

# MAKING VISIBLE THE INVISIBLE POWER OF COMMUNITY

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Development work in rural villages and in marginalized communities globally must start not from a program perspective such as health, education, or water management but from seeing the community as a living ecosystem with a self-organized infrastructure. This perspective would significantly improve the efforts of foundations and governments to make an impact on the lives of vulnerable people.

I have come to the conclusion that an organic infrastructure in communities is fundamental to sustainability. This infrastructure, composed of informal leaders, places, and socially bonding activities, shapes the culture of community. Some informal leaders and their activities strengthen social connectedness and social safety in the community. Other informal leaders voluntarily organize activities that help the wounded and the most vulnerable. And still other leaders are involved in wealth creation. These findings are the accumulation of more than thirty years of my development experiences in Asian American, African American, indigenous, and Mexican/Central American communities; in mixed racial and ethnic communities in the United States; and in China and Mexico.

Recognizing the growth of the infrastructure is the missing half to development work. This infrastructure incubates the community's values and capacity to protect, nourish, and heal itself. The infrastructure provides the underpinning for young people and adults to be productive forces in society. The infrastructure draws on the accumulative experiences of generations of people and takes the community to a higher level. The infrastructure is the means by which the community becomes self-sustaining.

My association with the W. K. Kellogg Foundation has also offered me extensive understanding of communities locally and globally. I have the privilege of serving as a trustee of the Kellogg Foundation, whose mission is to improve the lives of vulnerable children. I have learned so much from people who serve at Kellogg as program directors, executive leaders, and trustees, all of whom focused on how to steward and use Mr. Kellogg's resources in communities. My experience at Kellogg has broadened my knowledge and has prompted me to think deeply about vulnerable populations in innovative ways.

During the course of my work in communities at Wildflowers Institute, I have been deeply humbled by the generosity and openness of community members and their leaders. They have patiently helped me see their community architecture that was once invisible to me but over time has emerged with great clarity. I have come to realize that the power of this infrastructure should never be underestimated for it is conceived by the collective action of the community and is the most enduring.

None of this learning would have been possible without the help of local leaders in seven communities in the United States.<sup>1</sup> Wildflowers Institute has invited leaders of

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1. African American community, East Palo Alto; Chinatown community, San Francisco; Frank's Landing, Olympia; Lao Iu Mien community, San Francisco Bay Area; Latino community, East Palo Alto; Filipino community, South of Market, San Francisco; and the Red Wolf Band, Albuquerque.

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## INTRODUCTION

A small village in northeast Spain, Ibieca, illustrates the premise of this paper—the importance of seeing and strengthening the inherent infrastructure and culture of community. Professor Susan Friend Harding conducted a study of this village in which she showed that from 1950 to 1975, “the villagers of Ibieca unwittingly refashioned themselves and their world as they carried on what they experienced as life as usual . . . they participated willingly in social processes that dispossess them of their preindustrial cultures simply because they are unaware of what is at stake.”<sup>2</sup> One of many examples of the unwitting changes was how the women went about their daily work. Women in the village played a vital role in circulating information in such a way that they held the community together, within and between families. This sharing of information happened around the village washbasin, where the women would routinely gather to wash clothes. Such conversations would also happen in bread-baking, sewing, and knitting circles. But when the women purchased washing machines and when a bakery and a general store opened in Ibieca, the frequency of collective action and engagement reduced significantly.

The point that I want to make here is the need to surface and make explicit the cultural assumptions and behaviors that reinforce social connectedness and improve social health and safety in communities. Anthropologist Hsiao-Tung Fei made this observation: “Human behavior is always motivated by certain purposes, and these purposes grow out of sets of assumptions which are not usually recognized by those who hold them. . . . It is these assumptions—the essence of all the culturally conditioned purposes, motives, and principles—which determine the behavior of a people, underlie all the institutions of a community, and give them unity. This, unfortunately, is the most elusive aspect of culture.”<sup>3</sup>

A good portion of our work at Wildflowers is to help the members of the community infrastructure see their shared purposes and the underlying cultural assumptions so that they can be more explicit and intentional about the adaptations that they make in their community. Had the villagers of Ibieca been conscious of the women’s role in weaving the social fabric of their community, they might have continued the circles of engagement and collective action while also adopting the washing machine. We believe that culture, the manifesting of human intellectual achievements regarded collectively, is one of the community’s richest assets. We also believe that culture need not be dismissed because it may be seemingly irrelevant to the economy of the times.

In this paper I describe an approach that Wildflowers Institute has developed to seeing the cultural assumptions and strengthening the organic infrastructures of communities. The paper documents our work and what we have learned from it in order to assist communities, funders, and organizations dedicated to social development and to contribute to the ongoing discourse of how best to make communities succeed.

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2. Susan Friend Harding, *Remaking Ibieca: Rural Life in Aragon under Franco* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), p. xiii.

3. Hsiao-Tung Fei, *Earthbound China: A Study of Rural Economy in Yunnan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1945), pp. 81–82.

## THE WILDFLOWERS APPROACH TO COMMUNITY BUILDING

Wildflowers is invited to work in communities through different channels. On many occasions, community leaders who have had exposure to our work ask us to help them in their community. At other times, one or more funders will seek out Wildflowers to help them understand the community's strengths and challenges and to develop a shared plan that comes from the community. In most cases, our interaction with a community involves three years or more of work. We have engagements that last only a few days and others that have continued beyond a decade.

