NATIONAL COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT INSTITUTE

Through the Lens of Culture:
Building Capacity for Social Change and Sustainable Communities

The mission of the National Community Development Institute (NCDI) is to provide customized capacity building services that promote community building and social transformation in diverse, low-income communities.

Our compelling vision is to build strong, healthy, resilient communities of color with the leadership, infrastructure, and civic participation to effect social change, shape public policy, and influence the political economy in a diverse society.

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Through the Lens of Culture:
Building Capacity for Social Change and Sustainable Communities
By Patricia St. Onge, Breonna Cole, and Sheryl Petty

What is a *culturally-based* approach to capacity building for social change?

The world is a rapidly changing place and with this, the illusion of separateness is diminishing under the same force of change as that which originally gave power to the notion of the "melting pot." We now have the opportunity to think differently about how we engage with one another, and we have the opportunity to be intentional about building a worldwide neighborhood that reflects the strengths of all of its members, and works together to overcome the challenges that we all face.

"*Cultural competency*" has become a buzz-phrase in the nonprofit sector as well as in corporations and government. Traditional definitions of culture have focused on various components of cultural identity, with some authors describing culture as representing "the values, customs, beliefs, heritage, and norms of a particular group of people from a particular society." For many communities, culture is more diverse than race or ethnicity. It incorporates a host of perspectives that include language, gender, class, age, religion, and disability to name a few. Thus every understanding of cultural reality comes from a unique point of view based on an individual's life experiences in the context of the cultural groups in which s/he moves.

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NCDI understands that individuals, organizations and communities experience the world through the lens of culture, whether or not we recognize it or name it as such. The cultural lens, as we at NCDI use this term, has multiple dimensions, including race and ethnicity, language, gender, sexual identity, socio-economic status, religion, etc.

The "iceberg" is often used as a metaphor to describe how culture plays out in the world: above the surface are the external dimensions of culture including food, dress, music, art, dance, literature, language, celebrations, etc. Below the surface are the more subtle areas where culture impacts our worldview: notions of modesty, conceptions of beauty, relationship with nature, engagement patterns (e.g., competitive vs. cooperative), patterns of emotional response, non-verbal communication (e.g., eye contact, hand gestures), relationship to time and space, and many more. A focus on only the tip of the iceberg limits our ability to be aware of and to deeply engage with individuals and communities.

Often, people focus all of their attention related to culture on racial and ethnic "minority" communities. This tendency ignores the existence of other cultural groups established via religion, geography, age, sexual identity, or other factors. This tendency also reinforces the false notion that the "dominant" culture isn't a culture like other cultures, but rather is the norm. Such erasure of various kinds impairs our ability to recognize and respectfully engage with groups and communities.

Imagine, if you can, a collection of "*circles of cultural perspectives*." In U.S. society, White Anglo Saxon Protestant culture, often referred to as the "dominant culture," would be at the center. All other cultures would be in circles around the dominant culture, in a *reactive* relationship to it. When we identify the cultural aspects of the position in the center *and name it* as a cultural worldview, it can then move from the center to take its place as simply one of the many "circles of culture." NCDI's contention is that when members of the dominant culture learn to behave in a *culturally-based* way, it gives them the capacity to understand that all cultures are formed

and developed in similar manners. This recognition then begins to dismantle the dominant approaches used (both consciously and unconsciously) to marginalize "minority" cultures.

NCDI recognizes the need for on-going attention to the question of culture. We see culture as dynamic, with the lens changing as people's experiences expand. As we engage across differences, our worldview also expands to include a deeper understanding of other people's and communities' experiences. Moving beyond cultural *competency*, our culturally-*based* approach is not a topic, but rather a *methodology*. More than a skill set, *it is a perspective* that shapes and informs how we arrive in communities, how we participate in the process of facilitating transformation, and how we leave tools, resources, and capacity behind for community members to continue their own processes of growth, change, and development.

NCDI is engaged in a continuous developmental process to become an authentic culturally-based organization. Our approach is to integrate and transfer knowledge about the cultural dynamics of organizations, communities, and constituencies into specific policies, practices, and standards to enhance the quality of their lives. We understand that in this process, the effectiveness and proficiency of our technical assistance and training services is enhanced as well.

Context

There is a growing body of evidence that *capacity building* and *civic engagement* are two of the keys to social transformation in communities. Underserved communities and communities of color have historically lacked access to quality and culturally appropriate technical assistance support for their capacity building and civic engagement endeavors.

