

# **Towards Defining Government's Role as Catalyst: Building Social Capital in Disinvested Communities**

by Charles Bruner

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## **I. Definitions of Social Capital**

There is increasing interest in the service reform world of extending beyond providing professional services to constructing community support networks to improve the status of children and families, particularly in disinvested neighborhoods and communities. Different researchers use different terminology to define the type of "community supports" or "social capital" that is needed for children and youth to thrive. John VanDenBerg says simply, "If a child doesn't have friends, he or she is unlikely to succeed" in explaining the need for "wrap-around" services for multi-problem youth.<sup>1</sup> The Community Collaborative for Youth Development Initiative of Public/Private Ventures describes five "core concepts" that lead to youth success, concepts it is seeking to develop within communities participating in the Initiative:

- \* Personal support and guidance from caring adults
- \* Work as a tool for promoting personal development and learning as well as preparation for future employment

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<sup>1</sup> VanDenBerg, John. *Alaska Youth Initiative* (Alaska Department of Health and Social Services, Division of Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities: 1991).

- \* Constructive activities that fill critical gap periods and facilitate major transitions
- \* Active youth involvement in program and community activities, and
- \* Continuity of attention to these four areas from early adolescence to adulthood.<sup>2</sup>

Chapin Hall has introduced the concept of "primary services" (e.g. "sports teams, peer support groups, parks, Y's, church and synagogue youth groups, libraries and museums") as being integral to youth development and success.<sup>3</sup> David Hawkins, Richard Catalano, and Associates speak of "protective" or "resiliency" factors in predicting youth success and are marketing a social development strategy based upon achieving healthy behaviors through creating opportunities, skills, and recognition for bonding (attachment and commitment) with positive influences to produce healthy beliefs and clear standards.<sup>4</sup> Karen Pittman stresses the need to support the "inner circles" around a youth--family, peer and adult friends, role models, and community organizations--and work positively toward youth development, voluntarily, informally, and with an eye toward developing the whole person.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Public/Private Ventures. *Community Change for Youth Development (CCYD): Establishing Long-Term Supports in Communities for the Growth and Development of Young People* (Concept Paper: Philadelphia, PA: Fall 1993).

<sup>3</sup> Richman, Harold, Joan Wynn, and Joan Costello. *Children's Services in Metropolitan Chicago; Directions for the Future* (The Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago: Volume IV of a series of reports prepared for the Chicago Community Trust: 1991).

<sup>4</sup> Developmental Research and Programs. *Communities That Care: Risk Focused Prevention: What Does it Mean for Community Prevention Planning?* (Seattle, WA).

<sup>5</sup> Pittman, Karen. *A Youth-Centered View of Community Supports* (The Center for Youth Development and Policy Research: Academy for Education Development: Washington, DC).

From his research on communities in central Italy, Robert Putnam speaks of the importance of "social capital" in economic growth and regeneration. He stresses that community development must devote attention to "religious organizations and choral societies and Little Leagues that may seem to have little to do with politics or economics."<sup>6</sup> Bronfenbrenner labels this social milieu and network of community supports as "microsystems" critical to human development.<sup>7</sup> William Julius Wilson calls these stable working and middle-class individuals and institutions "social buffers" needed to sustain a neighborhood or community.<sup>8</sup> Frank Reissman and David Carroll have stressed the importance of "self-help" networks and organizations as a significant source of "social capital," with a need for policy and practice to better integrate "self-help" with professional services and supports.<sup>9</sup>

Whatever the terminology used and the nuances of definition, these researchers all describe a largely nonprofessional, voluntary, rich and layered network of social activities and behaviors within a community that afford children, families, and youth the opportunity to congregate, share experiences and interests, and realize some of their aspirations in a way that enhances overall community cohesion. Whether individual families, children, and youth participate in these social activities, their existence within a community serves to reinforce positive development for all community members.

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<sup>6</sup> Putnam, Robert. "The Prosperous Community: Social Capital and Public Life," *The American Prospect* (Spring: 1993); and *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, NJ: 1993).

<sup>7</sup> Bronfenbrenner, U. "Ecology of the Family is a Context for Human Development: Research Perspectives," *Developmental Psychology* 22, No. 6 (1986) pp. 723-42.