It takes time for us to build trust in communities. We seek to understand the social realities of a community, from its perspective, to illuminate the power and the impact of this power on the commons. We need to learn about local history and appreciate community culture and to relate effectively with community members. What is most important to us is that communities are comfortable with our intent and convinced that we have their best interests in mind. Building confidence and trust is a process of reaffirming what we have in common and overcoming misunderstandings, suspicions, and conflicts.

*We seek to understand the social realities of a community, from its perspective, to illuminate the power and the impact of this power on the commons.*

Wildflowers focuses on improving the operation and functioning of community infrastructure. Strengthening the infrastructure strengthens the whole community. Accordingly, we analyze the inner workings of communities and their culture. We help communities build on their assets and identify improvements to the basic functions that they need. We serve as a mirror to reflect on the people, activities, and places that weave the social fabric of the community. Our social investment fund provides modest support for infrastructure capacity building and for socially bonding activities. We offer 3-D tools to enhance funders' effectiveness in their work in vulnerable communities.

In the process of revealing the functions of an infrastructure, communities uncover a set of assumptions that hold them together. Making explicit these implicit assumptions provides communities the opportunity to assess and discuss them. Ensuring that these assumptions are both deeply rooted in history and collective experiences and relevant to contemporary times is absolutely essential for social adaptation and ongoing self-sustaining change.

This approach has evolved for more than a decade. We continue to learn from the communities in which we work. Over time we deepen our shared learning and relationships, which enable us to further develop and refine our processes and tools. And an improved methodology deepens our understanding of self-sustaining community change. Our understanding and our methods have evolved and will evolve in an interactive way. We have distilled our current methods into the following four activities, but they are not always applied in a linear sequence.

## 1. Getting Grounded in the Community

Wildflowers gains an initial impression of the community in a first one- or two-day visit during which our host introduces us to community members. We discuss our proposed project to get their point of view on its issues and challenges and what they aspire to see happen in their community. We look for the level of homogeneity and heterogeneity and the racial and ethnic composition. Following this visit, we hold a planning meeting with our team, which consists of a project director, one or more focus group facilitators, a documenter, and a logistics person. We then develop a list of tasks, assign responsibilities, and devise a schedule of activities. To begin to map the central players in the community, the team reaches out by telephone to contacts provided by community members who have engaged us; by Wildflowers fellows,<sup>4</sup> colleagues, friends, and family members who may know the community; and by the funder if there is one. The team members describe the project that we are undertaking and ask for names of residents to whom we should be talking at this early stage of our work. From these conversations, the team develops a list of people and the networks to which they belong and arranges meetings with them.

We identify one or more families in the community who are volunteering for several different organizations or groups and are connected to and highly regarded by different networks of people. We ask each family to host a reception for us with extended-family members, friends, and others in the family's networks. We cover the expenses for the reception and for small gifts reminding people of the meeting. We ask the families to decide on the location, the arrangements, food, gifts, and so on.

At the meetings and receptions in the community, we discuss the purpose(s) of the project and learn about participants' perspectives on it. We ask them for their contacts and for their help in introducing us to other people they suggest we meet with. This list of players gives us a way of seeing the landscape of community. It is an ongoing process of identification and learning about different groups and the leaders of social networks in the community. We identify community leaders, young and old, who have influence in bringing different groups of people together. Many of them surface from their leadership role and activities at meetings and events.

One method of identifying leaders is to arrive early at a meeting or event and make note of the final preparation work: who is assuming overall responsibility, how many people are involved, who consults with whom, and how they work together. We take a photo of any groups and follow up by getting their names.

A second method is to attend meetings and situate ourselves in the front of the room where we can see the facial expressions of others. When serious problems or questions are being addressed, we turn around and look at the audience and make note of where the eyes go in the room. Later on, we introduce ourselves to these individuals and inquire about them with others in the community.

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4. Wildflowers fellows are locally focused community leaders in different racial, ethnic, and indigenous communities.

A third method is to observe and document clusters of people in informal settings gathered around a particular person before and after meetings and events. While these methods of observation and documentation take time, they provide a sure way to recognize the influence that certain individuals have on others.

Our practice is to arrive early to meetings and events to document the informal gatherings of people outside the meeting place. By making note of attendees and their gathering spaces, we are able to see the relationships of people over time, which are often very difficult for outsiders to appreciate. We also document the people who consistently attend other community activities, because they generally play a role as a catalyst in bringing people together.

A fourth method that we are now developing is to ask different stakeholders—youth, parents, other residents, staff of community-based organizations and small businesses, and so on—to take photos of leaders and people at meetings and events in their community and to describe the images that they have taken. When two or more stakeholder groups recognize the same individuals, we make note of such people.

A fifth method of identifying community leaders is through Model-building, discussed in the following section.

## 2. Seeing Different Social Realities

We are mindful of the limitations of our own mental and cultural filters in seeing and understanding a community different from our own. We have developed a tool, Wildflowers Model-building,<sup>5</sup> to uncover implicit cultural assumptions that hold the community together and to establish a shared social reality among different stakeholders in the community. We hold Model-building sessions to enable people to identify resources within different sectors of the community and to employ these resources to further address their challenges and aspirations. In effect, Model-building is a tool that people use to construct a lens of the whole community, showing the strategies for building sustainability and growth. It is a process in which participants build three-dimensional models using blocks and figures that represent schools, centers, homes, cars, trees, animals, and people of different races, ages, genders, and cultures. Community members use the figures and objects to construct a set of symbols that reflect their personal reality, their shared social reality, and the deployment of existing resources for building their community. The facilitation of this process involves asking questions to illuminate the choices that people make in the selection of objects to represent

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5. Wildflowers Model-building is an adaptation of Sand Play Therapy in which individuals build three-dimensional objects to represent their life and dreams. What we have done is to study how groups employ this tool to reflect their collective lives and dreams and to develop a process that helps groups of people in community to work more closely together.

themselves and their community, the arrangement of the objects and what it means to them, and the description of activities that are reflected in the model.

