

The Impacts of the Sustainable Communities Initiative Regional Planning Grants on Planning and Equity in Three Metropolitan Regions

Juan Sebastian Arias
Sara Draper-Zivetz
Amy Martin
University of California, Berkeley

Abstract

This article explores the planning process dynamics and outcomes of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD's) Sustainable Communities Initiative (SCI) in three metropolitan regions: the San Francisco Bay Area, the Puget Sound region in Washington State, and the Minneapolis-Saint Paul, Minnesota (Twin Cities) region. Approved by Congress in 2010 and renewed in 2011 for \$250 million in appropriated funding, SCI was a grant program formed out of the Partnership for Sustainable Communities, an interagency collaboration among HUD, the U.S. Department of Transportation, and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. In this article, we assess the impact of the SCI grants on planning processes, specifically, the extent to which SCI fostered greater collaboration and shared definitions of equity. Through indepth interviews with more than 50 SCI participants across the three regions, this study finds that the grants had both short- and long-term impacts in (1) breaking down barriers to coordination and collaboration across jurisdictions and planning sectors, (2) promoting a greater attention to and understanding of issues of social equity, and (3) institutionalizing equitable planning practices. The impacts were uneven across regions, however; the project in the Twin Cities was by far the most effective. The findings of this research have implications for HUD and other agencies as they select grantees with which to collaborate in the future.

Introduction

In 2010, the U.S. Congress appropriated \$250 million for the Sustainable Communities Initiative (SCI), an interagency collaboration among the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the U.S. Department of Transportation, and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. The initiative was intended “to improve regional and local planning efforts that integrate housing and transportation decisions, and increase the capacity to improve land use and zoning to support market investments that support sustainable communities.” This report analyzes the structure, processes, and impacts of SCI Regional Planning Grants that were disbursed in three regions: the San Francisco Bay Area in California, the Puget Sound region in Washington State, and the Twin Cities (Minneapolis and St. Paul) region in Minnesota. This empirical research explores outcomes related to equity and collaboration and the lasting impact of SCI on regional planning processes.

As researchers, we sought to understand whether and how SCI improved cross-sector collaboration and increased alignment of regional goals and strategies. Through indepth interviews with several dozen participating organizations and entities across the three metropolitan regions, we explored short and long-term impacts of the SCI grants in (1) breaking down barriers to coordination and collaboration across jurisdictions and planning sectors, (2) promoting a greater attention to and understanding of social equity, and (3) institutionalizing equitable planning practices. Interviewees included regional planners, municipal officials, and members of community-based organizations (CBOs). Interviews explored a range of topics, from specific organizations’ roles within their SCI regional consortium to broader reflections on how the SCI grant impacted regional planning culture.

Given our location in the Bay Area, we selected the Bay Area as one of three case study sites. Then, to compare our findings and test our hypotheses explaining outcomes in the Bay Area, we selected the Puget Sound and Twin Cities regions due to their comparable levels of economic inequality, market strength, and high nonprofit capacity. Holding these regional characteristics constant across three case study regions enabled greater comparison and a deeper inquiry into the nuance of process and outcomes in each of the three regions.

We begin our article by offering a high-level overview of relevant academic literature on the themes of collaboration and equity in regional planning efforts. Our findings are then presented as three independent case studies. For each case study, we provide background on the regional effort, information about stakeholder engagement, an analysis of jurisdictional dynamics, our findings surrounding the degree to which the region experienced a lasting impact as a result of the grant, and conclusions. We end with a final comparison of thematic findings and implications for equity, stakeholder engagement, and jurisdictional dynamics. We also suggest some areas for future research to further unpack the themes we highlight.

Literature Review

Several assumptions underlay the SCI program: namely, the need to address social equity and inclusion at the regional scale and the need to integrate existing planning silos. This literature review examines decades of academic debate related to both the purpose and execution of the SCI grant program.

A core premise of SCI was that U.S. regional planning suffers from *siloeing*, or the separation of certain key jurisdictions, planning issues, or institutions to a point of dysfunction. This has become conventional wisdom among politicians, academics, planners, and thought leaders alike. Prominent siloeing scholar and former Minnesota legislator Myron Orfield has produced several widely read works on the frustrated dynamics of jurisdictionally siloeed regions, which he terms “metropolitcs.” Orfield (1999: 43) pointed out the tension between different levels of government: “central control versus local autonomy in federated systems is the central political dilemma in American history.”

A second primary goal of SCI programming was to enhance consideration of social equity within regional planning processes. The logic underlying SCI—enabling a more inclusive and equitable regional planning table—was to both improve planning outcomes and ensure decisions were responsibly influenced by those bearing the eventual impacts. Kania and Kramer (2011) explored this “table setting,” arguing that alignment of goals and definitions is instrumental to the success of addressing complex social ills within a diverse group of actors.

This alignment occurs through an intentional process of continuous communication, shared metrics, and mutually reinforcing activities known in the field as “collective impact.” Mathur, Price, and Austin (2008) further stressed an “ethical requirement” for planners to value democratic participation as a main engagement method.

In a parallel thread of research, Fung (2006) echoed the importance of adding “community” seats at the table, given the planning field’s traditional domination by an “expert” class. Planning often occurs in expert isolation, yet a stronger connection by planners to the people and places they serve results in more successful outcomes (Manzo and Perkins, 2006). This research supports the SCI goal of making regional planning processes more inclusive.

Mathur’s ethical requirement for broader stakeholder inclusion is not without its critics, however. Seemingly engaged stakeholder participation may serve only to deflect attention from what is an otherwise top-down decisionmaking process (Kaza, 2006). Moreover, a seat at the table for impacted community members does not automatically result in a socially preferable outcome (Kaza, 2006; Lester and Reckhow, 2013).

Theorists have also developed metrics for evaluating the success of SCI silo-busting efforts. Dichotomizing outcomes into tangible and intangible benefits may help define and discern what initially seems immeasurable. Intangible benefits, such as increased trust or stronger relationships, can produce indirect effects on planning efforts. By contrast, tangible outcomes could include the adoption of new policies or plans, legislation, or implementation strategies (Innes and Booher, 1999). Examining both tangible and intangible benefits of SCI is necessary to produce broadly applicable best practices.