<sup>8</sup> Wilson, William Julius. *The Truly Disadvantaged* (Chicago: University of Chicago: 1987).

<sup>9</sup> Riessman, Frank and David Carroll. *Redefining Self-Help: Policy and Practice* (Jossey-Bass Publishers: San Francisco, NY: 1995).

Further, this social capital can be distinguished from other forms of capital -- economic, physical, and human capital. Table One provides a characterization of these different types of capital and the types of public activities supporting their development. As Table One suggests, the public sector is involved, directly or indirectly, in financially supporting the development of all these types of capital, although much of the actual expenditure is in the form of tax benefits.

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TABLE ONE GOES HERE

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Prudence Brown, however, notes that the act of describing the importance of this social fabric does not, in itself, uncover effective strategies for building it in neighborhoods where it does not exist or is torn and threadbare:

Although described in different ways, comprehensive initiatives aim to "strengthen the social fabric" of the community or, in sociological terms, build social capital. ... While recent research supports the importance of social capital for a well-functioning neighborhood, there is almost no knowledge about how to increase this potential asset in a distressed neighborhood.<sup>10</sup>

**II. Alternative Approaches to Neighborhood  
Organizing and Their Implications to Creating Social Capital**

Government, of course, can finance a variety of recreational and child and youth

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<sup>10</sup>Brown, Prudence. *Comprehensive Neighborhood-Based Initiatives: Implications for Urban Policy* (The Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago: Background memorandum prepared for a Roundtable on Neighborhood Change and Community Empowerment at the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development: December 10, 1993). Quotes from p. 8 and 9.

development programs and activities that might lead to "strengthening the social fabric." To be effective in building social capital within a neighborhood, however, government actions eventually must succeed in developing indigenous neighborhood assets to provide such supports rather than importing programs and services from outside. In developing strategies for building social capital, it is important to distinguish between these different approaches--approaches which several writers about neighborhood organizing have described as philosophically and programmatically distinct.

Arthur Himmelman describes these two approaches to neighborhood organization as follows:

- \* **Collaborative Betterment:** begins outside the community within public, private, or nonprofit institutions and is brought into the community. Community involvement is invited into a process designed and controlled by larger institutions. This collaborative strategy can produce policy changes and improvements in program delivery and services, but it tends not produce long-term ownership in communities or to significantly increase communities' control over their own destinies.
  
- \* **Collaborative Empowerment:** begins within the community and is brought to public, private, or nonprofit institutions. In this context, empowerment refers to the capacity to set priorities and control resources that are essential for increasing community self-determination. ... The empowerment approach can produce policy changes and improvements in program delivery and services. It is also more likely to produce long-term ownership of the collaborative's purpose, processes, and products in communities and to enhance communities' capacities for self-determination.<sup>11</sup>

Robert Fisher describes these approaches, as they apply to working and lower class neighborhoods, in different terms but with similar distinctions:

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<sup>11</sup>Himmelman, Arthur. *Communities Working Collaboratively for a Change* (The HIMMELMAN Consulting Group: Minneapolis, MN: 1991).

- \* **Social Work:** views the community essentially as a social organism; focuses on social issues such as gathering together social service organizations; lobbying for and delivering social resources
- \* **Political Activist:** views the community as a political entity and/or potential power base; focuses on obtaining, maintaining, or restructuring power; raising the political consciousness and mobilization of the poor.<sup>12</sup>

Table Two further describes the differences between these two approaches. By its definition, "social capital" requires, in the long term, an approach which includes "collaborative empowerment" or "political activism."

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TABLE TWO GOES HERE

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Clearly, these two approaches do not have to be viewed as polar opposites (although past history suggests that community empowerment or political activist approaches produce resistance from mainstream institutions and the larger community as they become more effective and assertive<sup>13</sup>). They can be seen as potentially complementary approaches. In fact, the Consensus Organizing Institute has sought to integrate them by working to build leadership at the neighborhood level while reaching out to the larger community (especially business and civic leaders) to establish "common ground" to start joint actions between the two.<sup>14</sup> Fisher and Himmelman both recognize that disinvested neighborhoods do not have the resources for economic regeneration solely through "bootstrap" activities but require support from the larger

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<sup>12</sup>Fisher, Robert. *Let the People Decide: Neighborhood Organizing in America* (G.K. Hall & Company: 1984).

