



# CASE STUDY: SPARCC LA

Center for Community Health and Evaluation



The Strong, Prosperous, and Resilient Communities Challenge – or SPARCC – is investing in and amplifying local efforts in six regions to ensure major new investments in the places we live, work, and play lead to equitable and healthy opportunities for all. Since 2017, SPARCC has been addressing the barriers facing communities of color, especially low-income, by advancing a community-driven development model that prioritizes racial equity, health, and climate resilience. At the heart of SPARCC were local, collaborative tables that worked in partnership with SPARCC’s national implementation team and funders. As illustrated in the theory of change (see image on

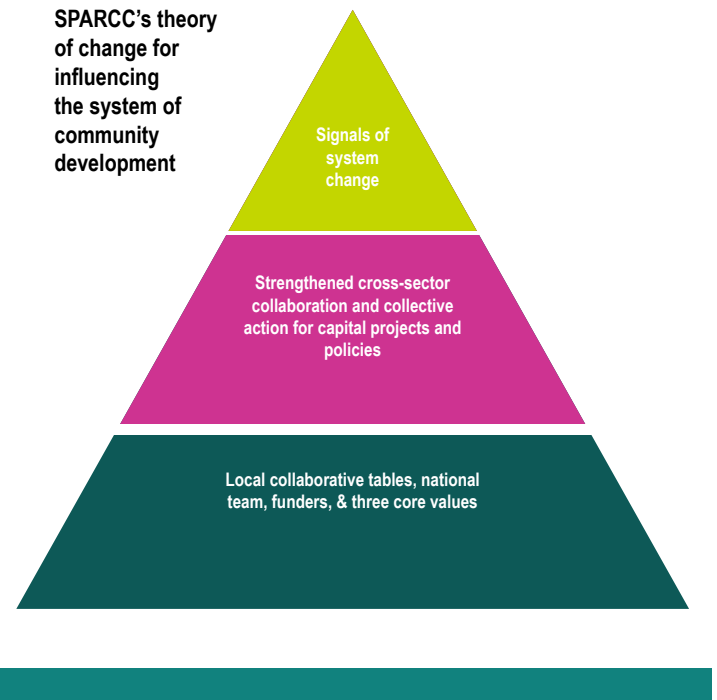
page 2), SPARCC built on and strengthened these partnerships to support collective action to advance racial equity and contribute to systems changes in community development. This case study provides an example of how SPARCC came to life in Los Angeles County including SPARCC’s contribution to changes in local community development systems, collaborative infrastructure and relationships, policy and practices, and capital investment strategies. While it is meant to highlight key examples of work and their connection to local systems changes, it is not a comprehensive or exhaustive account of all the work that occurred in the Los Angeles region during SPARCC.



## SPARCC COLLABORATIVE TABLE: SPARCC LA

The foundation of the SPARCC theory of change were local collaboratives called “tables” that provided the infrastructure for multi-sector partnership to advance SPARCC’s goals. Tables received operating funding from SPARCC to support collaboration and partnership development. In Los Angeles, representatives from several existing coalitions and networks came together to form SPARCC LA in 2017. Since then, SPARCC LA’s groups have deepened the scale and breadth of the impact of grassroots groups, focusing greater resources to increase the capacity of people of color (POC) in leading the work and truly centering racial justice and the voices of those most impacted by systemic inequities. In doing so, SPARCC LA has also increased the alignment and integration of housing justice and transit justice -related work across LA County.

