

Fostering Communities of Practice

The Assets Program has helped grantees to build learning networks that develop, adopt, and spread new methods—practices—for building the assets of low-income people and communities. When these networks develop a critical mass of capabilities and participants, they can help many individuals and organizations implement new practices. We have worked with three types of communities of practice:

- **Sectoral networks**, such as community colleges and community foundations
- **Place-based networks**, such as coalitions in metropolitan regions in the United States
- **Global fields of practice**, such as development finance, participatory community development, and environment and development



The underlying dynamic of a community of practice is one of voluntary association for improvement—people learning together to get better at what they do. Typically, practitioners form loose networks. Some networks may be permanent, such as formal associations of organizations or individuals. Others may be ad hoc and more project based, such as the peer learning clusters of community foundations that the Foundation has sponsored.

BUILDING GLOBAL FIELDS OF PRACTICE

A field is a critical mass of people and organizations working in a variety of ways on a common problem. Vibrant fields of work embrace diverse perspectives, reflect multiple entry points and methods for addressing practical problems and policy barriers, and encourage the new voices and leaders needed to sustain attention on persistent problems of poverty and injustice. The people and organizations in a field share some values, vocabulary, information, literature, objectives, and a repertoire of tools. They develop knowledge, individual and organizational capacities, and systems for professional development, standards, and best practices. They support experimentation and the cross-pollination of thinking and practice. Field building along these lines is a powerful way to achieve large-scale impact, suggest Michael Porter and Richard Kramer in an article in the *Harvard Business Review*, “Philanthropy’s New Agenda: Creating Value.” “Foundations can create the greatest value by funding research and a systematic progression of projects that produce more effective ways to address social problems. At its best, such work results in a new framework that shapes subsequent work in the field—making every dollar spent by philanthropists, government, and other organizations more productive.”¹⁷

The Assets Program supports the development of several global fields:

- **Development Finance and Economic Security**—helps low-income people generate sustainable incomes, save and plan for the future, and protect against unforeseen economic setbacks.
- **Community Development**—fosters healthy, equitable communities with strong civic culture where low-income people have opportunities to build a spectrum of individual and collective assets.
- **Environment and Development**—supports community development strategies that convert natural resources and environmental services into assets that benefit low-income people.
- **Workforce Development**—supports mechanisms that enable poor and disadvantaged people to obtain marketable skills and access to resources necessary to get and keep good jobs.
- **Sexuality and Reproductive Health**—addresses the social, cultural, and economic factors that affect sexuality and reproductive health by supporting community-based responses and appropriate policies to address AIDS and healthy youth development.

The development of global fields is an evolutionary process. For instance, our effort in the development finance field began by building new institutions and developing useful knowledge about financial services for the poor in Bangladesh, Mexico, Kenya, Nigeria, India, South Africa, and the U.S. The Foundation supported development of trade associations or formal networks of development finance institutions. These groups promoted learning among their members, especially the adoption of best practices, and advocated for supportive public policies. In the mid-1990s, we recognized that the development finance field was reaching global scale. To facilitate this, we have been supporting a worldwide learning network of leading development finance institutions and investing in new ways to assess the impact of innovative development-finance products and services.