



What is happening in your community?: Why community development matters, by Matthew J. Hanka

Langham, MD, Lexington Books, 2021

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BOOK REVIEW

What is happening in your community?: Why community development matters, by Matthew J. Hanka, Lanham, MD, Lexington Books, 2021

As a community development practitioner, writer, and researcher for over 4 decades, I appreciate the title and content of Matthew Hanka's new book, *What is Happening in Your Community?*, which underscores the importance of the work that many of us have been doing for a long time. Hanka provides an overview of community development and then grounds it in examples drawing from his academic and practice work at the University of Louisville and more recently at the University of Southern Indiana in Evansville, Indiana. The book starts out defining community and community development. The thread throughout the remainder of the book is on how social capital is applied to housing, economic development, service learning, and placemaking. There is also a separate chapter on the relatively new concept of collective impact, and a chapter on HOPE VI and New Urbanism. The Foreword was written by Sue Ellspermann and the Preface by John Gilderbloom. Hanka coauthored three of the chapters and a fourth was written by Anne Stratham and Helen Rosenberg.

Hanka approaches community development from the perspective of a physical place with shared interests based on knowledge, concern, and trust, leading to connections and interactions helping residents to grow and thrive. Hanka places a strong emphasis on social capital, social networks, civic engagement, as well as other new concepts such as collective impact. Early on, Jane Jacob's name is invoked, which is always fine with me, given her belief that "creating a livable neighborhood is a key to human happiness" (p. xvii). Simply stated, the environment matters for people, and neighborhoods should be seen as organic ecosystems where people can live meaningful and productive lives.

Hanka quotes Robert Putnam extensively on social capital and the critical role that trust plays in connecting people, ideas, and resources. Social networks and neighborly attitudes help support civic engagement, an important prerequisite for community development. Hanka discusses three dimensions of social capital: bonding social capital focusing on family ties, bridging social capital among friends and neighbors, and linking social capital to institutions and organizations that can be deployed for community development opportunities.

The author applies the concepts of social capital and community development to three strategies/initiatives: economic development, Habitat for Humanity, and service learning. It is important to note that Hanka is drawing mostly from his university experience and not from his practitioner experience, working for a community development corporation (CDC). Hanka makes an interesting economic development comparison between Youngstown, Ohio, and Allentown, Pennsylvania. Social capital in Youngstown is concentrated within the economic elite while in Allentown social capital is dispersed across economic, ethnic, and religious groups leading to a stronger recovery in Allentown since the 1980s. This speaks to the importance of building a diverse eco-system that is grounded in the local community and its leadership.

Hanka looks at how Habitat for Humanity has built social capital for Habitat homeowners. Survey results show that new homeowners talked about new job opportunities and education, but that they did not feel connected to other community and neighborhood initiatives. I believe this is a shortcoming of the Habitat model given how social capital and community development can lead to new opportunities. I have observed Habitat starting to focus more on the neighborhood and other community partners, which is a positive development.

Anne Statham and Helen Rosenberg's discussion, on how to connect service learning to community development is quite interesting, and appropriate, given the nature of the University of Southern Indiana partnering with neighborhoods. I like the fact that they center their work in social justice on

both values and outcomes. Service-learning opportunities at the University of Southern Indiana include working with YouthBuild, a health initiative within the Latino community, and homeless research and advocacy. The students, project sponsors, and community benefit from this work.

Hanka highlights the new concept of collective impact which was incorporated into the Promise Zone program launched by the Obama administration in 2013. Collective Impact is the commitment of a group of actors from different sectors to a common program for solving a specific social problem, using a structured form of collaboration. Under Promise Zones, located in high-poverty areas, the federal government partners with local leaders to increase economic activity, improve educational outcomes, leverage private investment, reduce violent crime, and enhance public health for low-income residents. Evansville's Promise Zone was funded in the third round. The lead convenor for the Promise Zone was the Echo Community Housing Corporation which partnered with the Evansville City Department of Metropolitan Development. The Promise Zone has already met its housing goal of 250 new units of housing several years early.

Hanka and Gilderbloom discuss Hope VI and how it has led to homeownership opportunities for low-income families locally and nationally. They conclude that HOPE VI has shown that homeownership is the best way to ensure livable and sustainable communities. Their assertion that HOPE VI "is the solution to bad government housing policy" (p. 247), is a huge over-reach. This assertion ignores the important role that federal resources from the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) program, the HOME Investment Partnerships Program (HOME), and the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit program (LIHTC) play in financing affordable rental housing development. It is simply not realistic to transform most low-income renters into homeowners.

I have two major reservations about the book. First, I would have liked to have seen a more extensive discussion on the evolution of community development corporations (CDCs) and other community-based development and finance organizations. CDCs have a rich 50-year-plus history and a large and growing literature documents how they have become the "backbone" of the affordable housing industry. There is a lot to draw from the diverse array of community development programs across the country. Taken together CDC and other community-based organizations play a pivotal role in creating a vibrant ecosystem that fosters community development. Secondly, I wish Hanka had placed more emphasis on the fact that federal housing policy historically spurred segregation and racist practices that have contributed to the racial wealth gap, substandard housing, and social-spatial isolation from opportunity. It has been a long struggle to counteract these policies with the Fair Housing Act, Community Reinvestment Act, and Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing (recently reinstated by the Biden administration).

Despite these limitations, *What is Happening in Your Community?* is a welcome addition to community development literature and practice. Hanka does an excellent job documenting the process and impacts of community development through case examples in Louisville and Evansville, and in demonstrates the ongoing need for community development to be a central strategy for social policy and progress in the United States. Residents of these communities have enormous talent that can be marshaled to benefit their respective communities. *What is Happening in Your Community?* should help to generate enthusiasm about future prospect for community development.

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