SPARCC’s theory  
of change for  
influencing  
the system of  
community  
development



**SPARCC LA structure and target geography:** SPARCC LA’s goal is regional systems change rooted in housing justice, transit justice, and economic justice. Their approach leverages community organizing and public investments in jurisdictions across the county that intentionally link local land-use, housing and tenant protections policy, together with regional policy and resources. Five key partners lead the collaborative of 35 member organizations:

- **The Alliance for Community Transit-Los Angeles (ACT LA)** is a coalition of over 40 organizations that serve residents across LA County with expertise in transit justice, housing justice, environmental justice, and public health. They work to create a region where all people have access to quality jobs, affordable housing, necessary social services, ample transportation options, and a voice in decision-making.
- **Esperanza Community Housing Corporation** supports the residents of the Figueroa Corridor of South-Central Los Angeles on issues of affordable housing and equitable development, health, arts, environmental justice, immigrant rights, and economic development.
- **Inclusive Action for the City** is a community development organization working to build strong, local economies that uplift low-income urban communities through advocacy and transformative economic development initiatives in the city of LA.
- **Long Beach Forward** builds community knowledge, leadership, and power among low-income communities of color in Long Beach.
- **Social Justice Learning Institute** works in Inglewood to improve the education, health, and well being of communities of color by empowering them to enact social change through research, training, and community mobilization.



**SPARCC LA priorities:** SPARCC LA's collective vision is to ensure that low-income Los Angeles residents of color benefit from new investments, such as climate resilience, transit and infrastructure, without being displaced from their homes. Their work focuses on transit justice, community leadership, housing affordability, street vendor and immigrant rights, tenant protections, and anti-displacement through strategies like community land trusts (CLT)<sup>1</sup>, tenant protections, and small business preservation.



## A SHARED VISION DROVE TFA'S COLLABORATIVE INFRASTRUCTURE AND FRAMEWORK FOR SYSTEMS CHANGE EFFORTS

The SPARCC theory of change suggests that local tables contribute to systems change by developing and strengthening relationships and collaborative infrastructure. With the aim of creating both an annual snapshot of collaboration within the tables and understanding change over time, the SPARCC evaluation administered an annual survey with all table members. This survey consisted of scaled questions addressing the six essential elements of collaboration [see image]. Perceptions of concrete accomplishments and collaborative effectiveness were determined by taking the average of several individual item ratings within each of the six elements in the collaboration model.

SPARCC LA used SPARCC resources to strengthen its collaborative infrastructure by building a leadership team, focusing resources on ensuring advocacy efforts were led by those most impacted (e.g. POC-led grassroots groups), engaging in a strategic planning process, refining its governance structures, and clarifying member expectations. As a result of ongoing investments, SPARCC LA increased its survey ratings on collaborative functioning and overall satisfaction since the beginning of the initiative. **This trajectory signals the evolution of a table with the foundations in place to collaboratively move forward their systems change priorities.** Highlights related to a sample of collaboration elements are included on the following pages.

### Essential elements of collaboration



<sup>1</sup> Community Land Trusts are mechanisms for creating affordable homeownership units and maintaining the units as affordable long term. Learn more [here](#).



## ESSENTIAL PEOPLE AT THE TABLE

SPARCC LA brought together new partners, many that had not worked together before, including schools, city and county government leadership, local coalitions, organizers, policy advocates, and community land trusts, working toward creating a more inclusive, equitable, and healthy region. They connected groups with a history of working on these issues around a shared vision. Members reflected that establishing a collaborative infrastructure that facilitated influencing each other's work across the region was a significant benefit of participating in SPARCC. Partners in Long Beach and Inglewood reported learning a lot from being part of a county-wide collaboration using a wide set of strategies.

SPARCC LA was structured to pass funding to organizations working on their priority areas. They intentionally funded groups that are traditionally not eligible for investments from mainstream philanthropy, increasing the capacity of critical grassroots partners with limited financial and staff resources. Strong values centered on advancing equity and racial justice for BIPOC and low-income communities were strongly held across all SPARCC LA partners. As one member shared, *"Being able to align our actions with our words around equity and racial justice, with how and where we're investing these resources, has helped to uplift what is already in existence and what we know works."*

*"SPARCC funding for grassroots groups has really helped. We're seeing new groups plugged into campaign work. Smaller groups are able to organize with a relatively small amount of money, so it's been a game changer."*

- SPARCC LA member



## ACTIVE COLLABORATION

The active collaboration domain showed the most growth over the initiative as measured by the collaboration survey. This includes practices related to funds distribution, trust, conflict, defined roles, and accountability. SPARCC LA built a structure that was inclusive of many organizations, honored the wisdom that came from their unique contexts, and made connections between partner geographies, expertise, and priorities.