Increasingly diverse ethnic populations have exploded, presenting new cultural implications for the years to come. The recent 2000 census shows that the United States now has 281.4 million people and roughly 37 percent of these individuals declared themselves as "non-white." Each year about one million people, predominantly Latin American and Asian in origin, arrive in the United States, mostly settling in urban areas. The US has become the most diverse country on earth. This increased diversity is a result of centuries of immigration, forced relocation, and an increasing sense that assimilation is not the answer.

"Race" has long been the primary metaphor in the "construction of Americaness." In creating a national identity, for many "American" has come to be defined as "white." While historically assimilation has been the primary method of responding to the Unites States' increasing diversity, new social, cultural, economic, and racial influences require evolved solutions that move beyond both homogeneity *and* beyond mere tolerance.

In her book The Miner's Canary, Lani Guinier points out how our system in the U.S. "racializes" social problems that are in fact *class issues* that impact poor White people in much higher numbers (though in lower proportions) than communities of color. She sees race and the racializing of our society as functioning in much the same way as a canary operates in a mineshaft. The canary alerts the miners that there's poison in the mine. Marginalized people and communities in our society point to a poison in our economic/social system. Our public policy reaction is to pathologize the canary; to give them a little gas mask so that they can survive the poison a bit longer, as opposed to addressing the issue of poison itself and the imminent danger to *everyone*.

The canary represents those most vulnerable in society, and so they are the first to feel the effects of the poison. Nevertheless, it is clear from the metaphor that we all inhabit the same "mine" and that, eventu-

ally, we will all suffer the ill effects of a society that is not attendant to the sources of poison in the air. NCDI seeks to show how the mine is poisoned, and to provide the canaries with the tools for transforming the air, not just to manage their masks more effectively and not to remain simply an alert to others of danger.

The dialogue on race has shaped theoretical constructs of culture and has impacted communities of color. The question of whether mainstream society values concepts such as multiculturalism, cosmopolitanism, and cultural pluralism impacts how ethnic and cultural relationships are forged and maintained in an increasingly diverse nation. If difference is not valued, this is expressed in the treatment of those who do not integrate easily into society; "individuals and groups who deviate from objectified identities because of cultural or biological mixture are [considered] either marginal persons or in pathological identity crisis."

Defining culture as vibrant and central to identity has been part of a larger empowerment process for many communities of color and other marginalized groups. Pushing back against the force of assimilation, it has been by identifying cultural singularities that these movements have brought communities of color into a higher recognition of their strengths. How the U.S. defines itself and defines culture impacts the experiences of each individual, how they interact within their own cultural groups, and the ways in which groups and individuals interact with each other.

The vast majority of research published in the area of cultural competency has been in response to the needs of educators and healthcare professionals. Because of the direct work in diverse communities, these professions have started to grapple with concepts such as multiculturalism and cultural pluralism. A recent report published in the field of nursing examined how the multicultural education movement has begun to redefine pedagogy to meet the contemporary needs of our diverse society.

The following table highlights an example of how world perspectives on life and human nature can vary from culture to culture. The lens through which individuals, organizations, and communities see one another informs their response to social problems as well as how they build community. Embracing the value of diverse cultures and the perspective and insight they bring opens up new avenues through which to create social change.

Table 1 Comparative value orientations

Value Orientations	Euro-Americans middle class	Traditional Native American
Time	Future>Present>Past	Present>Past>Future
Mode of Activity	Doing>Being>Being-in becoming	Being-in becoming Being=Doing
Relations with people	Individual> Collateral>Lineal	Collateral>Individual>Lineal
Relationship between humankind and nature	Dominant Over>Subject to> In Harmony with	In harmony with> Subject to> Dominant Over
Basic nature of humans	Neutral/mixed>Evil>Good	Good>Neutral/mixed>Evil

Integrating cultural knowledge of individuals, organizations, and communities requires developing a culturally-based framework for organizing that includes contemporary theories of multiculturalism but goes further. Some authors claim that multiculturalism alone fails to provide the basis for culturally-based work because its focus on separateness and difference can be divisive. For others, the focus should be on moving in the direction of cultural pluralism defined as "a peaceful coexistence of various racial and ethnic groups, with each retaining its own subculture." NCDI's approach stresses the continuous developmental process of integrating and transferring knowledge about the cultural dynamics of organizations, communities, and constituencies into specific policies, practices, and standards. Each of these models refutes the notion of assimilation into a larger

homogenous society at the expense of deeper understandings of culture.

How we approach this work

In our view, there is a direct relationship between the quality of life in a community and the capacity of its social institutions to address basic human needs, build community, promote social transformation, and achieve institutional change. We think that the key to transforming urban neighborhoods is developing a strong and stable infrastructure of sustainable community-based organizations with visionary leadership, effective management systems, feasible development plans, and viable organizing/advocacy methods.