<sup>13</sup>Fisher, *ibid.*

<sup>14</sup>*Consensus Organizing Institute: Concept and Background Paper* (Boston, MA: July, 1994).

community. The Committee for Economic Development urges that government and business become a partner in neighborhood revitalization by promoting such outside support.<sup>15</sup> Robert Halpern, somewhat more pessimistically, speaks to the danger of placing unrealistic expectations upon neighborhoods to rebuild themselves.<sup>16</sup> All these

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<sup>15</sup>Research and Policy Committee of the Committee for Economic Development. *Rebuilding Inner-City Communities: A New Approach to the Nation's Urban Crisis* (Committee for Economic Development: 1995).

<sup>16</sup>Halpern, Robert. *Rebuilding the Inner City: A History of Neighborhood Initiatives to Address Poverty in the United States* (Columbia University Press: New York: 1995). Halpern writes:

We continue to view, or at least to treat, inner-city neighborhoods as if they were autonomous entities--not really part of society--created by residents who were masters of their community's fate. "The people are going to solve their own problems" becomes "The poor are going to solve their own problems." Yet there is now abundant evidence that the beliefs, priorities, and practices of people and institutions rooted outside poor neighborhoods have had a profound effect on creating and then undermining the quality of life within them, and on constraining neighborhood residents' efforts to improve their individual and collective lives. ...

The history of neighborhood initiative also reflects more subtle contradictions and disproportions.

Reformers have not only asked the poor to solve problems they did not cause, but have distrusted either or both their capacity to do so and the motives of the indigenous leadership that emerged with self-help efforts. Reformers also often have disliked the consequences of community mobilization, whether articulation of specific demands or expression of anger and frustration. The tendency to trust the residents of poor communities halfway is as old as neighborhood initiative itself. Morone described the Progressives' approach to local control as "protoparticipatory," since middle-class reformers themselves both set the reform agenda and determined courses of action. Lack of trust for residents of poor neighborhoods particularly undermined government and foundation-sponsored initiatives in the 1960s. Neighborhood initiative has been viewed as consonant with American problem-solving traditions only when the dynamics and demands that it presented seemed reasonable to those living outside of poor neighborhoods. (pp. 221-3)

point to a need for support from the "outside." Ultimately, however, the "outside" must be in a supporting rather than a "directing" role in this construction of social capital.

### **III. Beyond Description to Practical Strategy: First Thoughts on Social Capital Formation**

Clearly, one major task for reformers and researchers is to develop and test different strategies for building this social capital and responding to the challenge raised in Prudence Brown's remarks.

James Connell and Larry Aber recently produced one taxonomy of possible strategies for building this social capital (in their terminology, increasing the supply and capacity of "social mediators," or "competent adult networks" for children and youth) within disinvested communities, focusing their attention on youth (6 to 19 year-olds).<sup>17</sup> They focus upon three sets of adults who are primarily involved in the lives of children and youth:

- \* adults living with the youth, including primary care-givers and other adult household residents
- \* adults in the professional support network, including those working with youth in school and in primary and secondary service settings; and
- \* adults in the community-support network, including neighbors, local employers of youth, and adults who work in the community where youth live.

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<sup>17</sup>Connell, James P. and J. Lawrence Aber, with contributions by Gary Walker, "How Do Urban Communities Affect Youth? Using Social Science Research to Inform the Design and Evaluation of Comprehensive Community Initiatives," in Connell, James, Anne Kubisch, Lisbeth Schorr, and Carol Weiss (eds.) *New Approaches to Evaluating Community Initiatives: Concepts, Methods, and Contexts* (Roundtable on Comprehensive Community Initiatives for Children and Families: The Aspen Institute: 1995).