*"It's clear that big policy wins or real change on the ground is really done through coalition. Funding structures need to focus on helping people come together and creating shared work plans. That's really the future, and foundations need to start moving into that model. That's where SPARCC got us to and now it's going really going well."*

- SPARCC LA member

Building on strong relationships and clarity of mission, SPARCC LA was poised to act on the most urgent needs resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, including centering issues of racial justice in solidarity with the movement to support Black lives. The group was well-positioned to leverage policy opportunities to strengthen the pandemic response at both the county and municipal levels. This work required nimble leadership and built on existing networks to help support the emergent work across various issue area coalitions. This example underscores the value of funders supporting the operation and organizing efforts of these kinds of networks that can be quickly activated to respond to urgent needs or opportunities.



## **SPARCC LA CONTRIBUTED TO POLICY AND PRACTICE CHANGES THAT ADVANCED HOUSING AND TRANSPORTATION SYSTEM CHANGES AND BUILT COMMUNITY CAPACITY IN LA**

SPARCC's aim was systems change. This included changing practices, policies, and investments in the built environment to be more equitable so that communities are healthier, more climate-resilient, and opportunity-rich places for all. The SPARCC theory of change posited that strengthened local and national collaboration will result in capacity outcomes and ultimately lead to systems changes in community development policies and practices. Guided by the knowledge of their partners on the ground of what works, SPARCC LA's policy work focused on support of small businesses, immigrant rights, renter protections, environmental consideration in community planning, equitable transit-oriented development, parks-oriented-development, and transit justice.

**SPARCC LA prompted changes in how funders and government entities approach community development work.**  
For example:

- The flexibility of SPARCC funding allowed SPARCC LA to support strategies that had already been determined to work by the communities most impacted. Through this funding, SPARCC LA was able to expand the impact of those strategies and catch the attention of mainstream institutions, such as government, who added their own investments. For example, SPARCC LA helped to organize LA around the CLT model, which then received significant government funding.
- Because of its wide network of member organizations and community partners, SPARCC LA mobilized and united many community voices to advocate for shifting LA City Council funding from policing to community needs, like housing and public transit, in a way that had never happened before.

*"SPARCC's flexible funding really bolstered the strategies that our partners were already pursuing that we know work. Mainstream funders led by a white supremacist framework don't recognize these strategies as credible. SPARCC decided to do things differently and go with what our partners know works, whether it's the land banking, whether it's the street vendor pieces or even the transit justice campaign."*

- SPARCC LA member



**SPARCC LA contributed to policy wins with potential for regional impact on housing and transportation systems while centering community.** For example:

- In 2018, SPARCC LA substantially shaped and gained approval of a new, progressive, transit-oriented communities' policy by LA Metro. The new policy committed the agency to goals and activities aimed at achieving housing affordability and economic vitality in transit hubs across LA County. SPARCC LA built on this win and influenced the policy implementation to ensure equitable-driven development, centering the most impacted communities, on and alongside Metro land, including the production of affordable housing for very low-income individuals.
- SPARCC LA found that COVID-19 heightened existing inequities and brought a new level of urgency to some of SPARCC LA's existing priorities, like tenant and homeowner protections, transit justice, and power building. The powerful advocacy work of *Black Lives Matter* Los Angeles, and other aligned racial justice groups, created pressure on local governments at the city and county level to take action to address the systemic racism and inequities facing LA's most vulnerable communities, especially Black and brown communities. As a result, SPARCC LA was able to move forward some policy priorities with unexpected speed. For example, there was unprecedented investment in community land trusts, widespread eviction protections, investment in anti-harassment ordinances, and the development of a Transit Safety Advisory Committee with LA Metro.
- The Inclusive Action coalition led a major policy win in 2020 legalizing street vending in LA county. The county approved a set of recommendations that were directly informed by street vendors. It established new regulations, allocated \$1 million to begin the process of designing an affordable street vending cart program, and committed the Department of Public Health to working in partnership and developing an education-first approach to compliance.
- In 2022, ACT LA along with a coalition of homeless service providers, affordable housing nonprofits, labor unions, and renters' rights groups, drafted and advocated for the passage of the United to House LA measure. This measure will bring \$900 million a year to the city of LA for the protection and production of affordable housing, cash assistance to seniors and other vulnerable renters, and give tenants facing eviction a fair shot in court.