Communities of color experience both a tremendous need for and a lack of access to, quality technical assistance and capacity building services. Ultimately, as communities develop their skills for self-determination, the long-term value of these kinds of interventions is significant. The work of NCDI helps communities in moving toward self-determination. This is the fundamental purpose of the NCDI: to serve as a national technical assistance center devoted to building organizational and institutional capacity in communities of color and other communities who have traditionally lacked such access.

We recognize that there are different skills needed to be culturally-based than those it takes to be proficient in the technical aspects of capacity building work, and this distinction is significant. Culturally-based technical assistance ensures that community residents lead their own change processes; that consultants come from or have extensive, well-received experience in the communities they serve; and that communities are left with the tools and resources to continue their own transformation and growth process after the intervention is completed.

As part of this work, NCDI engages in on-going self-assessment regarding our own cultural framework, the approaches and strategies we use to do this work, and the resources we have available to deepen our knowledge and competence. We are intentional about drawing upon the skills, expertise, and resources of practitioners of color from various backgrounds, experience sets, and sectors to ensure the continual deepening of our culturally based work, as staff, faculty, colleagues, and members of our team of consultants.

Key *values* that guide us in our culturally-based approach include:
- We recognize the inherent worth, dignity, and unique assets of each member of a community.
- We include attention to the realms of feeling, spirit, and relationships in our work.
- We seek to learn in and from every interaction.
- Our focus is on interdependence (rather than independence) as the pathway to transformation.
- We utilize a holistic, social transformation approach.
- We enter into and work with communities based in the cultural perspectives of those communities. Implicit in this is the need to first *recognize* and then *honor* the existing culture(s) in a community.
- We are intentional about relationship building between consultants, the organizations, and communities into which we are invited.
- We hold a strong commitment to understanding the history of struggles and triumphs, strengths and challenges of these communities.

Within our culturally-based service delivery, we provide effective technical assistance and training services in cross-cultural contexts based on knowledge of, experience with, and sensitivity to the issues of race, language, ethnicity, gender, religion, ability, age, and socio-economic status. Providing culturally-based services means: attending to our own cultural orientations, helping those we work with to articulate, share, and celebrate their own and each other's cultural frameworks, and recognizing that as we move toward so-

cial transformation, culture is central to the entire process, including the way we deliver capacity building services.

Given this, the key elements of our *approach* to service delivery include:

- We are client-driven and responsive to the communities that we serve.
- We listen to the authentic voice of our clients, peers, and partners in the field.
- We see our roles as facilitator, translator, and coach of the change process.
- We provide reliable and beneficial services to each client organization.
- We help individuals, organizations and communities to identify and/or articulate their own cultural context, and create an environment where people are supported to do the work of community building through the lens of their own contexts.
- We pay attention to the set of assumptions we bring, as well as the organization's or community's assumptions.
- We acknowledge that we have a cultural lens through which we engage the world; we look critically at it, and assess how it informs our behavior.
- We value and utilize the unique approaches that communities have historically used to move themselves toward growth and transformation, as the basis for any capacity building, technical assistance work.

A culturally-based approach helps communities become aware of multiple cultures within each community. It helps communities and those who would assist them to understand that *context matters*. With this level of attention to assumptions, history, context, spirit, and behavior, it is more likely that the authentic voices in a community, organization, or individual will be *heard, understood, affirmed and engaged with* in a way that promotes a higher degree of powerful, community-led transformation.

How we deliver services

The following are just some of the elements included in our approach to technical assistance with underserved communities:

- We function as *enablers/facilitators/resources/co-creators* with the community, not as "experts" imposing "other" cultural perspectives or approaches.
- We *identify, document, synthesize and transfer knowledge* about lessons learned and return it to the community, because it belongs to them; and we incorporate the lessons learned into our own institutional practices so that we continue to grow.
- We engage in a process of *diagnosis* that consists of creating a *planning team* made up of individuals who represent the various perspectives within an organization or community.
- We review the *history and cultural elements* of the community prior to beginning a project (conduct a "listening project").
- We engage the planning team in *dialogue* to define the best approach for overall organizational effect (done with them…not to them); and then we create a Technical Assistance Plan that reflects the voices of the planning team.

The *personnel we send into communities* (staff and consultants) are teams that are technically and culturally appropriate to the specific community, in terms of background and experience.
- We do a *scan of the environment* and select the tools and process that are culturally based and arise from the organization or community's wisdom.
- We include a *strategy for leaving capac*ity in the organization or community that outlives our work

with them and we also offer follow up check-in to increase the chances of sustained institutional capacity.