In each phase of the process described below, community members are challenged internally by the many tensions and substantive differences that surface among different stakeholders. Individuals articulate their personal points of view, and as they come together to build one model representing their shared perspective, they begin to reconcile many of their differences. Similarly, different stakeholder groups, such as intergenerational groups, elders, young people, and spiritual and cultural leaders, construct models of their community life. And as these groups come together to build a model of the whole community, they do so with a better understanding of what is different and what is shared in their opportunities, challenges, and values, giving them a framework from which to build on the interests of the commons. So each stage leads to a greater articulation of a collective reality and shared values and common interests. What follows is a description of a four-phase process and how it illuminates the social realities of individuals, stakeholder groups, and the community as a whole. Phases one and two reveal the social realities of individuals and small groups. Phases three and four converge around shared values, aspirations, and a mutually agreeable implementation strategy.

**Model-building Phase One: Individual Models** All participants construct their own model of the community and their life in it, enabling them to express their points of view about the realities they face. Participants describe their models, what their challenges are, what is important to them in the community, and what they would like to see in the future.

A young man who resides in what is locally called the “Jungle” (Baldwin Village) in South Central Los Angeles shared his point of view in one of our sessions. He introduces himself and shows us an object of an exotic bird that represents who he is—someone slightly out of reach but having a “bird’s-eye” view of what is happening in the community. He goes on to tell his story of the social injustices and the community culture he sees every day. The following is a video clip of this young man’s story. (Double-click to start the video clip, or view video online.)



This second example is of an individual model of the Red Wolf Band, an indigenous group in Albuquerque, New Mexico. The model reflects the resources that help this individual and his community in their everyday living. He builds a model of his community formation showing over forty infants, toddlers, children, youth, adults, and elders of different genders, races, and ethnicities. We use the term “community formation” to refer to community leaders and their self-organized activities and the relationship between the leaders and their members. In the video clip below, you will see community members standing in concentric circles with the youngest nearest the center and the oldest in the outer ring. At the center of the circle is the sacred fire that brings everyone together. The model-builder points to a middle-aged man and a middle-aged woman whom he describes as the ones who are nurturing the circle. He then points to three guides, each one representing different attributes: (1) being observant, (2) being prudent and humble, and (3) being candid and playful. What follows is a one-and-a-half-minute video clip of this model. View video online.



Model-building grounds both participants and observers in the social realities of the community. What we see in the examples above are two distinctly different communities with different social challenges and local resources.<sup>6</sup> What we look for in the individual models are different points of view among community members and among people who are playing a role in keeping the community together. One person’s interpretation of his or her community may differ significantly from another’s. Phase two of Model-building helps to flush out these different perspectives.

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6. The demographic data of the Jungle and South Valley where the Red Wolf Band gathers together are very similar. Both are communities of color of about the same size, and both have median family incomes of less than \$48,000. In 2006, the populations of South Valley and the Jungle (Baldwin Park) were almost entirely people of color, 80% and 90%, respectively; the majority of residents in both communities were Latinos. The median household income was 4% greater in the Jungle (\$47,977 compared to \$35,374), and its population was just over twice that of South Valley (79,980 residents compared to 36,924). ([http://www.muninetguide.com/states/new\\_mexico/municipality/South\\_Valley.php](http://www.muninetguide.com/states/new_mexico/municipality/South_Valley.php))

**Model-building Phase Two: Small Group Models** Groups of different stakeholders—youth, women, elders, and others—construct models together of the community’s strengths and challenges. By surfacing similarities, this process helps each stakeholder group form a common point of view—shared concerns, core values, key resource institutions and people, self-organized activities, and social spaces—and a shared understanding of the group’s community.

What we do at Wildflowers is to make the similarities and differences in values and belief systems explicit in the form of figurines and objects so that these symbols become a visual language to identify shared goals and address tensions among different groups of stakeholders. Some of the differences between stakeholders, such as those between youth and elders, are often resolved by the model-builders mutually agreeing to have their own spaces within the community for their activities. In other situations, the symbolic representation of people and social spaces provides insights into an implicit shared premise between and among groups. Uncovering and naming this shared premise makes it explicit and available as a significant unifying factor in the community. But there are situations when differences cannot be reconciled, and we honor and hold that tension as well. Our digital documentation captures how community members are dealing with their differences in values, beliefs, premises, and practices, and we follow this over time.

Bridging differences among stakeholders is the work of the third phase of Model-building.

**Model-building Phase Three: Large Group Model.** Other levers of change surface in phases one and two of Model-building as participants describe their community and the people and social spaces that help them in their living and in work settings.

For example, leaders working in the formal and informal sectors of the community emerge in the models. Certain self-organized activities that bring the community together are represented in the models. Having identified these levers, we convene a third phase of Model-building consisting of a group that is optimally composed of a representative sample of the community’s stakeholders, among them youth, parents, elders, leaders, and businesspeople. We invite the entire group to build a single model showing the culture(s) of the community, the leadership group(s), and common motives of the community, including its activities and social spaces. This phase of the Model-building process helps community stakeholders and us understand the challenges that the entire community is facing as well as the resources that stakeholders have available to them. Seeing both aspects of reality helps everyone focus on relevant strategies for strengthening community from this authentic, culturally rich, and informal perspective.