Some of their strategies speak to one set of adults, some to another. While at a fairly abstract level, the strategies they identify are worth summarizing in depth. The authors arrange them within three broad areas:

\* *Building the Knowledge Base*

- Design community-level programs in which trained and experienced parents from the community are paid to work with and provide support for other, less-experienced parents and care-givers.
- Involve the professional support network of adults--including school, social service, juvenile justice, and police personnel--in shared professional development programs to build their knowledge base and repertoire of effective practices with respect to this group of youth.
- Augment the training of adults working with youth in voluntary youth-serving organizations and other primary services such as churches, synagogues, parks, and recreation departments to include specific instruction and supervised experiences in these areas.
- Initiate community programs for all residents in the area of conflict resolution and violence prevention, with particular emphasis on adult-youth relationships outside the home and school.
- Work with local employers to craft mutually beneficial strategies for creating more developmentally oriented workplaces for younger youth.

\* *Promoting Connectedness between Adults and Youth*

- Change school catchment areas, schedules, and staffing patterns to promote continuity of adult support in school.
- Develop case management approaches to social service provision that keep one adult or a small team of adults coordinated across specialties with the youth over time.
- Establish planned and regular interactions between community

residents and youth, and between parents and youth, that build collective traditions of shared activities.

- Provide high-quality day care for younger children that "frees up" parents to spend more time with their older children.
- Establish programs to improve employers' family support practices that encourage increased parent-youth contact.

\* *Connecting Adults in Youth's Support Networks*

- Create a common, consensually validated set of expectations for adult involvement with children and youth, e.g.
  - All adult caregivers are able to call on three other adults in the community who can provide competent care
  - Adults living or working with youth refrain from using violent and profane language in front of youth
  - Adults with responsibilities for youth have effective techniques for discouraging the use of physical violence to solve conflicts
  - Adults working with youth feel free to "call each other on the carpet" for not following through with their commitments to youth.
- Build dense and mutually supportive networks for adults, through activities that encourage parents to:
  - Find out who their neighbors are and whether and how many children they have
  - Make initial contact where appropriate and feasible
  - Engage in some shared activities (for example, a block party, group dinner, or attendance at a cultural or recreational event)
  - Discuss their goals and values for youth, not seeking to achieve immediate consensus but looking for opportunities for shared actions

- Plan necessary actions and share responsibility for carrying them out (for example, evening neighborhood watches)
- Develop ways to look out for and offer support to other caregivers and their youth
- Recognize and accept that there are consequences when adults do not give what is deemed to be the minimum support for their own and each others' youth.<sup>18</sup>

Connell and Aber's list represents a useful starting point, but one which needs to be expanded and refined. Their taxonomy may have more relevance to poor but working class neighborhoods than to destitute ones. Public housing projects and neighborhoods beset by violence may create special challenges to social capital development.

The best way to expand and refine this list is to draw from current efforts in the field. The following are several such examples, some drawn from innovative efforts within severely disinvested neighborhoods. They are designed to be illustrative and suggestive of the diversity of approaches possible for social capital formation, guided by the ingenuity of those pursuing practical and new approaches to meeting family and neighborhood needs. While some are directly targeted to developing social capital, others have that as a significant and recognizable side benefit to other activity:

- \* Several widely-praised community-based programs, for instance the Vaughn Family Center, have established "exchange banks" that ask Center participants to contribute time and resources on an inkind basis for what they receive from the Center. Self-help movements have shown success in building a climate and spirit within disinvested neighborhoods; they emphasize individual worth and stress reciprocity, elements of social capital. "Exchange banks" not only are a means to extend scarce resources and to raise self-esteem among participants; they also are an

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<sup>18</sup> *ibid*, pp. 114-117.

entry point for adults to share their abilities with others.

- \* The Grameen Bank of Bangladesh's widely-cited peer group lending micro-enterprise program itself is based on the power of social capital. Its premise is that business start-up loans co-signed and overseen by friends, even if the recipient and the recipient's friends are very poor, will be repaid. The signatory of friends constitutes both collateral and loan oversight. At the same time, it builds connections within the community that can lead to other entrepreneurial activities.<sup>19</sup>
- \* Community nonprofit organizations can help create community leaders when they take their own board development activities seriously and recruit, train, and nurture board members from their consumers. They provide another avenue for residents to participate in community affairs and to develop advocacy and management skills.<sup>20</sup>
- \* The Philadelphia Children's Network has been a leader in seeking to reintegrate inner-city young men into family and community life through their love for their children. The Network has emphasized that engaging or re-engaging fathers in the lives of their children can bring new meaning and hope into their lives, a sense of the future that is tied to making the community a place where children can grow. While it takes concerted work, Smith claims, "For young men who often are viewed as pariahs within the communities in which they live, parenting brings with it a unique opportunity to claim a stake in society."<sup>21</sup>
- \* Seeking to create more "center-based" child care opportunities for children with disabilities that did not involve "segregated" care, Sunrise Children's Center in Milford, New Hampshire found demand for such integrated settings exceeded their own center's ability to provide that care. They hired a staff to identify other possible providers -- and started responding to newspaper advertisements from family day care homes. They found many family day care homes willing to take children with disabilities, provided they had help in addressing any special needs. The homes

