



Mural by [Max Sansing](#)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Changing systems in community development: Lessons from the first three years of the Strong, Prosperous, and Resilient Communities Challenge (SPARCC)

The Strong, Prosperous, and Resilient Communities Challenge ([SPARCC](#)) aims to shift decades of racially discriminatory policies and investments that have resulted in racial disparities in health and climate resilience in communities throughout the United States. Since 2017, SPARCC has been addressing the barriers facing communities of color and low-income communities by advancing a community-driven development model, which evolved to focus especially on displacement.

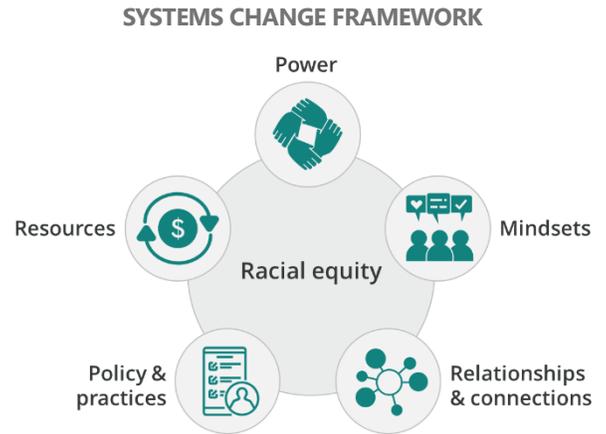
SPARCC's work is implemented by multi-sector collaborative tables in six sites (Atlanta, the San Francisco Bay Area, Chicago, Denver, Los Angeles, and Memphis), together with four national organizations ("national team") that provide support and funding to sites. These include [Enterprise Community Partners](#) (Enterprise), the [Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco](#) (FRBSF), the [Low Income Investment Fund](#) (LIIF), and the [Natural Resources Defense Council](#) (NRDC).

The [Center for Community Health and Evaluation](#) (CCH) serves as the evaluation and learning partner to SPARCC with funding and support from the [Robert Wood Johnson Foundation](#).

The evaluation seeks to answer the following questions:

1. To what extent has SPARCC advanced changes in the systems that shape investments in neighborhoods, with the goal of racially equitable, healthy, and climate-resilient communities?
2. What is driving or impeding SPARCC progress?
3. What can be learned from SPARCC about promoting inclusive investment and integrated systems change?

The evaluation assessed systems change by looking at how SPARCC contributed to shifts in five conditions in the field of community development (see figure, right).



ALL ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS: COLLABORATIVES BUILT AN EFFECTIVE FOUNDATION

Having a foundation of multi-sector collaboratives was key, and seen as positive.

SPARCC funded collaborative tables as a core element of its theory of change to formalize multi-sector relationships and facilitate collaboration. Working with new partners across an expanded network within and across sites has been one of the most valuable outcomes of SPARCC.

All sites developed new relationships and collaboration among partners who had never worked together; approaches to collaboration varied.

Sites were responsive to their own contexts and approaches to collaboration were influenced by geography, philosophy, and collaborative history. This affected how sites approached engaging membership, fostering community leadership, amplifying community voice, and creating structures for collaboration and decision making. Most sites established or strengthened formal collaborative structures to direct SPARCC work. Some sites established a network, or “table of tables,” bringing together several existing collaboratives under a more informal umbrella.

“The kind of work they put in so far in devising a structure for this table is the first type of effort that looks like that in the area [North Memphis]. They are thinking about how to include people from the community who are affected by policies, and who don’t traditionally have a seat at the table.”

MEMPHIS INSTITUTIONAL PARTNER

Multi-sector collaboration and leading adaptive work takes significant skill, time, and resources.

Sites that invested more time and effort in building their collaborative infrastructure saw more payoff in outcomes (i.e., community power and leadership, capital resource investment, and policy and practice change). Challenges to sites’ abilities to develop a strong shared vision included leadership turnover; integration into a preexisting structure and set of priorities; and coalescing diverse organizations, geographies, and priorities. Some sites encountered inherent challenges in SPARCC’s design as a regional initiative with local focus areas, making it hard to define who was needed to participate in the collaborative tables.

SHIFTING POWER AND MINDSETS IN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Mindsets: leading with racial equity

The SPARCC initiative strengthened its emphasis on racial equity over time, which brought energy, momentum, new ways of working, and new partners to the collaboratives. A focus on racial equity has also given cover and credibility to anti-racism work within local power centers, pushed constructive dialogue, and catalyzed strategic changes within all four national team organizations.