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Wildflowers had an opportunity to carry out several Model-building sessions in a migrant community in Ningbo, China. The next video clip shows the coming together of different stakeholders—elders, teachers, and concerned residents—to describe the self-organized infrastructure of their community and its functions. Ningbo is a city of six million

people located on the eastern coast of China about a two-hour drive south of Shanghai. More than three decades ago, migrant workers came from Anhui Province to work in a steel factory in Ningbo. This migrant community began to organize itself and form a security system, a community activities center for elders and infants, and a learning center for young people. You will hear comments referencing “new” and “old” residents, and this classification hints at a tension between the current Ningbo residents and the Anhui migrant community. You will also hear the community voice expressing its identity and culture, its leadership formation, and current and future activities that residents intend to carry out. This model represents quite clearly what the Anhui community offers to the current residents in Ningbo. View video online.



**Model-building Phase Four: Community Strategies** With a formulation of shared motives, we help the community develop a plan of collective action through phase four of Model-building. In this phase, we bring together leaders from the different sectors of the community—including cultural and spiritual leaders, women’s and men’s groups, and youth groups—to build models of what they will undertake to implement the overall community vision. We suggest that the model depict how existing resources will be brought to bear to address social challenges in the community.

Several months ago, we visited Chichicaxtepec, which is located in the southern mountains of Mexico about a four-hour drive from Oaxaca City. During a four-day visit, we learned about the community’s history and social structures and offered our process as the community planned strategically for social and economic development. Residents of Chichicaxtepec and more broadly the indigenous Mixe people have resisted Spanish and Aztec domination and, over centuries, have formed a social structure that is self-sustaining.

We did not carry out the first three Model-building phases in Chichicaxtepec because the community members we met were very clear about their shared values, beliefs, and cultural practices. When we suggested that they build individual models, their response was, “Why would we do that?”

Thus, during the fourth phase of the Model-building process, a group of women and a group of men came together to build their model of the community. They constructed a representation of their community that reflected the importance of living in nature, family, intergenerational relationships, education, and sustainability. Half of their group model was of the hillside and mountainous regions where they grazed their animals. The other half showed their social structures and activities. The model showed their leadership group, a plaza for informal socializing of intergenerational family members, a classroom of children, a municipal office, and a church. The image below reflects a model of their community.



The two groups described the importance of developing a Mixe language and culture curriculum in the school, building an aquaculture farm, and expanding the greenhouse capacity as three projects that they intend to undertake. The groups agreed that the anointed leaders of the community and the municipal office would provide overall planning and direction. A woman would play a central leadership role in these efforts with support from a small group of men leaders. The image below shows this group of leaders.



As its first step in developing the Mixe curriculum, the group agreed that two indigenous teachers, a man and a woman, would devise a program for preschool children. It was important that this curriculum be at the center of community life as reflected in the next

image below of the children in school in the center of the plaza. The Mixe residents also agreed that the leadership would oversee the expansion of the greenhouse and the building of the aqua farm, both of which were located outside the main plaza.



### 3. Discovering the Power of Individuals in the Community

As we learn about the social realities of different stakeholders, we also identify the internal levers of change. Some of these levers come to our attention during our work in becoming grounded in the community. Through interviews and our documentation, we identify individuals who have significant standing and influence in the community. Some of these leaders are invisible to the outside. Let me give you an example. The Lao Iu Mien community in the San Francisco Bay Area is composed of five thousand refugees who have established a community center in East Oakland. On April 27, 2008, they held a premiere showing of a thirty-minute video documentary directed by one of the Iu Mien leaders on the development and formation of their community over the past thirty years.

This showing was held at the center and attended by about forty residents, some of whom were spiritual leaders and representatives of the eight Iu Mien districts and central council in Oakland.

One of the attendees was Mr. Kao Chiem Chao. We have been acquainted with Mr. Chao for almost a decade. Our documentation of the many community events that we have covered over the past ten years shows that Mr. Chao has attended every one of the events, but he generally does not give speeches nor does he actively give direction to others. Over time we learned that Mr. Chao's father was the chief of the Orange Tree Village in the highlands of Laos. On many occasions we have heard different community leaders say that they hold Mr. Chao in very high esteem. Every time we interviewed Mr. Chao, he came across as so soft-spoken and kind that his power could seem cloaked to an outsider.

While his role was initially difficult to document, two years ago we observed that Mr. Chao has a favorite place to hang out under a tree outside the community center. So a half hour before the showing of the video, we went out to take a look and there was Mr. Chao (the man wearing eyeglasses and holding a bottle of water in his right hand in the photos on the next page), standing with other district and central council members under the tree.



And just to be sure that what we captured in the morning and what we observed earlier in the year were not coincidences, we went back three hours later to see if a group of leaders was clustered around Mr. Chao. Sure enough, there he was with a different group of council members and spiritual leaders. We have come to recognize the important role that Mr. Chao plays in providing overarching guidance for community leaders.