- The *processes and tools* we provide are culturally and linguistically appropriate.
- We *adapt our service delivery methods* to meet the unique needs of diverse groups and ensure that all voices are included in the process. We *tailor the methods* to the community's history and cultures, and we use this history and culture(s) as tools.
- We ensure that those impacted by decisions are in steering positions.
- We ensure that the language and process of the intervention (strategic plan, program evaluation, etc.) is not oppressive.
- We ensure that support services (child care, food, translation, transportation, etc.) are provided so that everyone can participate.
- We deliver services and products in multiple media (written, oral, electronic, paper, etc.) so that everyone in the community has access to them.

We see our role as bridge building in that we perform a linking function between grassroots communities and funders. An explicit focus on culture gives one the ability to meet, document, manage, and then supervise results, since our approach and outcomes are tailored to the specific needs, perspectives, and values of the communities we are invited to work in. We create clear processes for closure and transfer of process and outcomes to the community, and we tell the story in a way that is true for the individuals, organizations and communities. Out of this perspective, the products we create and the services we provide (including follow-up) are geared toward *holistic systemic analysis* and *social transformation*.

Conclusion

Conquest in the political and social realms has been much like what charity has been in the religious realm. The dominant group recognizes that it has strength (military, ideological, or religious) and the group that it encounters (through war, hegemony, missionizing or even in some cases, providing social services) is perceived and interacted with as inferior or is identified primarily by its needs. As we build the global community, we can choose to build it the way nations have been built in the past: as conquerors, imposing a worldview and cultural perspectives on the communities we encounter; or we can collectively discover new ways of respectfully engaging with and learning from one another around issues of difference (racial, ethnic, language, religion, custom, etc.).

Individuals, organizations, and communities, and those who would assist them, can engage in the work of social change incorporating cultural competency skills but going beyond these to create a culturally-based social change process. In this way, everyone is engaged and we have the opportunity to benefit from our collective resources, gifts, perspectives, understandings, and approaches. With this as the foundation, accompanied by a strong commitment to support and honor the authentic voices of community members, we have the possibility of seeing more widespread change. Communities of color and other marginalized communities can finally move beyond having "helpers" trying to do change _to_ them, to having supporters assist them as they transform themselves.

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Developing the article and NCDI's Culturally-based Approach

In May 2001, the National Community Development Institute (NCDI) was born in Oakland, CA stemming from the decades of work of the Community Development Institute (CDI) in East Palo Alto, CA.

As is our process, early in 2002, we identified a number of organizational *Learning Questions* and decided upon a number of forums to use in gaining insight into these questions and to outline pathways for integrating the answers we discovered into our work. In striving to describe our approach and the values underlying it, the term "culturally-based" was coined through our conversations with consultants and other community partners. NCDI's Education & Training Team was charged with leading the efforts on the learning question: "*What is the meaning of a "culturally-based" approach to consulting?*"

During the Spring and Summer of 2002, we convened several "learning environments" in which to further refine and articulate our values, strategies, and outcomes in working with communities of color and underserved communities. The NCDI staff met on a number of occasions to give feedback on stages of development of our "*Culturally-based Framework.*" We also convened a four-day *Learning Community* with consultants and practitioners focused on the "culturally-based" question, wanting to ensure that we engaged the perspectives and thinking of our partners and colleagues in the broader community.

The results of this Learning Community and staff conversations led to this articulation of our values, approach, and strategies used in our culturally-based approach to technical assistance. We are grateful to the staff, consultants, and other community members who engaged in conversations with us about this question, especially the Learning Community participants: Wilson Riles, Deborah Montesinos, Susan Shelton, April Veneracion, Anthony Reese, Omowale Satterwhite, Fred Blackwell, and Rochon Perry. We look forward to on-going future dialogues around related themes influencing the effectiveness of our work and our capacity to be true partners in community and social transformation.

The National Community Development Institute's (NCDI) mission is to provide customized capacity-building services to promote community-building and social transformation in diverse, low-income communities. Our core services are: *Organizational Services*: providing technical assistance to organizations serving communities of color to build stability and local institutional capacity for social change; *Education & Training*: implementing professional development training programs for community-building practitioners and consultants working in communities of color; and *Community Building*: developing and implementing major demonstration projects with the potential to influence practices in the community-building field.

NCDI offers technical assistance, training, and consultation in a wide range of organizational and community development areas including: Board Development, Community Building, Collaborative Development, Program Development & Evaluation, Resource Development, Strategic Planning, and Team Building. The vast majority of our clientele are community-based groups engaged in organizing, community development and/or advocacy activities in communities of color.

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All three authors are graduates of NCDI's Professional Development for Consultants (PDC) training program and have served as faculty for the program.