



Joseph C. Cornwall Center
for Metropolitan Studies

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Our Vision

The Joseph C. Cornwall Center strives to be:

- A key resource in the production of “usable” knowledge for the public, private, and nonprofit sector
- development in Newark, the northern region of New Jersey and beyond.
- A central force convening key civil society individuals and institutions as they engage in and pursue the economic, political, and cultural revitalization of Newark.
- A forceful agent for the economic and administrative coordination and cooperation of Newark and its surrounding communities.
- A national model for what a university-based center can accomplish working with regional, local, and community partners.

From the Director’s Desk

Monday, April 21, 2014

Greetings.

Please see attached article.

All the best.

RVA

OPINION: DID PRESIDENT JOHNSON'S WAR ON POVERTY SUCCEED?

ROLAND V. ANGLIN | JANUARY 15, 2014

If you define "success" as enabling marginalized communities to help themselves, then the answer is "Yes"



The 50th anniversary of President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty is upon us, and it has occasioned a retrospective on what is arguably one of the most complex periods in our nation's history.

This period is seminal as far as I am concerned. The role and scope of government was fundamentally altered in ways unimaginable today. So I am pleased this national reflection is going forward, even though I know the Great Society's real impact will always be measured by the question: How much poverty did it reduce?

One argument says that the Great Society programs may have significantly reduced elderly poverty, but general poverty, measured by our standard metric, has not declined all that much. An adjunct to that argument says that if we count non-cash government programs, many of them implemented during or in the wake of the War on Poverty, the true impact of the period emerges and there is a case to be made that poverty would have been much worse over the past fifty years without government intervention.

Another argument says that searching for impacts of the War on Poverty misses the point. Globalization and technological shifts have changed the game for the poor, leaving little opportunity for social and economic mobility. Growing inequality results from these large trends. But limiting the damage to the American social contract is exacerbated by the lack of consensus that inequality is indeed corrosive.

Of course there is the much-repeated argument that the War on Poverty failed to affect statistical poverty. Indeed, the War on Poverty put in place disincentives to individual drive and family formation that resulted in many of the social challenges we now face as a nation.

My own view of the period lends no clear and certain argument that would clarify statistical impact. No, my view of this time begins with President Johnson's [pathbreaking attempt](#) to introduce political and organizational voice to the question of poverty. In introducing to Congress his legislative bundle for the War on Poverty, Johnson said:

"What you are being asked to consider is not a simple or an easy program. But poverty is not a simple or an easy enemy. It cannot be driven from the land by a single attack on a single front. Were this so we would have conquered poverty long ago. Nor can it be conquered by government alone . . ."

"Today, for the first time in our history, we have the power to strike away the barriers to full participation in our society. Having the power, we have the duty. . . We are fully aware that this program will not eliminate all the poverty in America in a few months or a few years. Poverty is deeply rooted and its causes are many. But this program will show the way to new opportunities for millions of our fellow citizens. It will provide a lever with which we can begin to open the door to our prosperity for those who have been kept outside."

Johnson believed that opportunity is closely related to participation in the scrum of American democratic politics and that race and class had prevented some groups, such as African-Americans, Appalachian whites, and Latinos, from actively pressing for their interests such as better schools, healthcare, and housing.

Thus "maximum feasible participation" of the poor in planning and implementing the Great Society programs introduced a shift in local power away from urban patronage machines and in the case of rural poverty, powerful economic interests. We forget that this term, "maximum feasible participation," created a firestorm of uncertainty at the time but also presaged the acceptance of the notion that the poor should and must have a representational role in community and public affairs as a corollary to economic upward mobility.

In fits and starts, what has evolved from the War on Poverty's initial support of institution-building in poor communities is nothing short of an American triumph. The Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO), Johnson's lead agency in the War on Poverty, began supporting community-based agencies that coordinated the community and economic development of poor communities in the mid- to late 60s. There was much churn and failure in the beginning of these organizations, which we now call community development corporations (CDCs).

With the help of philanthropy, national financial and technical assistance intermediary organizations such as [NeighborWorksAmerica](#), the [Local Initiative Support Corp.](#) and [Enterprise Community Partners](#) were created in the 1980s to assist these fledgling organizations on the ground.

The work of the CDCs was further aided by policies such as the Community Reinvestment Act (CRA), which required financial institutions to make capital available in disinvested communities.

At first controversial, CRA was for a time a significant tool to get capital back into financially marginalized communities. We also have the Community Development Block Grant, the [Community Development Financial Institutions Fund](#), and the New Markets Tax Credits, which connects private investment to community development projects. This latter tool is clear indication of how mainstream community and economic development has become.

For some time community and economic development relied on housing rehabilitation and development as an entry strategy, but as the field has grown in prominence and strength it has broadened its reach into other areas of life that put people on the path of upward mobility, such as neighborhood security, supporting healthcare facilities, workforce development, personal asset building, and support for cultural development.

Most important, community-based development organizations are seen as essential partners by local government in the fight against blight and poverty. Community development is no longer a fringe field, but part of what public policy scholars call "networked governance." It is the idea and reality that government has limits and must find and use other partnerships in civil society to accomplish its goals.

The big question: If this great field is an important partner to government and has the confidence of the private sector, why do we still have poverty? This question deeply frustrates those of us for whom helping marginalized communities gain economic opportunity is our life's calling. It goes back to the President Johnson speech quoted earlier. Poverty is not going to be solved by one strategy, nor in a short period of time. We have to build the institutional framework for success in marginalized communities so that they can act and do for themselves, but not isolated from the rest of us who should help as Americans always do.

As a nation, we must continue to focus and expand investment in marginalized communities. We now have a tool that can make a difference when used well. There are whole neighborhoods and people who are living the American dream through the efforts of community and economic development over the past 50 years. The truth of the matter is that poverty reduction is a never-ending project. This observation should not make us pause or give up. Rather, providing opportunity in this country has always been a process of experimentation and innovation. What Johnson's Great Society succeeded in doing is to help this nation experiment and learn what can work and not work in the search for multiple solutions to poverty. That is success as far as I am concerned.

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