## **SPARCC LA worked to build the capacity of community members to take an active role in policy processes**

- ACT LA's train-the-trainer model built community capacity to bring equity and climate issues into the development of local community plans across the city of LA.
- In an effort to build community involvement in local governmental affairs, two SPARCC LA partners, Inclusive Action for the City and LA Forward, released their LA 101 Guide, which provides an understanding of how LA's local government works and how to best plug in to work with leaders to support communities.
- The Social Justice Learning Institute in Inglewood holds weekly community meetings for campaign strategizing and organizing. There has been a lot of energy among local partners around the intersections of racial equity, equitable development and anti-displacement. They are working toward strengthening that leadership base and supporting community members, including moving youth into positions of power.
- In 2022, Strategic Actions for a Just Economy, a SPARCC LA member, launched an updated version of an app that gives tenants and housing justice activists detailed information about properties at risk for displacement and/gentrification in Los Angeles County. The app is called Organizers' Warning Notification and Information for Tenants (OWN-IT!) and includes measures of displacement vulnerability and gentrification across the county and can be used to amplify community organizing, planning, and advocacy strategies. Around 30 LA area housing and economic justice organizations use OWN-IT!

**SPARCC LA's ability to break down issue-based silos and center community in their work reached beyond their own table.** SPARCC LA provided funding or in-kind services to various local coalitions and initiatives, allowing for deeper investment in community organizing. For example:

- ACT-LA, Inclusive Action for the City, and Esperanza Community Housing Corporation helped establish the Healthy LA coalition in 2020. Healthy LA's goal is advocating for equity in any policies or practices responding to the pandemic, as well as those aimed at ensuring a just and equitable recovery. This was the first time that such broad geographic representation was included in one coalition in LA County. The collective power of over 300 organizations helped move important policies forward regarding tenants' right to council and tenant protections. For example, the budget advocacy and visioning done by Healthy LA formed the basis for a successful ballot proposition in 2022 in the city of LA. Their work specifically influenced how Measure ULA identified and structured types of affordable housing, tenant protection activities, and the budget to support each of these strategies.
- Long Beach Forward supported a new coalition, Cambodia Town Thrives, which engaged in a community-led planning and visioning process in response to pressures brought by a city of Long Beach zoning update process.
- The Social Justice Learning Institute in Inglewood partnered with a broad coalition of local allies to support tenants' rights in the Antelope Valley and Hawthorne. This effort added capacity to smaller cities that did not have as much organizing infrastructure.



## **SPARCC LA CONTRIBUTED TO SYSTEMS CHANGES RELATED TO COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT CAPITAL STRATEGIES AND INVESTMENTS**

Along with policy and practice changes, SPARCC was designed to shift the systems of community development. This includes both:

- New capital investment approaches, partnerships, and products; improved capital flow to development that supports racial equity, health, and climate resilience and creates options for residents and businesses to remain and thrive
- Observable changes in the built environment that reflect equitable access to opportunity

### **SPARCC LA played a pivotal role in promoting land banking as a strategy to combat displacement**

LA County considered land banking as a strategy to avoid displacement as a result of a large infrastructure project planned along the Los Angeles River. SPARCC funded the Southeast Asian Communities Alliance and others to research alternative possibilities. The report they produced provided recommendations for the county to pilot a land bank model, including details around geographic scope, land acquisition strategy, organizational structure, community partnerships, and funding sources. In response, the LA County Board of Supervisors dedicated \$50 million in American Rescue Plan Act funds to start a land bank<sup>2</sup> to preserve and create affordable housing near the river.