Leadership and incentive-based explanations for successful cross-sector collaboration offer a more pragmatic lens for understanding SCI. Strong leadership that defines structures and governance mechanisms early in a collaborative process, for example, is key (Crosby and Bryson, 2010). For the SCI specifically, collaboration may be most successful when consortium members “have a reason to stay at the table and negotiate” (Frick et al., 2015).

The academic literature reviewed here foreshadows collaboration and tensions expressed by interview subjects. Concepts of desiloing, strong leadership figures, naïve process expectations, and the ethical requirement all appear and are discussed. Our examination of SCI in three regions serves to both ground-truth existing academic discourse and validate the importance of the regional planning conversation.

Regional Case Studies

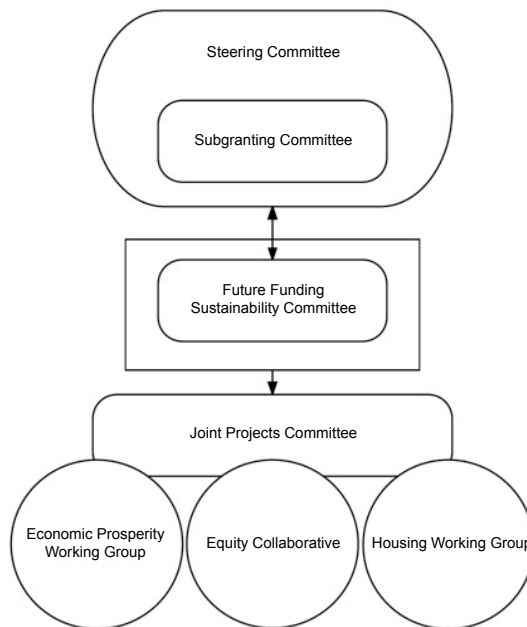
The following analysis discusses four themes salient across case study sites: (1) the nature and significance of equity outcomes from the SCI process, (2) the nature and significance of stakeholder engagement in the SCI process, (3) the jurisdictional dynamics at play in the SCI process, and (4) the lasting impacts of the SCI process on regional planning culture.

Case Study: The San Francisco Bay Area

The San Francisco Bay Area’s SCI grant funded the development of the Regional Prosperity Plan (RPP), led by the Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC), which, in partnership with the Association of Bay Area Governments, is the metropolitan planning organization (MPO) for the nine-county Bay Area region. Exhibit 1 illustrates the organizational structure of the San Francisco Bay Area’s RPP Consortium.

Exhibit 1

Organizational Structure of the San Francisco Bay Area Regional Prosperity Plan Consortium



The RPP identified four main focus areas: (1) limited opportunities for low-wage workers, (2) regional housing unaffordability, (3) housing and jobs spatial mismatch, and (4) gentrification and displacement pressures. To address these needs, the RPP developed an Economic Prosperity Strategy to expand opportunities for low- and moderate-income individuals. The RPP also focused on funding community-based pilot projects intended to address economic and housing disparities.

Regional Approaches to Equity

The RPP saw mixed results in its effort to integrate equity considerations in regional planning. At a high level, MTC's embrace of equity was perceived to be superficial and inadequate. However, the evolution of the RPP's governance did create a space for more targeted attention to equity related issues.

In the other two regions' SCI governance structures, a focus on equity materialized early on in the process. In the Bay Area, the consortium added a separate equity-focused working group, named the Equity Collaborative, later in the process. Even once the dedicated working group was created, however, its exact charge was unclear. The Equity Collaborative was seen as somewhat effective; according to a Bay Area CBO worker and Equity Collaborative member, the group "was [funding] really cool and interesting stuff, but it was really hard to tell what it all added up to." A CBO executive from the Bay Area also raised concerns about the group's lack of integration with other parts of the regional effort: "Equity did kind of get pigeon-holed a little bit into the equity work group... equity advocates got kind of siloed in there."

On the other hand, some saw value in this siloed approach, claiming it created a safe space for more meaningful equity conversations to occur, instead of being relegated to the margins of other working groups. An executive of a large nonprofit shared, "The strategy of building up equity-centered space is helpful, because people feel they can come into that space and talk about what their communities truly need, what they're hearing, more openly." In this sense, a separate space was key to legitimizing and elevating equity issues in conventional regional planning.

Still, the working group did not help establish a shared regional definition of "equity." Much of the conversation around regional equity was focused on residential displacement and low-wage work conditions, with race and ethnicity largely left out. Although stakeholders in other regions felt that racial issues were more directly confronted, this focus was absent in the Bay Area.

Stakeholder Engagement

Distrust, both between small and large CBOs and between local and regional governments, characterized much of the Bay Area project. These dynamics influenced the way stakeholders were engaged, especially among businesses with political and financial capital to support regional efforts and community members with the lived experience to inform and steer regional priorities.

Business engagement. Although in other regions business coalitions and chambers of commerce stepped up to serve as a business liaison to the SCI process, these stakeholder groups in the Bay Area were ultimately less involved. The Bay Area Council (BAC), a local business-sponsored advocacy group, was initially engaged in developing a regional economic development strategy through the Economic Prosperity work group. However, their involvement ended over political

disagreement with the scope of the work group's effort. Unsurprisingly, RPP consortium members (particularly CBOs) later expressed frustration with the local business community's lack of willingness to collaborate.

Following this rift, however, the BAC released a separate regional economic development report supported by MTC. The release of the report signaled a deeper engagement of the business community in regional planning discussions, but also cemented the divisions between BAC and the RPP consortium, and established parallel visions for regional economic development.

Community engagement. In contrast to the Twin Cities and to the Puget Sound Region, the Bay Area did not initially build in mechanisms to ensure community voices were included in the governance structure.

