles of participants; and co-design of leadership development programs explicitly created for community members who currently serve as informal + de facto leaders, including youth leaders.

An anti-racist community development sector makes sustained investments in research that supports the needs of practitioners + residents, engages them in every phase of research design, and compensates them for their contributions. Community development research could better serve knowledge + learning priorities of residents + practitioners of color if they were more substantially engaged in what is being researched, how it's being measured, and how results are being shared. This can reduce unintended bias in data collection or overemphasis of certain metrics, particularly the long-time prioritization of analyzing how property metrics are changing rather than metrics related to how people's *well-being* is changing. This shift in approach could result in a change in both methodologies + focuses of sector research, including greater investment in race-explicit research; more robust + comprehensive data sets disaggregated by race; greater emphasis on tracking + measuring policy + financing outcomes; more use of qualitative methodologies, particularly to capture nuanced experiences of displacement or underinvestment not always captured through quantitative methodologies; and increased financial + training supports for participatory research + resident- and practitioner-initiated research.

An anti-racist community development sector prioritizes accessible communications + narrative work as a key strategy in fighting structural barriers to participation caused by hyper-professionalization. Community development is a complex sector, with lots of technical language, frequently used acronyms, advanced degree requirements for staff, dense statutes, and intricate financing strategies. Focused investment in plain language, race-conscious media + communications about community development can help to chip away at the barriers to participation that this enviroment can create both for residents + practitioners. This could involve greater + more sustained investment in community development media outlets already doing this kind of coverage, as well as support of new outlets + approaches and in resident- and practitioner-led journalism. It could also involve increasing attention + resources for more sophisticated community development narrative work, work that can start to dismantle racist dominant narratives that challenge grassroots practitioners but that can be hard to fight at a grassroots level opposite other pressing community needs.

This work is incredibly complex. It requires us to sit with tensions + contradictions. It requires us to recognize that no single reform or single innovation is going to get us to where we want to go. There are no silver bullets or quick fixes. This work is also incredibly important, and we believe that we can find joy + purpose in naming both racism + anti-racism explicitly and then working collectively to move things forward.

To be sure, the research evidences that there are many difficult, unresolved conversations we need to be having. Unpacking structural racism in any sector, including community development, is simply not something quick or easy to accomplish. If it was, there are many incredible community development practitioners – including those that spoke to us in stakeholder interviews – that would have already accomplished it. It is going to require continued dialogue (tied to explicit, tangible action along the way) to truly build lasting change in community development. The residents + practitioners that are already modeling anti-racist practices need more financial, leadership, and communications support to embed their work throughout the sector. And they need more people, particularly people in senior positions of authority + visibility in the sector, to join in these efforts + to actively push for systems change that both reduces barriers to leading in the sector + more actively incentivizes race-conscious work.

So where do we go from here? We hope that you as a reader can see a role for yourself in the wisdom shared by interviewees + authors above. And we offer three prompts from those same practitioners to help guide some critical conversations moving forward:

What do we do about racial equity fatigue? How can we safeguard against that fatigue moving forward? Trainings, planning processes, and public statements around racial equity + inclusion over the past few years haven't translated yet into meaningful reform in the community development sector, at least not at scale. Several interviewees noted that there has been a slow decline in the overall amount of attention + passion to champion racial equity + justice efforts from its peak in the wake of George Floyd's murder, and a deprioritization of race-centered strategies + approaches in the sector. This has led to feelings of skepticism, hopelessness, and outright exhaustion, particularly opposite the very hard work that community development organizations have had to do in response to the pandemic. Racial equity work is generational work, so we need to be creating infrastructure that can support change over the long haul + that prioritizes people's well-being + healing.

How can we collectively do a better job of embedding community development history in our present community development work, particularly when we're working on things that feel urgent or are on already quick timetables? The history of community development is critical – both in the legacy of racist development + planning policy that community development is responding to, as well as how many community development organizations were historically rooted in racial justice work. It can be hard to make time + space to understand + build from history when community development work is so fast-paced, but not rooting in history has a cost. Many reform practices being promoted in the sector today are treated as new + risky, but the truth is that they're often returning to + reimagining communal approaches that were prevalent in the past, particularly in communities of color. Almost by definition, anti-racist community development work has to account for the historic oppression that residents of color + the organizations that serve them have faced. If we don't acknowledge the history of structural racism + anti-racist work in the past, it's going to be that much harder to build the future we're aiming for.