#### 4. Analyzing and Mirroring

We are helping communities see and reflect on the manifestations of their collective achievements. At community meetings and events, we report back to community members, mirroring what we have seen and documented over time so as to inform their strategies and investments in community. We post the photos and video clips of people and events that we have taken on our Web site, and we hold meetings and conference calls to discuss our documentation and findings. We work together to develop a shared analysis of the community. The following are examples of the kinds of analysis we have developed with communities in which we have worked.

We produced a series of illustrations of the Filipino formation of community, and these two-dimensional renderings have been incorporated into a book entitled *SoMa (South of Market) Pilipinas 2000* by a member of the Filipino community. We also developed a series of illustrations of the Lao Iu Mien formation for this community and for our reports.

In our work in East Palo Alto, we held a series of dialogues with over twelve elders of the African American community on their cultural values and practices. We documented the dialogues by video, produced VHS tapes, and distributed them widely in the community.

We produced the documentary on the Lao Iu Mien community mentioned earlier in this paper. This video highlights three strategies that brought the community together. First, the community developed a leadership group. Second, it provided cultural space for bringing people together. And third, it supported its grand priest, shamans, and monks and their spiritual practices in homes and in the construction of a temple. We also produced a DVD on the Red Wolf Band. This documentary reflects our understanding of one of the community's spiritual centers of gravity and the positive impact it is having on young people and on Red Wolf's wealth creation activities.

Our documentation has helped communities see their culture—the manifestation of human intellectual achievements regarded collectively—over time. It is a living record of the community. Documentation serves as a mirror to help communities reflect on their strategies and the impact of these strategies to address social and economic challenges. Members of different communities have reported how much they have learned from seeing their own leadership structure and making explicit the informal relationships that are critical to success, and the social realities of different groups of people in their community. Our documentation has helped communities assess their strategies and culture and refine or develop them. Our analysis brings to the attention of different groups of stakeholders the underlying cultural assumptions that unify one group but separate it from others. And our analysis also serves to inform those outside the community about the organic structures, relationships, and culture to make things happen within the community. This in turn has led to enhanced learning about differences among communities without resulting in a struggle for power of one community over the other.

## OBSERVATIONS AND LEARNING

We have come to see that the community infrastructure is composed of “informal leaders” who organize social spaces and generative activities and are guided by the beliefs and values of the community. They are the real-time architects for the social safety and social health of the community. This infrastructure has surfaced in every racially mixed and ethnically homogeneous community in which we are working. We believe that seeing the infrastructure that the community conceived of and developed over time and leveraging this innate system is the surest way to build communities without destroying it as a result of external interventions.

### Informal Leaders

We have documented the existence of a certain kind of leader who, although invisible to the outside, organizes activities that bring people together in socially connected ways. These leaders are the relationship builders and the caretakers of the interests of the commons. They have two primary functions. Some leaders work internally as the weavers of the social fabric while others build relationships and partnerships with external opportunities. And there are still others who serve both functions. These people and their collective actions have enormous influence and are the drivers of social transformation in their community.

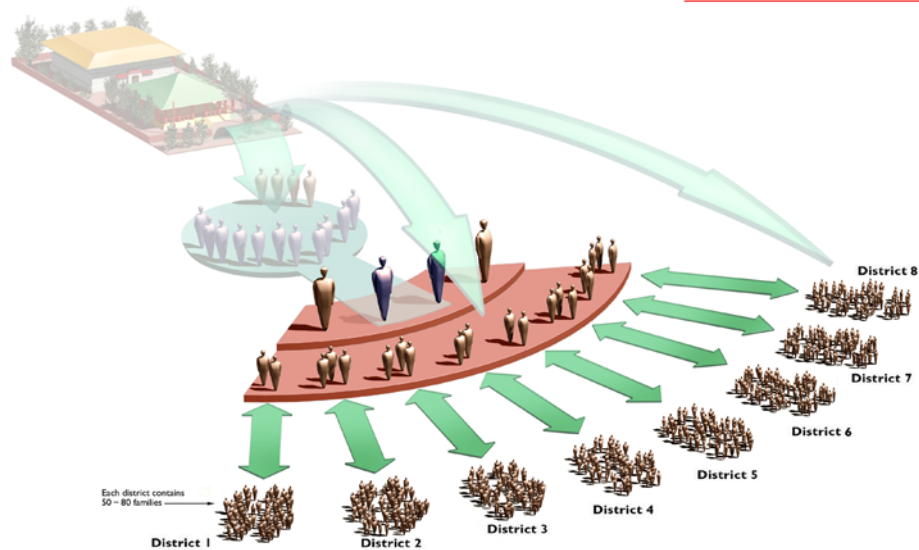
We have come to use the term “informal leaders” to describe those who build centers of gravity. Their work is almost entirely in the informal sector of the community. They are concerned elders, spiritual and cultural leaders, and other highly regarded community members who have taken it upon themselves to bring families and friends together. The elders provide guidance and direction. The spiritual and cultural leaders organize ceremonies and rituals. And the respected community members offer their help and support. Informal leaders hold six characteristics in common:

1. They have a long track record of dealing successfully with all kinds of pressing issues.
2. They are recognized for their good deeds and are trusted and well known by most community members.
3. They are invisible to outsiders.
4. They are modest and do not seek personal media attention or political positions.
5. Their role and authority are created by the community without external mandates.
6. They are motivated to help others and not by monetary gain.

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Informal leaders work closely and collectively and are the backbone of the community. Their trust and mutual respect are vital to the integrity of the community. The illustration below shows the collective leadership of the Lao Iu Mien community.