The RPP eventually addressed this issue by directly resourcing participation for low-capacity stakeholders through stipends to working group leadership. The RPP also had small grants funds that did help engage smaller community groups otherwise excluded from regional planning dialogues. However, these efforts did not add up to a comprehensive community engagement strategy, especially as compared with other case study regions. As a result, grantmaking decisions were regarded with skepticism; SCI funds were seen as yet another funding stream for the higher capacity organizations that already had an established voice. Ultimately, the SCI process did not shift tensions between large and small advocacy and community groups in the region.

In spite of these shortcomings, the RPP did produce some successes in community engagement. For example, community organizations reported stronger relationships among their peers. Some also gained a greater understanding of regional political and power structures as a result of their participation in the RPP consortium, which resulted in shifts in their organizing and advocacy strategies. In some instances, CBO-led projects have continued beyond SCI, signifying lasting changes in the capacity of grassroots groups.

Jurisdictional Dynamics

In some cases, unlikely partnerships emerged across and among jurisdictions. However, regional coordination was still a challenge due to competing policy priorities and interest among local and regional governing bodies. A CBO employee shared an example: "in the inner core, we're talking about more bus lines, more service on existing bus routes, connecting last mile connections between transit hubs and job centers," whereas in more outlying counties, the conversation is "about Uber, and shuttle apps and rideshare mobile apps that would help with rideshares, those kinds of strategies which are much more diffuse. We tried to hear those ideas and incorporate them but they're different."

In spite of these competing priorities, sharing and learning across municipalities did occur. For example, Santa Clara and Marin County, two counties with little historic interaction, shared and adapted a workforce strategy from SCI participants in Palo Alto for Marin communities. Similarly, urban jurisdictions provided some suburbs that have lower planning capacity with new technical tools and insights to address issues, such as displacement.

The greatest identified challenge to regional collaboration, however, was the lack of local incentive to act in the regional interest. A Bay Area nonprofit employee described these political dynamics.

Local decision-makers don't want their local decisions conditioned based on regional priorities. There are no political incentives for people to act at a regional level. They're elected by local populations. They get campaign donations by people who are interested in local issues. ... And they will put on this magical regional hat and we expect them, without sufficient political pressure, or without legal pressure or whatever, to act in a regional self-interest.

Another CBO leader summarized the same sentiment: "We can have all these regional aspirations but parochialism is ripe in this region."

Lasting Impacts and Institutionalization

Several community group representatives shared their distrust of the regional MPO. Many felt MTC should not have been leading the charge if the grant's goal was to advance regional equity. This skepticism about the regional agency suggests that MTC had ample room for growth in the institutionalization of equity concerns in its policies and programs.

Still, a few interviewees did report seeing the MPO's perspective shift on equity. At the very least, the grant and its related processes put concepts of equity on the radar of MTC. As one regional agency employee described, "it allowed for equity to become an increasing core component of what agencies are either talking about or are going to be implementing."

The extent to which the SCI program contributed to more formal, lasting changes in MTC practice and policy is less clear, however. Although considerations of equity issues like displacement have received greater attention among the agency's staff, similar shifts in perspective had not yet reached the agency's leadership. Several years after grant ended, MTC commissioners, for example, were still not convinced displacement was an issue to address at the regional scale. By this account, a failure to shift the perspective of MTC commissioners led to little change in MTC practice.

On the other hand, several CBOs reported having a more direct relationship with MTC and better understanding of how they can affect change within the agency after participating in SCI. One CBO employee elaborated on this success.

So, now we're in a moment where many more of the local equity groups are aware of the regional agencies ... we are aware of what they do. We are aware of who they are. We are aware of where they're located. We understand their programs, their policies, etc. and so that is shifting and so as we understand that then we're able to do a better job sharing that kind of information with the folks who are impacted by the policies and decisions of the regional agencies.

Still, as compared with other case studies, the Bay Area did not institutionalize equity priorities to a great extent within its regional planning agency.

Conclusions From the San Francisco Bay Area Region

Historic dynamics and challenges in the Bay Area planning were not significantly disrupted by the SCI grant or the RPP. The RPP’s initial governance structure replicated traditional power structures and areas of focus, which exacerbated—rather than shifted—regional tensions among stakeholders. The Bay Area was able to course correct on some of its structural challenges relatively early on in the process, but without enough purpose or clarity to achieve more sweeping change. Nonetheless, some incremental progress was achieved, particularly around a greater familiarity with equity issues and more communication among jurisdictions and stakeholders. Much of what did begin to shift could take several years before significant progress is observable, and future assessments of these dynamics would be useful to testing this theory.

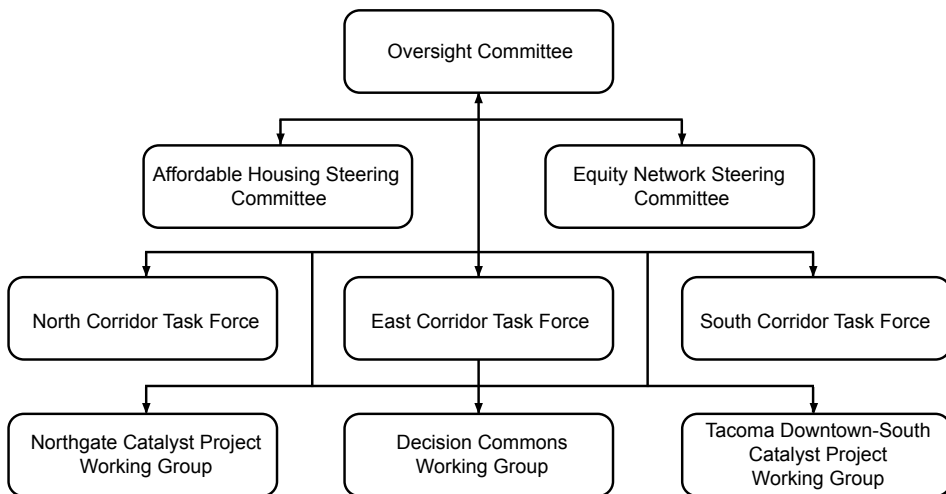
Case Study: The Puget Sound Region

The Puget Sound region’s SCI grant program, called Growing Transit Communities (GTC), was focused on integrating regional transportation and land use planning. The region’s MPO, Puget Sound Regional Council (PSRC), was the lead consortium member, host organization, and staffer for GTC. The grant was catalyzed by conversations between the Urban Land Institute and PSRC. Exhibit 2 illustrates the organizational structure of the Puget Sound region’s GTC Consortium.