### **SPARCC LA helped advance the community land trust model and infrastructure in LA County**

Members of SPARCC LA have played an important advocacy role in building awareness and support for community land trusts (CLTs) over several years. After partnering with the national SPARCC team to advance policies at city and county levels to secure public investment in CLTs, LA County acknowledged that CLTs need to be funded as part of a sustainable housing system in 2020. As a result, a CLT network formed in LA, and several new CLTs were established.



<sup>2</sup> Land Banks acquire, hold, manage or redevelop property to return it to productive use and meet community goals. Learn more [here](#).





## CAPITAL PROJECT HIGHLIGHTS

Project description (SPARCC funding)	How SPARCC contributed
<p><b>LA County Community Land Trust Demonstration Project (\$500,000 grant)</b></p> <p>A CLT Demonstration Project was approved by the LA County Board of Supervisors in 2020. SPARCC LA partnered with five CLTs to leverage funding from the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act, and the SPARCC initiative granted SPARCC LA \$500,000 to bridge acquisition deposits and due diligence costs for seven small apartment buildings across LA County. SPARCC LA developed property acquisition selection criteria that guided this work:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Multi-family housing (4-20 units)</li> <li>Within .5 miles to transit, also considered transit-oriented development area</li> <li>Tenants engaged and interested in ownership, at risk of being displaced</li> <li>Household income 30-80% area median income</li> <li>Gentrified, disadvantaged area</li> </ul>	<p>Escrow deposit and due diligence funding, most of which was repaid.</p>
<p><b>Thai Town Marketplace (\$100,000 grant)</b></p> <p>Thai Town Marketplace is a new social enterprise and business incubator for immigrant entrepreneurs located above the Hollywood/Western Metro Redline Subway stop and on the ground level of an existing 4-story affordable eTOD project. The project was designed to activate public space, improve the built environment, provide additional cash in the local economy, and increase the number of jobs available.</p>	<p>Provided gap funding to finish construction, signage, and furnishings.</p>
<p><b>Social Justice Learning Institute (SJLI) Headquarters (\$100,000 grant)</b></p> <p>This is a new community facility in South Los Angeles intended to house SJLI's offices and headquarters, serve as a community center for youth, provide opportunities for career and small business development.</p>	<p>Funds went to predevelopment.</p>
<p><b>The Commercial Anti-Displacement Fund (CORE) Project (\$300,000 grant)</b></p> <p>East LA Community Corporation (ELACC), Little Tokyo Service Center (LTSC), Inclusive Action and Leadership for Urban Renewal Network (LURN) partnered to preserve small businesses in low-income, gentrifying neighborhoods through the acquisition of commercial real estate. They created a fund designed to assemble and rehab commercial real estate in neighborhoods where entrepreneurs of color are at risk of being displaced by rising rents.</p>	<p>Funds were used as equity to fill funding gaps in a new markets tax credit investment fund.</p>



## CONCLUSION

Since joining SPARCC in 2017, SPARCC LA has grown, strengthened, and learned more about what it takes to build a collaborative that can move forward community development priorities by centering those most affected. SPARCC LA prompted changes in how funders and government entities approach community development work and contributed to policy wins with potential for regional impact on housing and transportation systems, while centering community. SPARCC LA also worked to break down issue-based silos and build the capacity of community members to take an active role in policy processes. SPARCC LA moved forward ten capital projects, demonstrating a new way to conduct community development, rooted in racial equity and community priorities. The work is far from done and they are committed to pushing for a more equitable LA County for years to come.



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