

CHAPTER TEN

Summary and Framework for Action

In addressing the socioeconomic well-being of low-income Asians in Los Angeles, this book reaches several conclusions:

1. There can be no empowerment for Asian Americans without recognition of the large, often voiceless and invisible population of poor Asians with unmet basic needs.
2. Except for refugee communities, joblessness is less extensive of a factor in low-income Asian communities than other communities of color, as there often exists an extensive enclave economy. Thus, the challenge is not to spur new small business development, but to improve the viability of existing businesses and the quality of jobs they generate.
3. Community Economic Development is a strategy that can effectively address the problems facing low-income Asian communities. An Asian CED strategy must look at Employment, Small Business Development, Housing, Capacity Building and Political Linkages.
4. The April 1992 civil unrest clearly demonstrated that Asian Americans can no longer afford to build economic strength through entrepreneurship while ignoring participation in the political process. Asian Americans must become active participants in policy-making to ensure that all groups are treated equally and fairly.
5. Institution building and strengthening linkages with policymakers, government agencies, foundations and

other ethnic communities are integral to enhancing the Asian community's capacity to carry out Community Economic Development.

6. While Asian communities have many economic needs, they also have many economic strengths. If channelled properly, these strengths can contribute to the economic development of impoverished areas. Thus, Asians must be part of any efforts to "rebuild" LA and revitalize inner-city areas.

Our research from this book reveals an Asian American community in critical need of quality jobs, skill and language training, decent and affordable housing, and assistance in small business development and planning. This research dispels the myth that Asian Americans are enterprising and prosperous. A substantial number are members of the working poor or are among the jobless. They face barriers that trap them in ethnic enclaves, where living and working conditions are often very poor.

Caught in the vicious cycle of trying to "make ends meet" for themselves and their families, low-income Asians lack the skills and language ability that could lift them out of this substandard existence. As long as poor Asians make up a substantial segment of the Asian population in Los Angeles and no effort is undertaken to improve their socioeconomic status, any strides made by other Asians are illusory.

Like others in the U.S., low-income Asians are entitled to a better standard of living and a decent quality of life. They have a right to meaningful employment that provides a living wage, opportunity for mobility, stable housing, and other important necessities of life. However, current Asian community organizations are primarily engaged in social service delivery. While their services are vital, they tend to treat only the symptom, not the larger problem. CED offers another perspective – one that offers empowerment as well as services. Rather than focusing on deficiencies, CED strategies enhance a person or community's level of skills, abilities and resources. They build on these strengths to legitimize rather than marginalize low-income communities. Asian community-based organizations are beginning to recognize this and are moving into community development work.

The task of looking at the needs of Asian Americans and developing a framework for economic development can be directly tied to the effort to rebuild Los Angeles. The rebuilding effort can finally provide the opportunity to address the issue of economic inequality in

the Asian American community. Avoiding the issue of inequality and the needs of Asians at the bottom of the ladder, we believe, will cause any rebuilding effort to fail.

In addition to calling for justice and equality for the Asian community, we call for a renewed spirit of social activism. Economic development combined with organizing and advocacy can produce positive changes and give voice to the working poor. It is imperative that community groups, churches, unions and other organizations educate themselves and their members about the economy and how to best shape policies to reap tangible benefits for their communities.

As long as the needs of low-income Asians continue to be ignored by policy-makers, elected officials and community representatives alike, true democracy for Asian Americans is unattainable. Low-income Asians will remain voiceless and invisible. We must ensure that low-income Asians, like all other impoverished communities, have access to economic opportunities. Anything less would be a false democracy.

A Five-Year Action Plan

We recommend that Asian communities take three broad steps to implement the CED goals outlined in this book. They should:

1. Encourage organizational capacity building
2. Promote internal and external linkages
3. Generate innovative projects that have a broad impact on economic development policy

Each step is not meant to be exclusive of the others. In fact, some steps must be done simultaneously. We do, however, suggest that a particular step receive greater emphasis at a specific time. The following description shows how these steps would fit into a five-year timeframe.

Capacity Building (One-to-Three Years)

While there are a few Asian community organizations with experience in Community Economic Development work, most groups lack the organizational capacity to do this work. Therefore, the first priority is to build and strengthen capacity.