The central goal of GTC was to “overcome key implementation challenges of VISION 2040.” VISION 2040, the region’s growth strategy, is based primarily on a \$15 billion transit expansion plan intended to help the region grow in an environmentally and economically sustainable manner.

Exhibit 2

Organizational Structure of the Puget Sound Regional Growing Transit Communities Consortium



Regional Approaches to Equity

We observed mixed impressions of PSRC's focus on equity. On one hand, the MPO gained a broader understanding of equity by leading and participating in the GTC. PSRC staff revealed this sentiment: "We had an equity training...here at the agency today. I think it's...an outcome. So, certainly, a reorientation internally that grew out of that, that interaction outside of our usual silos."

Other participants, however, disagreed that concerns of equity genuinely penetrated PSRC's organizational ethos, claiming that the agency's tight control over the GTC process produced expected status quo outcomes. A Puget Sound region CBO worker said the following.

For these kinds of big planning initiatives, how you set it up will almost always dictate what you end up with. So, if you set up a process whereby the information and the analysis is coming from highly-technical specialists, they have the power—they will have the power in how you define the problem and how you define the solution at the end of the day ... to really put equity at the center of this, required a very different approach than PSRC took.

In terms of the GTC governance structure, a focus on equity materialized relatively early on, a reality largely attributed to the early inclusion of CBOs in the process. Participants felt that the PSRC wasn't merely "checking boxes" in assembling the HUD SCI consortium, but bringing greater intentionality to stakeholder engagement from the beginning. This intentionality included establishing a separate body charged with an equity directive. The grassroots organizations and CBOs involved in the grant application process formed the Regional Equity Network (REN), a major subcommittee of the GTC effort. REN's primary role was coordinating the community engagement process through a subgrant program that connected regional and subregional efforts. This effort was widely viewed as a success, in that it resourced community participation and framed how the GTC understood and addressed equity issues.

Additionally, equity issues did appear to be elevated through the SCI process. The GTC prioritized the development of a working definition of equity as an explicit goal. Through the creation of its "Principles of Equitable Development," the REN laid the foundation for a common understanding of equity for GTC participants and other regional actors.

The Principles of Equitable Development defined social equity as follows.

[All] people can attain the resources and opportunities that improve their quality of life and enable them to reach their full potential. Addressing the history of inequities in the systems we work in and their on-going impacts in our communities is a shared responsibility. Social equity also means that those affected by poverty, communities of color, and historically marginalized communities have leadership and influence in decision making processes, planning, and policy-making. Together we can leverage our collective resources to create communities of opportunity.

A REN member reflected on the origination of the definition.

We developed a definition of equity from a community perspective. And that was huge because that definition has become the fallback definition for jurisdictions on equity. ... It gave our region a common definition and understanding. It was amazing to participate in.

A member of the REN framed equity in terms of capturing community benefits for current residents and raising awareness about cultural, residential, and commercial displacement: “We can develop all these wonderful places but if we really don’t see benefits accruing to the people that live there, that’s not what we want to see.” Preventing cultural and commercial displacement and retaining community benefits for long-time residents were addressed more in the Puget Sound region than the other regions examined.

Although it remains unclear whether the region’s efforts to define equity and elevate a conversation around equity issues have seeped into broader planning efforts, these efforts have likely laid the groundwork on which future advocates and planners can build.

Stakeholder Engagement

Business engagement. In the Puget Sound region, small business interests have a history of influencing regional planning. Local ethnic business coalitions worked on transit development initiatives before reengaging in GTC to ensure their displacement concerns were heard. As these stakeholders were previously active, they were able to maintain a more successful engagement throughout SCI than seen in other SCI recipient regions. Puget Sound small businesses may have also succeeded in regional engagement due to the GTC’s focus on transit development, which had clear repercussions for the small business community.

Small business engagement still faced some challenges however. According to one coalition leader, local business owners could not directly engage with planning processes due to lack of capacity, language barriers, and a lack of knowledge about the process. Some were also skeptical of their potential to influence the planning process due to prior challenges with transit initiatives. One community representative described significant commercial displacement having occurred along a light rail construction corridor and felt a lack of higher-level concern for the shuttered establishments. Although PSRC and the REN sponsored small business engagement through small participatory grant awards, the local business community still felt outreach had not been substantial or effective enough.

The project had even less success in stimulating and maintaining engagement of major employers and large business interests. According to interviewees, large business interests provided initial input to inform the SCI process but were less willing to stay continuously engaged. As one regional planner from Seattle summarized, “They’re only willing to engage at a certain level, over a certain period of time. . . . They’re willing to come to a meeting and react to something, and then go away and then come back again when the new thing is done.” Representatives from the Seattle Chamber of Commerce indicated that although the organization had the capacity to provide representation to the process, engagement was not prioritized for them.

Community engagement. The Puget Sound region attempted to bring historically marginalized communities into the planning process through specific mechanisms in the governance structure, built to ensure community voices were included. This concentrated effort of community engagement took shape through the REN, which focused on engaging communities of color and immigrant communities. The REN played a crucial, successful role in organizing community engagement. Part of this success may have resulted from the decision to use an expert facilitator

to equalize power dynamics in the consortium. An REN member described the facilitated process, saying: "...even though there may have been more people at the table from Seattle/King County there was equal attention that was paid to all voices at the table."

Still, these efforts to build institutional mechanisms for community engagement in planning processes faced obstacles. One was the inaccessibility of technical-planning jargon and its mystified processes, which the consortium tried to overcome through specialized training, capacity-building workshops, and peer networking to help stakeholders understand where to influence the process. Attempts to level the playing field for participants in the GTC were well received and may be implemented easily in other regions.