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<sup>19</sup>Nelson, Candace. *Going Forward: The Peer Group Lending Exchange Conference Proceedings* (Calmeadow: Toronto, Canada: 1994).

<sup>20</sup>*Human Development: Building the CAA Staff and Board* (National Association of Community Action Agencies: Washington, DC: 1993).

<sup>21</sup>Smith, Ralph. "Putting Fathers into Families," *Georgia Academy Journal* (Winter, 1993-4). Quote from page 4.

ended up receiving help that often involved basic child development support that benefitted all the children under care. They created a new core of community allies for inclusion -- family day care homes provider and other children (and their parents) receiving care.

- \* In the 1960's, the Center for Community Change provided technical assistance and support for "citizen monitoring" of the use of community development block grant funds. They trained and supported neighborhood leaders in tracking funds and ensuring accountability for their use. The monitoring not only increased compliance and effective use of funding, it also built expertise by neighborhood residents to participate on equal grounds in other community budgeting and fiscal deliberations.<sup>22</sup>
- \* Religious institutions can be critical partners in community-based development. Church-based organizing sometimes has been a very effective strategy in inner-cities, as it fits the social justice mission of most churches and churches can provide a continuity of support and a safe place for meeting within the neighborhood. Often, there is a mutuality of interests; addressing social needs of residents while congregation-building for the churches involved.<sup>23</sup>
- \* The Community Training and Assistance Center (CTAC) has been one of the few "intermediary" organizations in the country to provide truly long-term and intensive technical assistance to distressed neighborhoods and communities. CTAC has stressed a multiple approach to neighborhood regeneration, in many respects working from both "bottom up" and "top down" and using points of consensus as a place to start. Its current school reform initiative--working in such communities as Camden, New Jersey and Jackson, Mississippi--has employed a linked, four-dimensional approach that includes both an "inside" and "outside" strategy in leadership development, emphasizing: (1.) family participation and involvement in all aspects of reform, (2.) corporate and business

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<sup>22</sup>Eisenberg, Pablo, "Monitoring Government: Issues/Challenges/Approaches," *Foundation News* (March-April, 1979), pp. 43-47; and Kotz, Nick, "Citizens as Experts," *Working Papers* (March/April, 1981).

<sup>23</sup>Scheie, David. *Better Together: Religious Institutions as Partners in Community-Based Development* (Rainbow Research, Inc.: Minneapolis, MN) and Garland, James, "Congregation-Based Organizations: A Church Model for the 90's," *America* (November 13, 1993). See also the work of the Industrial Areas Foundation and the Campaign for Human Development.

involvement and leadership, (3.) site-based management of schools, and (4.) collaboration with human service and community-based organizations.

- \* Mutual assistance activities can become a base for community organization. The Del Paso Heights neighborhood in Sacramento, California, established a Mutual Assistance Network, promoting self-help, mutual assistance, and voluntary solutions. Like the Vaughn Family Center, a "time credit" bartering system was created. In addition, a community garden is being established, for residents interested in having garden plots and willing to help sustain the venture through developing a management board to move to independent management.<sup>24</sup>

Like most efforts, building social capital is likely to be a developmental and evolutionary activity. There must be "entry point" opportunities for individuals currently isolated from social systems to become involved. There must be "ladders of opportunity" that offer increasing challenges and recognition for those who wish to move beyond the entry point.