LAO IU MIEN Oakland, CA



The Iu Mien in the San Francisco Bay Area organized themselves into eight districts, each composed of fifty to eighty families, as shown in the illustration above. Each district elects two or three members to represent the district. The district council as a whole elects three or four of its members to serve on the central council. Thus, there are over twenty district and central council members who are informal leaders. Council members serve voluntarily to mediate and resolve tensions within and between families. Common issues that they address include serious tensions between husband and wife, out-of-wedlock pregnancy, and interfamily conflicts. A photo of the 2007 council members is shown below.



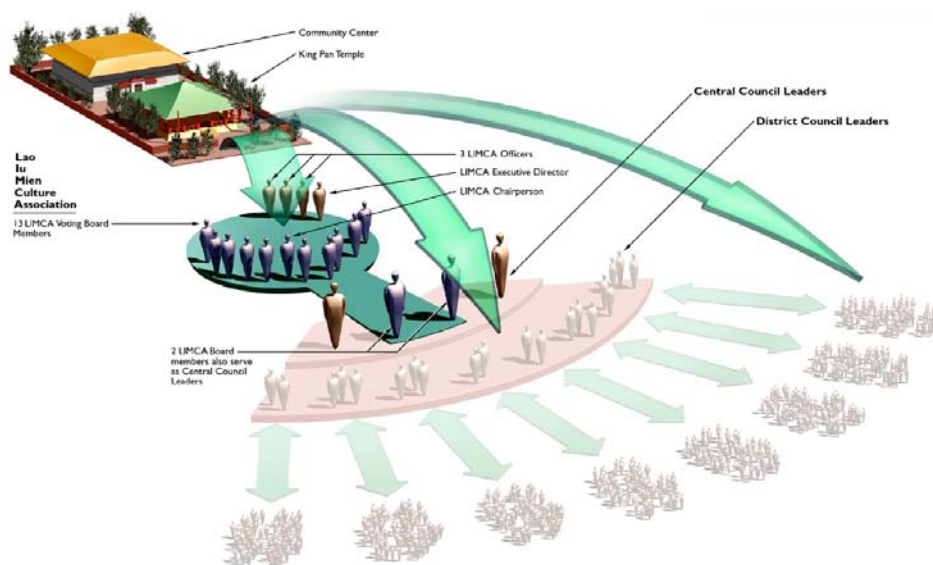
In addition to the district and central councils, there are grand priests and shamans who are highly respected and actively involved in holding Taoist rituals and ceremonies in local homes to help with spiritual healing. We have heard many accounts from community

members, young and old, about how much respect they have for their spiritual leaders. They, too, are informal leaders. A photo of the grand priests and shamans is below.



There are also informal leaders who function as connectors with mainstream institutions and resources. Like those who focus internally, these leaders support the development of new activities that offer some balance between the informal and institutional sectors of the community. They understand how to work effectively with others, inside and outside, and they remain faithful to and protective of what is important to the community when engaging with others on the outside. They do not seek personal recognition for this work.

The leaders of the Lao Iu Mien Culture Association (LIMCA) serve as an interface with mainstream society. These leaders were the ones who started organizing families in the early 1980s and developing the formation of districts and the district and central council structure. They also raised funds from a few foundations to build the community center and from a national network of Iu Mien families to build the temple. The illustration below shows their relationship to the councils, the districts, and the community center and temple.



## Activities with Unrelated Generative Effect (AWUG Effect)

*Activities with unrelated generative effect . . . by this we mean activities that bring about positive personal change that is unrelated to the primary purpose of these events.*

We have discovered generative activities initiated by informal leaders, and we use the term “AWUG effect” to describe them. By this we mean activities that bring about positive personal change that is unrelated to the primary purpose of these events. What is important about the AWUG effect is that there is an intentional effort by one or more persons to guide someone and to strengthen or heal relationships. Dallas Price is one of the most popular barbers among youth in East Palo Alto and Menlo Park. In the next video clip, you will hear Mr. Price speaking about how he counsels young people. [View video online.](#)



During our visit to Chichicaxtepec, Mixe, in Oaxaca, we were mindful that we would very likely introduce some different points of view and values to the community. We shared this concern with the indigenous leaders and asked them how they deal with their differences. We learned from them that their fiestas are not only for cultural renewal but also for the leaders to heal social wounds. One Mixe leader described the fiestas as opportunities to “prevent an angry relationship from turning into a dysfunction between your heart and stomach.” A second Mixe leader said, “Fiestas offer moments of reflection when you ask for forgiveness.” We came to see that the indigenous leaders of Mixe strategically use the fiestas to hold candid discussions that lead to social healing and conflict resolution—another example of the AWUG effect.

## Social Spaces

There are social spaces<sup>7</sup> in a community formed by groups of people who come together with shared values and expectations. Spiritual leaders, elders, cultural artists, organizers, women's and men's groups, and others hold rituals, ceremonies, gatherings, and events. Many of these activities happen inside homes, in backyards, on street corners, in parks, on porches, outside on a schoolyard, in restaurants, and in other community spaces, bringing people closer together. What is important is that in many of these spaces, something generative and special emerges. These activities serve as a centripetal force to bring others in. The collective action around shared values and beliefs is reaffirming and powerful. Some activities in social spaces serve to heal people while other activities strengthen intergenerational relationships and social connectedness. Still other social spaces transmit cultural knowledge and practices, and nourish and energize members of the community.