Jurisdictional Dynamics

The SCI program successfully brought together stakeholders from across jurisdictions and issues. Participants lauded PSRC and the SCI process for successful engaging both core cities and suburban jurisdictions. A city employee spoke of the grant's ability to not only spur connections across the region but also to create a place for grantees to connect and learn from one another. Creating this space allowed for important and difficult discussions to take place. A participant from Snohomish County admitted that although "there were some really uncomfortable conversations with people," at the end of the day, they felt their concerns were heard and taken "to heart" by the other government leadership at the table. The same interviewee elaborated: "I think the same was true for Pierce County. So, I think that was the best outcome."

However, the GTC's focus on light rail expansion led to challenges in identifying issues and pursuing strategies that would align with the priorities of *both* core cities and suburban jurisdictions. Not all parts of the region currently benefit from the light rail system, and many are not part of plans for future expansions. Not surprisingly, participants from Seattle felt that the focus on light rail galvanized the entire grant process, whereas those from outlying jurisdictions felt frustrated that the goals of the GTC weren't as locally relevant.

Lasting Impacts and Institutionalization

At one end of the spectrum, PSRC devoted substantial hours and maintained a tight grip on the execution of GTC. One oversight committee member described PSRC as "directly managing the entire process and they kept a really firm hand on it. They managed all those committees and they kept a pretty tight rein on the kind of communication. ... The oversight committees were organized by them and they were very scripted agendas." Some saw this tight control of the process as a highly efficient and effective way to make progress, whereas others felt it drowned out true engagement with a diversity of voices.

Some participants felt PSRC remained relatively unchanged in the aftermath of the GTC process. One interviewee called the affordable housing work accomplished in GTC "spectacular" but lamented that "a lot of this stuff has now gone onto the shelf and is just sitting there and that's unfortunate." The same respondent lamented the lack of capacity that was directed toward GTC issues after the grant's formal conclusion: "What's really needed is for PSRC to have a staff person with capacity to come back to this, all this, and say these are priorities and we're devoting staff people to it."

The Puget Sound region managed to increase the institutionalization of equity into ongoing work, at least according to some interviewees. Establishing a working definition of equity and incorporating it into the GTC's Principles of Equitable Development may represent a step toward broader consideration and implementation of equity in the region. Further, the proposed Regional Equitable Development Initiative, a "revolving loan fund for property acquisition in transit station areas for affordable housing development," represents some institutionalized change within the PSRC. However, little indication of further institutionalization in the agency emerged.

Although the SCI grant might have provoked limited institutional change within PSRC, it may have catalyzed efforts to bring change to local jurisdictions. As one CBO leader described: "cities have comprehensive plans. So, one of the things we're trying to do to institutionalize the efforts of SCI is to get... elements of the regional strategies, particularly the equity elements, to become incorporated into the comprehensive plans and the countywide plans."

Conclusions From the Puget Sound Region

The Puget Sound region managed to produce a shared definition of equity that continues to be used, the core membership of the REN remains active in advancing equity initiatives, and CBOs working on equity issues have formed new alliances to continue to collaborate beyond the life of the SCI grant. Both urban and suburban jurisdictions were engaged in the process, although the GTC faced similar challenges with respect to regional governance experienced in the other case study regions.

Case Study: The Twin Cities

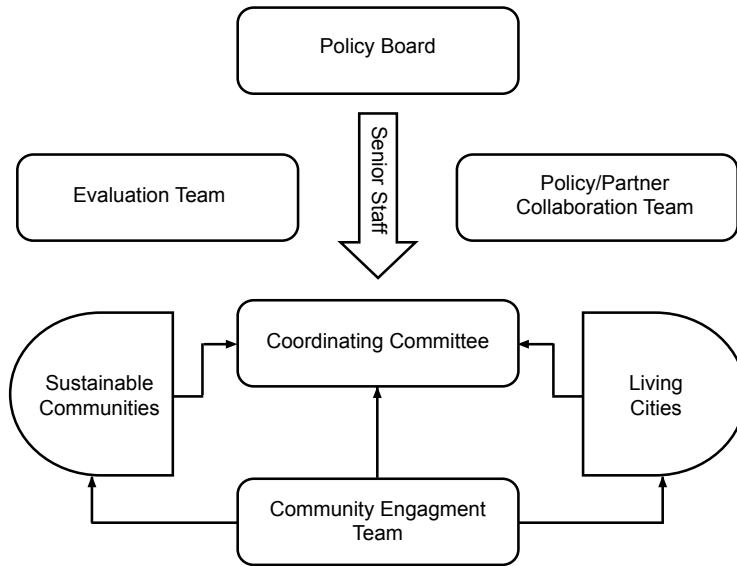
In 2011, the Twin Cities region was awarded an SCI grant known as "Corridors of Opportunity" (CoO), which ran until 2013. The consortium lead for the grant was the Metropolitan Council (Met Council), the seven-county regional government body serving the nearly 3 million residents of Minneapolis, St. Paul, and the entire Twin Cities region. The CoO work "focused on accelerating the buildout of the region's transit system while promoting adjacent development that advances economic vitality and benefits people of all incomes and backgrounds." The grant execution was closely coordinated with Metro Transit, an operating division of Met Council. Exhibit 3 illustrates the organizational structure of the Twin Cities region's CoO Consortium.

In addition to the \$5 million HUD SCI investment, the Twin Cities region also received \$19.1 million in grants and loans from Living Cities' 2010 Integration Initiative. This SCI-concurrent national philanthropic investment provided technical assistance and more funding for implementation in the region.

The CoO was overseen by a policy board, shepherded by a coordinating committee, and distinguished from other regions, to some extent, by a Community Engagement Team (CET), which spearheaded a thorough and multilayered engagement and regranting process via a Community Engagement Steering Committee. This committee consisted of representatives from a number of the Twin Cities CBOs.