“SPARCC has helped us grow and incorporate new lenses of climate and health and allowed us to lead with racial equity. We always had equity in ‘e’TOD but people didn’t want to hear about it. SPARCC gave us power and permission and stability to lead with racial equity.”

ATLANTA TABLE MEMBER

Community power drives change

Supporting and harnessing community leadership and power is also core to SPARCC’s model. Community power influenced collaborative table priorities and informed many local and regional decisions. Tables created new processes for getting community input, provided resources for local community power building, and increased individual and organizational capacity to engage in capital and policy work. Community leadership and power also drove capital investments and started to shift the community development paradigm in some places. Sites found this required slowing down to ensure a strong, collaborative foundation that prioritized racial equity, particularly through community-driven decision-making structures and mechanisms for authentic community participation and leadership.

When Google bought public land near a transit station in the Bay Area, the local SPARCC table brought its influence, securing seats for residents on a steering committee and bringing research on local rent impacts. These and related grassroots advocacy efforts pushed Google to commit to \$1 billion in housing investments (5,000 affordable homes), including affordable housing benefits in the public land it bought, and to establishing a \$250 million investment fund to support affordable housing.

Resources: Financial support for built environment projects

SPARCC disbursed over \$3.4 million across 25 capital projects (including one loan) to historically disinvested communities, supporting built environment projects prioritized by local communities that are showing positive benefits and impact. Capital work at the sites was supported by having a champion with capital expertise, having potential borrowers connected to the table, and developing a pipeline of projects in alignment with communities’ priorities. Using SPARCC debt to finance projects at sites took longer than anticipated due to several challenges, including ongoing tension between projects that are feasible to finance with SPARCC debt resources and communities’ own priorities for projects. The SPARCC national team continues to learn what sites need to advance capital projects in alignment with SPARCC goals and available financial tools. It is adapting its support and resources accordingly. SPARCC is elevating gaps and opportunities in the field of community development and provides a unique model for a philanthropic community development initiative.

In Denver, the Accessory Dwelling Unit (ADU) Pilot Program provides moderate and low-income families the opportunity to build wealth by renting out secondary structures built in their backyards. This program addresses equity within economic opportunity and mitigates displacement by offering affordable housing. This program was made possible through a \$250,000 SPARCC grant and a Fannie Mae Sustainable Communities Challenge award in addition to a partnership with the City of Denver.

Policy & practices: Shifting how development happens

Sites reported a tension between working at the regional level at the same time that they were trying to mobilize and build community power locally since each required significant time and attention. Sites, mindful of leading with racial equity, often found it important to do the local work first. At the same time, sites were able to strengthen their positions as regional actors to move forward local policy priorities and institutional practices to help mitigate the displacement of legacy communities of color and low-income communities. The focus on regional agencies like transit proved impactful.

At the national level, some of the most promising outcomes to-date may be changes within the national implementing organizations reflecting SPARCC values. This included explicitly naming “racial equity” as an outcome goal in strategic plans and processes, providing anti-racist and anti-bias trainings, embedding the SPARCC frame of racial equity, health, and climate resilience into long-term organizational work, and informing the evolution of non-SPARCC initiatives.

In Chicago, Elevated Chicago’s recommendations on eTOD were influential to the City’s process in amending and updating its TOD ordinance. The City’s eTOD amendment includes strategies aimed at avoiding displacement of residences and businesses, reinvesting in low-income communities and communities of color, supporting equitable transit investment, and ensuring appropriate density levels and parking aligned with neighborhood needs.

“We have to do a better job building political will to make change [between mayor, city council and board of supervisors]. It’s building those alliances and educating folks. It’s a critical time to get in there and build support for more equitable solutions, not just geographic equity but social and racial equity.”

LOS ANGELES TABLE MEMBER

CONCLUSION

SPARCC is elevating gaps and opportunities in the field of community development, bringing new partners together, influencing local policy, raising issues of race in local power centers, and changing mindsets. Equally important, SPARCC values have influenced the national implementing organizations in how they prioritize and advance racial equity internally and externally in their work. SPARCC has received funding for a second phase in which it will continue to hone its unique model for philanthropic community development.

LEARN MORE

For more lessons and details that bring the SPARCC systems change progress to life, read the full [evaluation report](#). More information about SPARCC can be found at sparcchub.org.

The evaluation report was prepared by the Center for Community Health and Evaluation. If you’d like to find out more about the evaluation, email CCHE@kp.org.