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The Filipino youth in South of Market, San Francisco, claimed Sixth Street as their space. The video clip below shows a Wildflowers session that we held with a group of Filipino youth describing their community. This model was built from a consensus among the young people and does not reflect the opinion of just one or two individuals. In this example we see how they define who they are, what people and institutions are important to them, and the social spaces they claim as their own that are invisible to others. Making visible these invisible spaces leads to recognition of the importance of these spaces in the neighborhood. This in turn helps everyone see the young people's point of view. View video online.



7. Social spaces are geographical locations that are defined by groups of people and hold a special meaning for them.

The next video clip is of a young man who receives support from the Gates Foundation to attend the University of California, Berkeley, and who is a Taoist priest in training. In the clip he talks about the social importance of the annual King Pan Festival. You will see both cultural and spiritual activities and the impact of uplifting the spirit on people attending the event and those performing in it. View video online.



In the backyard of a home in South Valley, Albuquerque, an indigenous Indian family holds Inipi ceremonies every Friday evening for a group of women and a group of men. One of the main purposes of these sweat lodge ceremonies is to support indigenous Indians in their sobriety. The ceremony is spiritually moving, and inside the sweat lodge we have witnessed the expression of pain and sorrow and deeply candid conversations. After the ceremony, the family hosts a potluck meal that reinforces social bonds and connectedness among those attending the session.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Informal leaders, social spaces, and activities with generative effects are the foundation from which everything grows. This infrastructure is the master key to improving educational outcomes, increasing employment, strengthening family and community cohesion, and multiplying individual and family resourcefulness. The elegance of this infrastructure is its simplicity. Its power and authority come exclusively from its capacity to instill social safety and to adapt and build community. The more responsive and effective this infrastructure is to its constituency, the more authority the community bestows upon it. We submit that this architecture helps communities be self-sustaining and that it must be strengthened.

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Inside and outside cultural centers, sacred spaces, and civic gathering places, community members nourish, protect, and replenish others and transmit and reinforce beliefs and values of the community culture. But when the infrastructure is weak and diminished, a culture of violence and destruction prevails. In a weak community culture, people are overwhelmed by negativity and unable to come together to defend their beliefs and values. The way to correct this toxic tide is to help communities return to the basic culture of their community. To start building again from the ground up, the community must create an infrastructure dedicated to the aspirations of the commons.

There are many examples in each of the communities that we are working in that demonstrate the power of a community infrastructure to improve the quality of life. The Lao Iu Mien community in the San Francisco Bay Area illustrates the power of an infrastructure to make a big-step change in a community's social situation. In the early 1980s, Lao Iu Mien refugees came to the Bay Area and were scattered all over in some of the most vulnerable and challenging neighborhoods.<sup>8</sup> During the 1980s and 1990s, the Lao Iu Mien were almost all on public assistance. They did not speak English nor did they understand American culture. Families experienced significant disruption and family breakdown, young people dropped out of school, and many joined gangs. At that time, Iu Mien youth were the second-largest racial group to be incarcerated in California. In our interviews with community members, we heard consistent comments about how they felt a strong sense of loneliness, social isolation, and loss of a sense of community.

The leader of the Lao Iu Mien Culture Association, Kouichoy Saechao, convened a meeting of a few elders (Saengchiem Kuan Saechao, Fochiane Tong Saechao, and Kao Chiem [Yao Fey] Chao), the Grand Priest (Fouvang Tang), and other community leaders to discuss how to bring families together and what strategies they should employ to address family disintegration, social isolation, and youth violence. What emerged from their

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8. The U.S. government's Office of Refugee Resettlement provided support to the Lao Iu Mien in the form of cash assistance, employment training, job searches, classes in English as a second language, and vocational training. The government also offered a health safety net and food stamps through its Aid to Families with Dependent Children Program.

deliberations was the development of a comprehensive effort to bring families together through cultural and spiritual activities and to form a community-wide leadership group that reflected the village structure in the highlands of Laos. Iu Mien families quickly accepted and adopted this mirroring of the past and applying it to the present as a sensible approach to organizing. While community leaders were deeply concerned about addressing gang violence and youth incarceration, they remained focused on establishing an infrastructure that served as a container to bring families together. They did not develop intervention or violence prevention programs for young people and at-risk populations. In 1991, they formally established their district council structure, which served to resolve conflicts within and between families and strengthen relationships among community members. In 1996, they acquired a small building and property in East Oakland where they organized cultural and spiritual events; in 2003, they built the community center on that property; and in 2008, they built the Taoist-Buddhist temple adjacent to the community center.

Since Wildflowers began its work in the Iu Mien community in 1999, we have observed how its infrastructure has provided social support and a greater sense of identity. Over the years, more and more people have participated in community activities, and we have seen evidence of greater social engagement, social trust, and cohesion. Children, young people, adults, and elders look happy and proud in their traditional attire, and they report enjoying themselves socially at cultural events. Some of the youth are involved in organizing and performing in cultural events. Council members help to resolve differences within and between families and align community members around shared aspirations. Grand priests and shamans hold ceremonies to help foster the spiritual life of family members. Community leaders have indicated that they have not heard of any incidence of gang violence or gang-related youth incarceration over the last five years. Today, almost all Iu Mien youth are finishing high school. Many young men are entering the workforce after high school graduation. Community leaders estimate that the majority of young women are enrolling in a college or university. A growing number of them are attending graduate schools in such fields as social work, education, and human services. And most of the graduates are returning to the Bay Area to work and contribute to their family income and the community. Community leaders have reported that a majority of families have pooled their individual and collective financial resources to acquire a home and that most adults are now employed. They also have estimated that a minority of working adults are on public assistance today.