Other strategies worth consideration are those that seek to nurture and support resident mobilization efforts for ensuring public safety (through community policing, neighborhood watches, etc.), tenant rights campaigns, and community development corporation activities--understanding that many of these are "entry point" opportunities for neighborhood residents to become involved. Some participants in these efforts, particularly if they achieve some success, will seek other opportunities to help rebuild their neighborhoods. They may become social capital entrepreneurs in their own areas of particular interest and concern. Rainbow Research Inc. notes, with experience and common sense, that:

In working to build an organization, leaders and organizers need to keep in mind that they are helping people learn lessons which will live long after a particular

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<sup>24</sup> Bolton, Arthur, "A Strategy for Distressed Neighborhoods," in: *Strategies for Distressed Neighborhoods* (Center for Integrated Services for Families and Neighborhoods: Sacramento, CA: 1994). Pp. 5-29.

organization may be gone. ... The long range reality is that organizations don't last. If they do, they change. The lessons learned by the people are frequently the most durable evidence of change.<sup>25</sup>

Finally, there is a role for encouraging those who have found employment and left the neighborhood to return, to become a critical base of economic stability, Wilson's "social buffers." And there is a role for supporting a variety of community-based organizations, although they may be led by persons who themselves reside outside the neighborhood. The challenge for these community-based organizations is to view their outside leadership as transitional and to make concerted and explicit efforts to moving from being "community-based" to becoming "community-owned." There are too few examples in the field of community-based organizations, even those that provide much-needed and much-welcomed support to neighborhood residents, that truly have a mission of converting themselves to neighborhood governance and management.

#### **IV. Establishing the Proper Role for Government: A Catalytic, not Compensatory, Role**

As implied above, the perspective one takes to addressing the issue of social capital formation is critically important. One must first assume (the alternative is to accept defeat) that residents within disinvested neighborhood can produce the social capital their neighborhood needs. If it is not the absence of potential "social capitalists" that causes the shortage of such capital in distressed and disinvested neighborhoods, one must look to other missing factors. There may be few opportunities for residents to become involved. Those opportunities that exist may not fit the talents and skills that residents have to offer. They may not offer sufficient recognition to sustain involvement. They may not provide participants opportunities for continued growth, development,

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<sup>25</sup>McGinness, Grace. *Prerequisites to Power: Six Principles for Building Community* (Rainbow Research Inc.: Minneapolis, MN: June, 1987).

and new challenges. The costs of involvement may be too high. Safety may be a fundamental concern. The larger community, in subtle and not-so-subtle ways, may subvert social capital development efforts within the community. These barriers to social capital formation must be systematically addressed.

Ultimately, the "community empowerment" or "political activism" approach to social capital formation is to create these opportunities for residents and to break down the barriers impeding them.

This requires a fundamentally new role for government. Government should be a catalyst for the development of social capital within neighborhoods; it cannot compensate or substitute for its absence. Defining government's role will require thought and experimentation. Hopefully, there will be many efforts to develop, and test, different strategies for creating social capital within disinvested communities. The need for knowledge-building in this area is clear. The first place to start is to identify, and then eliminate, the barriers that Halpern and others have suggested government can place on disinvested neighborhoods.

**Table Two: Contrasting Approaches to  
Neighborhood Development and Building Social Capital**

Terminology

|                       |                         |
|-----------------------|-------------------------|
|                       | (Fisher)                |
| Social Work           | Political Activism      |
|                       | (Himmelman)             |
| Community Betterment  | Community Empowerment   |
|                       | (Other)                 |
| Service Collaboration | Community Collaboration |
| Top-Down              | Bottom-Up               |

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Emphasis

Agenda, goals and outcomes defined by larger community  
 -- as minimum goals for all children and families and society's responsibility to achieve them

Agenda, goals and outcomes defined by neighborhood  
 -- what neighborhood wants and needs and what changes residents want in community institutions

Focus upon individuals needs  
 -- education, job training, access to health care, human services, child care

Focus upon neighborhood needs  
 -- safe streets, recreation options, adequate housing stock, job opportunities

Organization structure and leadership emphasizes gaining commitment for change from community leaders and professionals

Organization structure and leadership emphasizes building leadership capacity at grassroots to successfully push for change

Emphasis upon service reforms  
 -- making services more responsive to resident needs and concerns  
 Neighborhood input solicited

Emphasis upon political power  
 -- addressing issues of institutional racism,  
 decision-making control  
 Residents govern agenda

Emphasis to help residents be

Emphasis to enable residents

better consumers of services

to operate services

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