Exhibit 3

Organizational Structure of the Minneapolis Corridors of Opportunity Consortium



Regional Approaches to Equity

The CoO was developed and implemented in the Twin Cities against the backdrop of both facilitating and impeding forces. The local political climate was newly supportive of collaboration after decades of competition, especially between St. Paul and Minneapolis. The notion that equity goals were important was fairly universal, although a shared definition of equity and strategy around achieving those goals was more elusive.

The region faced, and continues to face, significant racial disparities and has a history of exclusion of minority voices in public infrastructure decisions and development. These challenges and opportunities shaped the implementation and ultimate impact of the SCI grant; Twin Cities participants embraced a culture of collaboration, and historic exclusion led to a stronger community engagement approach than might otherwise be expected. Specifically, this context meant that equity goals were advanced in the dialogue and action within key institutions but efforts to maintain a shared definition and priorities around an equity agenda are ongoing.

Equity in Structure

A central component of advancing the equity agenda in the Twin Cities was to “bake” equity into the structure of the SCI grant. The approach to decisionmaking and power-sharing amongst the key players—the policy board, CET, and Met Council—would determine whose voices were heard and what outcomes might be advanced.

On receiving the CoO funding, the Met Council, which typically held authority and decisionmaking power in the region, relinquished much of its control to the policy board. The policy board, in turn, devolved much of the decisionmaking around where and how to allocate resources to the CET, which was given \$750,000 of the grant for allocation among local organizations. The CET then went a step further, allocating the majority (\$720,000) of these funds to a Community Engagement Steering Committee, which was empowered to distribute these funds to support local involvement in the planning process. This committee was staffed and led by local CBOs whose “whole purpose was to create a powerful voice for low-income communities and communities of color to secure community benefits for [the] regional transitway system,” according to a Twin Cities CBO worker. Ensuring community voices were heard became a critical component of the structure of the CoO grant. Although many were doubtful about the authenticity of this approach at first, participants in the CoO were ultimately encouraged: “The Policy Board was really nervous about all of this. Are we going to have a final say in your granting process or not? . . . The powers that be were very nervous about this. But to their credit they allowed us to move forward.”

In addition to devolving of funds and decisionmaking to the CET, inclusion of people of color at the senior governance level of the CoO, including in the policy board, was also seen as a positive, equitable step forward. Although in their first year the board was largely a racially homogenous group, this lack of diversity was recognized and ultimately led to the recruitment and inclusion of additional individuals, such as Paul Williams, the African-American Deputy Mayor of St. Paul.

Equity Narratives and Definitions

The structure of the CoO was an important mechanism through which to elevate equity issues, but the degree to which equity issues were confronted in the CoO's work was also key. In the Twin Cities, the initiative supported a robust and nuanced conversation around inequities, despite the lack of a dedicated equity-oriented subcommittee. According to a CoO evaluator, “Equity was a big element of everything from the beginning. The Policy Board, the big group went out of their way to incorporate equity.”

In the Twin Cities, the equity dialogue focused on racial disparities in educational achievement, employment, and other outcomes. As one regional agency employee pointed out, “[The newly appointed Met Council's] principles [mandated actions] to address what is a pretty deep disparity in this region—we are an economically thriving region as a whole but not everyone has been beneficiaries of that. And that's gotten worse over the last 20 years.”

To address these disparities, the idea of promoting shared prosperity was repeatedly referenced among interviewees in the Twin Cities. As a participant from a regional transit agency put it, the consortium “look[ed] at the challenges we faced in shared prosperity, meaning equity in terms of employment, equity in terms of pay, equity in terms of opportunities for business development and business growth.”

Numerous participants agreed that over the course of the grant, general comfort discussing these issues increased, and equity considerations had been ingrained in regional planning dialogue. Producing a broadly shared definition of the term, however, continues to be a challenge. As one Twin Cities municipal official put it: “I don't know that the region is comfortable with a *definition*

[of equity]. Certainly we worked really hard on it, staff and the Policy Board worked on it, and struggled and struggled and struggled. I don't know that we still have something the region would agree to or be able to tell you what it is."

Stakeholder Engagement

Business engagement. Digging into the extent and nature of engagement with stakeholders also reveals some unique aspects of the Twin Cities SCI grant. With respect to the business community, existing regional actors helped set the stage for involvement. The Itasca Project—an employer-led alliance that seeks to address regional economic issues in the region—was active and established before CoO and was already playing an influential role in regional planning. For example, prior to CoO, Itasca members worked to generate political will among regional representatives in the state legislature to override a governor's veto of a transportation spending bill—a bill that ultimately helped finance the very light-rail transit expansion around which the CoO was centered.

While individual major employers and businesses may not have prioritized ongoing engagement, business coalitions and chambers of commerce were, in some cases, able to serve as a liaison to the SCI process on behalf of these interests. In the Twin Cities, the Itasca Project and local chambers of commerce both played this role successfully.

Conflicting narratives emerged on the degree of success with which small businesses were brought into the process. Although a few grant participants felt that small businesses had a strong voice at the regional table, several others noted that they were hard to engage and unlikely to even be aware of the regional planning effort.

Community engagement. Community members who had previously engaged with power structures in the Twin Cities were generally skeptical of the CoO process, expecting repeated patterns of disconnection and disingenuity. One member of a local advocacy organization described the skepticism and local dynamics at the time the consortium was formed: "We had to overcome that—we had to persuade folks [that] this is a new Met Council, new leadership, a lot of possibilities and potential—but we had to get over this deep-seated suspicion."

The intentionality in the formation of the CET and steering committee around sharing decision-making was repeatedly described as an attempt to disrupt existing power dynamics. One city government official from the Twin Cities elaborated: "I wasn't on the community engagement team but I certainly know those parties and I was in the group that said we need to actually share power here, we need to give people money and we need to let them make the decisions."

Still, these efforts to build institutional mechanisms for community engagement in planning processes faced obstacles, including the inaccessibility of planning jargon and its black box-like processes.