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When this infrastructure is strong and vibrant, across the communities in which we have worked we see the strengthening of shared social and sacred spaces and generative activities. Examples of these spaces include the building of community centers for cultural enrichment, such as the Anhui Street community center in Ningbo, China, and the Bayanihan Community Center and the Bindlestiff in the Filipino community, South of Market, San Francisco. We witness the emergence of sacred spaces for spiritual ceremonies, such as the Red Wolf Sweat Lodge and its Sun Dance grounds in Tsa-ya-toh, New Mexico; the King Pan Temple in East Oakland; and Cooley Landing, East Palo Alto. We observe the organizing of social events that strengthen trust and social connectedness among Filipino youth on Sixth Street, South of Market, San Francisco; among black youth on certain intersections in Baldwin Village (the Jungle); and among adults and elders in coffee shops in San Francisco Chinatown. In Chichicaxtepec, the plaza was the social space where intergenerational family members came to socialize and informally discuss the affairs of the community.

At Wildflowers Institute, we have a unique process that helps those inside and outside the community develop a shared framework for collective action toward greater self-sustainability. We invite others to join us in learning about organic infrastructures and more broadly about community as a phenomenon and from a multidisciplinary perspective. We are confident that the application of our knowledge is making a difference in development in societies.

## ONGOING CHALLENGES

Philanthropy plays a unique role introducing innovative models and practices into the community to address pressing issues of poverty and the like. But there are many examples of philanthropic initiatives that did not achieve their intended outcomes. At the heart of many of these issues is philanthropy's dependency on the willingness of the existing leadership structure in communities to accept innovation. And to reach this leadership structure, foundations work through nonprofit organizations and intermediaries. These channels have access to individuals and other community organizations, but they generally do not have relationships with the community's informal leaders. It is the informal leaders who hold the power of the commons and are responsible for the sustainability of the community. We believe that it is crucial that government, funders, and concerned citizens take the time to understand and leverage the innate power so as to improve the self-sustainability of communities. We understand and appreciate the importance of public-private partnerships between nonprofit organizations and government agencies and funders, but communities can be self-sustaining only if a generative infrastructure exists, both for social connectedness and spiritual replenishment and for wealth creation.

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But there are some key challenges in engaging and working with this infrastructure to create sustainable community change. One challenge is to learn how to strengthen informal leaders without undermining their power. Their influence and standing in their community come from being reliable and dependable and having established a degree of social trust with others. Singling out informal leaders and raising their profile through access to training or project funding risks disrupting their embedded status. Elevating informal leaders may raise a question within the community of whether their motivation has become personal rather than collective and may undermine the trust that is central to their position and their effectiveness.

A second challenge is to understand how to create and maintain some dynamic balance between the informal and formal sectors of community. What we have observed in communities with robust institutions and an active informal sector is that over time, the balance tips toward the formal sector and a diminishing of the values, principles, and beliefs of the core. We have also observed that the social realities of people working in the formal institutional sector—government agencies, service providers, and businesses—are vastly different from those of informal leaders. Informal leaders are building social safety and trust and laying the foundation for people to be open and generous with their time and energy. Their rewards are essentially personal and social and come from building the community of which they are part. The reward system for the formal sector has its intrinsic elements as well, but it relies heavily on recognizing individual achievements through personal promotion often coupled with monetary gain. While the informal sector—the informal

leaders and community architecture—creates the foundation of the community’s cohesion, the formal, institutional sector provides human capital resources, social services, and employment opportunities. Both the informal and formal sectors are assets that can contribute to the community’s long-term viability. So it is important to develop mechanisms through which these sectors can interact without undermining their respective significance and contributions.

A third challenge is to develop strategies that enable government, funders, and others to identify and effectively interact with informal leaders and other aspects of the community’s architecture. Funding sources have tried a series of different strategies for interacting with local communities, but most of these strategies have fallen short. Too often, funders hold their own definitions of success and seek out and rely on existing or newly created community-based organizations or a community foundation to reflect their interests and to serve as a link to the core of the community. But as we mentioned earlier, without the full endorsement of the core of the community, it is very unlikely that new programs and projects will be sustainable after external funding ends. Finally, funders have tried to recruit informal leaders to join boards of directors of community-based organizations. While informal leaders may agree to serve in this capacity, their authority becomes diminished in a boardroom.

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A fourth challenge is to develop approaches to bringing different cultures together in a level playing field. Most individuals and groups are at their best in their own cultural environment, and only a small percentage of the population has the bilingual and bicultural capacity to traverse different cultures seamlessly. It seems inappropriate and unwise to take people out of their natural milieu especially when the goal is to nurture, heal, and replenish community members. On the other hand, we recognize that some of the most significant divides come from major cultural and religious differences. We suspect that this coming together of differences involves identifying commonality among different cultural approaches to social connectedness, healing, and growing. So we are focused on designing processes and tools to help diverse groups appreciate their differences and identify their commonalities. We are also designing learning environments that build capacity for understanding two or more social realities while discovering the core elements of what they have in common.

These four challenges are on our agenda. We are deepening our understanding of them and are interested in partnering with others to develop processes and tools to address these challenges. Throughout all our work, we have learned that it is only by listening, watching, and engaging with many different community members and their informal leaders that we can be informed about what is central to the community and its culture, what the community sees as its problems and priorities for change, and how to stimulate development that will take root and be sustained by the community over time.