How can we capitalize on – and hold accountable – a federal administration that appears to value race-conscious policy in sectors like community development, while safeguarding against present + future backlash? While interviewees pointed to promising federal attention to race in policy, particularly within the executive + legislative branches, they also expressed apprehension over countertrends that suggest that federal policy may continue to exacerbate inequities within community development. Federal policies like the Infrastructure Investment + Jobs Act, the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021, and the Inflation Reduction Act of 2022 are supporting deployment of financial investment in chronically under-supported communities. At the same time, there's a perceived backlash to race-conscious federal policy in the federal judiciary, tilting toward race-neutral interpretations of laws originally designed to protect people of color. And there's a concerted, coordinated effort to rapidly enact "anti-woke" legislation in states across the country. Interviewees lifted up that while federal community development policy creates a range of specific mandates for local + state governments, these mandates are still relatively weak in regards to racial, class, and geographic equity requirements. Even as we work to capitalize on this particular policy window, collectively creating a policy environment that enables meaningful, race-conscious community development work is going to take significant time. Policy-focused interviewees were proponents of creating long-term mechanisms for increased community input + implementation of accountability mechanisms in funding allocation decisions to ensure that community members have influence + oversight for how these resources are distributed + managed.

How can we truly celebrate, support, and elevate anti-racist leadership, particularly leadership of color? Community development practitioners are tired. This is one of the most frequent things we heard in interviews. Poorly compensated, overworked, heavily regulated, doing emotionally exhausting work in building consensus, across multiple constituencies, over multiple bodies of work. Taking on direly needed emergency response work in the pandemic without the recognition or the financial resourcing of "essential workers". Addressing the immediate needs of residents while pushing for systems-level reforms + creative, new approaches. These are the kinds of conditions that promote fatigue, burnout, and field departure. That is particularly true when trying to pursue race-conscious approaches to the work in a sector that doesn't always actively support such efforts (and sometimes actively penalizes them). And that is even truer when those anti-racist leaders are leaders of color and bear the brunt of implicit biases + emotional labor faced by people of color more broadly. Who leads + how they lead has such a significant impact on our strategies, policies, practices, and outcomes, and that may be particularly true in a sector that relies so much on insights about local context. Yet, we have not yet hit a place where there are sector-wide attention or norms around adequate onboarding, retention supports, knowledge sharing, succession planning, professional development, expectations of healthy work-life balance, protections against microaggressions, or financial compensation to safeguard against these leaders from leaving the sector. Authors + interviewees suggest that we desperately need attention to these issues not just in individual organizations but at a systems level.

Each of these topics could be a book in + and of themselves, but we offer them up as particularly salient places for immediate dialogue + action. We can, we will, we must move. Onward.

Status Quo Community Development

PRINCIPLES

Race neutral
Top-down
Rigid
Compartmentalized
Sterile + Uniform

BENEFICIARIES

Residents + other beneficiaries' communities change with little input in managing that change.
Where resident engagement does happen, it rarely addresses structural barriers to participation.

CBOs

CBOs pursue industry standard approaches without attention to local history or priorities.
CBOs center the vision of "thought leaders" with advanced degrees, technical skills, and capital.

NETWORKS

Networks emphasize sector-wide best practices, often through a race-blind lens.
Networks engage organizations they serve as beneficiaries, rather than co-strategists.

FINANCING

Financing gravitates toward isolated, "de-risked" projects with most straightforward capital stacks.
Investments are dispersed broadly without attention to or appreciation for context or need.

POLICY

Policies entrench decision-making in top-down, inaccessible, and bureaucratic bodies.
Policymakers prioritize speed of decision-making, reducing ability of those most impacted by policy from engagement in public process.

LEADERSHIP

Leadership development is targeted to those who already have baseline technical expertise.
Leadership development emphasizes career advancement of those with the most well-reputed educational + technical credentials.

RESEARCH

Research agendas are set internally by well-resourced institutions, particularly governments, foundations, and academic institutions.
Researchers overwhelming center inquiries + data sets around hard real estate metrics.

COMMUNICATIONS

Media organizations largely ignore community development or perpetuate harmful narratives about community development.
The media landscape generally lacks sufficient supports for localized, civic journalism.