Jurisdictional Dynamics

In the Twin Cities region, the two major municipalities of St. Paul and Minneapolis have a contentious history that can sometimes be characterized as combative, competitive, and distrustful. A local foundation worker admits, "St. Paul is the smaller of the two cities, it is the poorer of the two cities, it has the least corporations of the two cities, and the least amount of philanthropy that's

invested in the two cities. So, it has an underdog syndrome.” Several interviewees believed the SCI process substantially improved relationships between Minneapolis and St. Paul, as well as between Hennepin and Ramsey Counties (where the respective cities are). A government employee from one of the municipalities said: “It was clear, at that point, that the region was hungry for the cities to quit fighting. . . . I don’t think that any of us guessed how powerful this would be.”

The urban-regional distinction was also important in the grant process. Elected officials struggled to balance leadership and decisionmaking that would benefit the region, with loyalty and accountability to more localized interests of their jurisdiction and constituency. As one local representative put it: “I was one of the main leads on the central corridor but it wasn’t even touching my district. I would go back to my community and people would say ‘Why are you working so hard on this when this is our district?’”

This urban-regional tension extended to collaboration between suburbs and urban cores. The SCI process began with only a single suburban mayor involved. Later, as a research foundation employee explained, an additional suburban mayor was included “to give better voice and a fairer chance of participation [for the suburban communities].”

Despite this gesture, several interviewees explained that the representatives from suburbs were never fully engaged. As one elected official put it, “We had a number of different suburban mayors throughout the process, no one mayor committed. We had a number of suburban county commissioners that came and went. . . . It wasn’t something they were comfortable with. And I think that even at some times it was stuff that they were adversarial to, they felt threatened.”

The Twin Cities recognized this jurisdictional dissonance and created a “submarket strategy” to better address the divergent needs of their core cities, suburban job centers, and rural areas. As a result, the greater Minneapolis-St. Paul region is now dedicated to using different models to address varied regional needs—particularly those related to creating jobs and attracting businesses and investment. Implementation of these submarket strategies is the goal for the next 2 years.

Lasting Impacts and Institutionalization

To what extent were the changes effected by the SCI grant institutionalized? How, when, and where do these changes create a lasting impact? Many interviewees felt that the culture around community engagement in planning has been fundamentally shifted as a result of the CoO grant program. Both cultural norms (for example, who was involved in meetings and who had a voice) and structural changes emerged; as one city official told us, “There’s a different expectation around what it’s going to look like when good engagement is happening, that it’s not going to be a bunch of white people and a microphone.” In addition to changes to cultural norms and expectations, the Twin Cities also saw institutionalized structural change, as described by a Twin Cities CBO employee.

The first task they set out was to establish regional standards on community engagement. It took them a long time and they got huge pushback from Met Council like: ‘That’s the gold standard and we don’t do that here.’ And, but, a couple years later . . . [the process] ended up with them rewriting [a public engagement plan] in partnership with the community engagement steering committee. . . . Now they apply it not just to transportation spending but also to all activities of the Met Council. That was a huge win.

In addition to the adoption of CoO's best community engagement practices into Met Council's public participation plan, other institutional changes include—

- An *Equity Advisory Committee* to the Met Council, with 17 of the 21 seats designated for community members. The CoO CET advocated strongly for the creation of this committee.
- An *Everyday Equity cross-agency team* at Metro Transit focused on identifying and breaking down institutional barriers to equity both within the agency and in Metro Transit's operations.
- An *expanded Engagement and Outreach Team* at Metro Transit housed within the Marketing and Customer Services Division. Previously a lone dedicated community engagement officer, the team has grown to five employees drawn from diverse backgrounds including community organizing.
- A *Transit-Oriented Development (TOD) office* in Metro Transit that could provide expertise on TOD to the region.

Furthermore, the capacity building of CBOs to engage more thoroughly in the regional planning process represents another institutionalized impact. The CET continued to meet until 2016 to ensure this capacity was expanded and secured. One CET member noted the completion of the team's goals as the reason for the group's winddown: "We have agreements and partnerships that have agreed to sunset—and it was time. The goal for us was . . . how our partners and grantees thrive. Some have turned into full-fledged organizations that have been able to do their own thing now."

Conclusions From the Twin Cities Region

In many respects, the Twin Cities region stands out as a strong example of equity building and progress as a result of the CoO initiative. An existing, if fledgling, culture of collaboration in the public sector among some in the nonprofit community, and to some extent in the private sector as well, may have put this region at an advantage in terms of the extent and level of culture change needed to implement and achieve the stated goals of the SCI grant. The willingness, especially early on, for traditionally empowered leaders to hand over decisionmaking may have set the tone for subsequent buy-in and change by other stakeholders. Finally, the involvement of Living Cities' Integration Initiative may have facilitated deeper and better engagement of stakeholders, given the availability of significant additional and more flexible resources. Although the work begun by the SCI grant showed significant promise for the equitability of regional planning in the region, future evaluation will be essential to monitoring just how significant and lasting these impacts ultimately are.

Conclusions From Three Case Studies

Thematic Findings and Implications

Across our interviews with stakeholders in the Twin Cities, Bay Area, and Puget Sound regions, we identified insights across the themes of equity, stakeholder engagement, and jurisdictional dynamics.

Equity

Central to our research was the concept of equity as a goal to be advanced through regional collaboration. We define equity, as opposed to equality, as fairness in outcomes across race, ethnicity, class, and other status. We had three broader findings related to regional efforts to promote equity.

First, communities and advocates within all regions viewed regional planning efforts to advance equity with skepticism. Likely based on historic relationships, we found a broad distrust of MPOs and a related skepticism that MPOs were authentically attempting to promote equitable outcomes across the region. In the Twin Cities, the region's SCI-related success built off of recent organizing momentum created by advocates. In other regions, the history of prior MPO disengagement from low-income communities and communities of color was evident in how they approached the SCI process. HUD should work with MPOs to realistically assess distrust from grassroots advocates and leaders and ensure action is taken to rebuild trust.

Second, each region studied made explicit space for equity within the collaborative governance structure—albeit in different forms and with different sequencing in the development of the collaboratives. In the Bay Area, the Equity Collaborative was formed late in the process without clarity of purpose. In the Twin Cities, equity was incorporated through a focus on community engagement and sharing of decisionmaking authority. Similar to the Bay Area, the regional collaborative in the Twin Cities only incorporated this targeted focus on community engagement at the tail end of the application process. In the Puget Sound region, the regional collaborative formed the Regional Equity Network very early on, with an explicit goal of co-creating an equity agenda for the region. These various experiences show the importance of both creating a space explicitly focused on equity and of clearly defining the goals and mechanisms through which an equity agenda will be articulated. The late formation of these committees was at times an obstacle to building trust with communities, suggesting that HUD should consider encouraging their formation from the start.

Third, the narratives around equity also varied greatly across regions. Our interviews revealed that regions often struggled to arrive to a shared definition of equity. In the Bay Area, conversations tended to focus on displacement and low-wage work. In the Puget Sound and the Twin Cities regions, however, the conversation was more explicit about race. The Twin Cities in particular was particularly race conscious, with racial disparities often cited as a structural problem with which the region needed to grapple. Only in the Puget Sound region, however, was defining a regional equity agenda a priority, which was locally lauded as a significant win. To help assist regions in arriving at a shared vision of equity, HUD should encourage regions in future regional planning efforts to formally prioritize the creation of a common definition of equity with a related agenda and expectation for action.

Stakeholder Engagement

We were also interested in the extent to which various stakeholder groups were engaged in the regional planning process.

We found that the SCI grants largely magnified existing regional dynamics, instead of fundamentally shifting them. Where distrust and animosity already existed, local entities struggled to

meaningfully collaborate across silos. Where a culture of collaboration permeated the region, such as in the Twin Cities, the SCI grantee built on this strength and used federal funding to strengthen collaboration between stakeholders.

This trend was true across both business and community engagement efforts. With respect to the former, existing dynamics often determined the extent to which businesses were successfully engaged. When business stakeholders were already active in the regional planning conversation, they were more likely to play a role in SCI collaborative. Efforts also varied depending on which business stakeholders were targeted. Grantees differentiated among larger corporations, smaller neighborhood businesses, real estate developers, and regional or statewide business associations. Indeed, different strategies are needed for different types of stakeholders. The increased partnership of larger business associations or alliances, such as the Itasca Project in the Twin Cities, is key to long-term regional success, whereas small business engagement was most often critical in mitigating harm to commercial districts during transit infrastructure expansion. In future regional planning efforts, HUD should be mindful of these local dynamics, which can pose significant barriers to regional planning success.

With respect to community engagement, we found that a focus on building institutional mechanisms for deeper engagement—such as the CET in the Twin Cities—led to greater, lasting success. Common challenges to authentic and inclusive public engagement across all three regions included a historic distrust of regional planning (as mentioned previously), the inaccessibility of planning jargon, and limited resources and staff capacity to engage. Although each SCI grantee attempted to address these challenges in various ways, the most success was seen when the regional collaborative and MPO shared actual decisionmaking power with community residents. HUD can encourage regions to follow in the footsteps of the success in Minnesota by recommending grantees form and resource a community engagement committee comprised of community members and local CBOs that are empowered to make decisions. This institutional mechanism for community-led decision-making can also help combat the historic distrust of government.

Jurisdictional Dynamics

Lastly, we compared how regions fared in promoting increased collaboration across different municipalities and levels of governance. Although the SCI grant had an explicit focus on regional collaboration, regions saw uneven participation from local jurisdictions. In some case, the relationships were more focused on cross-jurisdictional learning than actual collaboration. In regions like the Bay Area, which are very decentralized, some felt collaboration was too spread out to be coherent. In regions that are more tightly defined, as in the Puget Sound and the Twin Cities, suburban jurisdictions often felt excluded and ended up largely sitting out of the collaborative process. HUD should consider these dynamics of defining regions in future efforts.

This uneven participation was rooted in our related findings. First, planning priorities in core cities were different from those in suburban jurisdictions. Second, local priorities also differed from regional ones. Indeed, all regions grappled with getting locally elected officials to act in the interest of the broader region. Local interests were often at odds with regional interests, which presented some naturally limiting constraints to advancing a regional agenda. HUD may have limited authority over granting MPOs additional authority, which may need to come from states themselves.

Final Thoughts

Our research suggests that the starting point from which each region launched was a key factor in how much progress could be achieved within SCI. Although that may seem obvious, this nuance complicates how the implementation of a national grant program lands in regions with many different contexts. The SCI program goalposts were all various distances away from where each region was, suggesting that a more nuanced understanding of where regions are at in different situations is needed to build effective and realistic program goals.

We have identified potential strategies for HUD and any other federal agencies supporting regional planning to consider for future program implementation. First, federal leaders should encourage MPOs to address the historic distrust with which communities often view them, encourage or mandate the formation of equity-centered committees early in the application process, and require regions to collectively define a vision and definition for regional equity as a key program outcome. To encourage more inclusive stakeholder engagement, HUD should also encourage greater participation of regional business interests while also providing technical assistance for collaboratives to build institutional mechanisms for community engagement. Lastly, supporting the influence or efficacy of regional governance bodies is an important way of ensuring local interests do not consistently override regional needs.

Indeed, the experiences of SCI Regional Planning Grant program grantees are rich with potential lessons to be learned. Additional case studies that examine regions with weaker markets, lower nonprofit capacity, and varying MPO strength can add nuance to our findings from the Bay Area, Puget Sound, and Twin Cities regions. Revisiting regions to assess outcomes after more time has passed since SCI will enable a greater understanding of lasting tangible and intangible outcomes. Lastly, additional research on the findings from this article, such as the importance of intentionally defining “equity” or the challenges of MPO distrust, would offer relevant lessons for future federal programs that work with regions across the country.

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Authors

Juan Sebastian Arias is a program officer with Enterprise Community Partners.

Sara Draper-Zivetz is the Associate Director of the Turner Center for Housing Innovation at the University of California, Berkeley.

Amy Martin is a consultant at Four Nines Technologies.

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