Anti-Racist Community Development

PRINCIPLES

Race-explicit + race-conscious
Bottom-up + inside-out
Adaptive + flexible
Holistic
Culturally relevant + contextualized

BENEFICIARIES

Residents + other beneficiaries have extensive agency in their own communities.
Intended beneficiaries' baseline needs for money, technical skill + language, and time to engage meaningfully in community development work are prioritized.

CBOs

CBOs model + prototype programs + practices that speak to community context + priorities.
CBOs centering leadership + strategies of people with lived experience of issues addressed.

NETWORKS

Networks elevate + incentivize CBO creativity in addressing structural racism.
Networks create mechanisms for frequent + meaningful input from organizations they serve.

FINANCING

Financing supports interconnected projects with greatest potential for collective wealth-building + addressing key resident priorities.
Investments are targeted in communities with greatest impact from redlining + urban renewal.

POLICY

Policies create more opportunities for shared + distributed power, including community power.
Policymakers prioritize deep, substantive engagement in policymaking by those most historically marginalized from decision-making.

LEADERSHIP

Leadership development values, supports, and compensates different forms of expertise.
Leadership development helps advancing promising anti-racist leadership into the most senior community development positions.

RESEARCH

Practitioners + residents are deeply engaged in deciding what is researched, how it's measured, and how results are shared.
Researchers value + resource inquiries that capture resident experiences + outcomes.

COMMUNICATIONS

Media organizations cover equitable community development extensively with lay audiences, including around promising emerging practices.
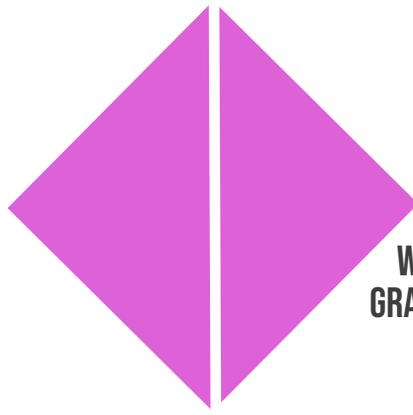Media organizations + funders increase investments in resident-led journalism.

WITH ABUNDANT GRATITUDE

This project simply would not have been possible without the rich analysis, insights, and candidness that people brought to the exploration as authors + interviewees. We will forever be grateful for their contribution to this project + look forward to continuing to build community with them in the future.

Interviewees

Seema Agnani
Marco Antonio Quiroga
Candace Avalos
Miriam Axel Lute
Natalie Bamdad
George Barrett
Aliya Bhatia
Ryan Bowers
April Callen
Omar Carrillo
Chanda Causer
Monica Copeland
Chrystel Cornelius
Nicole Crutchfield
Devin Culbertson
Ja'Net DaFell
Eric Dobson
Michelle DuBray
Donovan Duncan
Clair Dunning
Jeff Epstein
Sasha Forbes
Sondra Ford
Holly Frindell
Vedette Gavin
Rahwa Ghirmatzion
David Goldberg
Adam Gordon
Carol Gore
John Gorman
Megan Haberle
Robin Hacke
Griffin Hagle-Forster
Romi Hall
Ben Hecht
Andrea Heyward
Eric Horvath
Mónica Maria Hurtado
Kiersten Iwai
Courtney Jacobovits
Melissa Jones
Doug Jutte
Chris Kabel

Angie Kim
Sydney Kopp-Richardson
Tamar Kotelchuck
Ricardo Leon
Jeremy Liu
Lenwood Long, Sr.
Paul Lumley
Curt Lyon
Molly Martin
Johan Matthews
Michelle Matthews
Minnie McMahon
Tania Menesse
John Moon
Carol Naughton
Joyce Pan Huang
Oscar Perry Abello
Heidi Pickman
Joo Hee Pomplun
Mykell Price
Olivia Rebanal
Charles Rutheiser
Maya Santos
Corianne Scally
Lacy Serros
Beth Siegel
Kendra Smith
Nathaniel Smith
Tayyib Smith
Syrita Steib
Grant Sunoo
Maggie Super Church
Elizabeth Tail
Pete Upton
Natalia Urtubey
Chris Walker
Emi Wang
Jeff Wicklund
Daniel Wiley
Frank Woodruff
Lisa Yun Lee
Dave Zuckerman

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