First, community-based organizations (CBOs) interested in CED work must obtain operating funds to hire staff for such work. Second, training and technical assistance is needed, particularly for projects involving affordable housing and other developments. To meet these needs, organizations should link up with resources such as the Los Angeles Collaborative for Community Development, which provides training and operating grants for affordable housing development; approach private foundations for operating grants; and attempt to open up new sources of funds and training, such as recent overtures by Asian community representatives to Housing and Urban Development Secretary Henry Cisneros.

Board members, staff and clients of these CBOs must be involved in the development of this work. Capacity building must include a process of educating organizations and their boards about the work they will undertake. It must also include creating ways to involve community residents in planning efforts – to insure that they are participants in determining the priorities of projects and the goals of CED work.

Capacity building should also include learning from similar efforts in other communities across the country. Connections should be made with Asian groups involved with CED in San Francisco, New York, Boston and other cities. Local organizations with some expertise in CED work should share experiences with fledgling organizations.

Ultimately, this capacity-building step will enable community organizations to successfully launch projects, including affordable housing, community development and planning, and employment training and small business assistance.

Internal and External Linkages (Two-to-Four Years)

As Asian CBOs gain experience in carrying out development projects, the question of building linkages will emerge as the next major step. Internal linkages between Asian communities and CBOs will be necessary to expand CED work. External linkages to political institutions, relevant economic development agencies and other communities will be essential in insuring full inclusion of Asians in broader economic development policies and programs.

As Asian CBOs build their capacities, they can end up competing for the same private or governmental funding. Mechanisms to encourage coordination and cooperation will be critical to avoid a destructive and self-defeating level of competition. The Asian Pacific

Planning Council (APPCON) provides an example of how Asian CBOs can coordinate similar service programs and pursue joint funding. This is particularly crucial since funding sources often use implicit racial criteria in awarding funds. This means that for any given funding, only a few Asian organizations will receive an award. Sharing information about various funding sources and program opportunities, encouraging joint projects and proposals, collectively lobbying, and, where possible, prioritizing needs can help to minimize competition.

External political linkages will also be crucial for Asian communities. Because of the civil unrest of 1992, the current economic recession, down-scaling of the defense industry and general concerns about global restructuring, development policy enjoys a high level of public attention. New program initiatives will emerge from various levels of government, the private sector and foundations. Asian CBOs need to build external linkages to ensure that they are "in the loop" when these initiatives are debated and implemented.

These external linkages include building ties with local political institutions, elected officials and key government and private agencies, as outlined in Chapter Nine. They also include efforts to increase Asian political representation. Asian CBOs must strive to access existing funding sources as well as participate in the development of policy. However, this means Asians must be prepared to contribute to the economic development of the broader community and region. The welfare of low-income Asians is inextricably tied to the welfare of all who are economically marginalized.

Finally, linkages with other communities are important. As discussed in this book, many of the needs of low-income Asians are shared by other low-income minority communities. At the same time, many of the tensions between ethnic communities are rooted in economic conflicts. Building coalitions and ties with African American and Latino organizations, labor unions and other institutions will be important to bring about policies that will benefit all communities.

Innovation and Impact (Four-to-Five Years)

As Asian CBOs build their capacities and linkages, they will be in a position to create innovative programs. This step represents a crossroads for Asian communities. Because many organizations remain dependent on specific government and private sources of funding, it is easy for such organizations to become "funding-driven." That is, the organization's activities are shaped by the requirements of funders

rather than an independent determination of needs. This is problematic since our analysis has determined that *many existing policies and programs are ill-suited to the CED needs of low-income Asian communities.*

Asian CBOs in this third stage must develop innovative programs. Organizations will have the track record and stability to experiment and attempt new pilot programs, as well as the experience and insight to understand what is feasible. This can include program concepts mentioned in this book, such as small business diversification and upgrading, worker organizing and education efforts, and specialized employment training for better paying jobs.

By building the linkages described in the previous stage, Asian CBOs should be in a position to influence broad economic policy. Currently, this policy is shaped without the involvement of disadvantaged communities. "Public-private partnerships" in economic development typically involve only governmental agencies and business representatives. Asian CBOs, together with groups from other minority communities, must push for inclusion in this process. Policies must be rooted in daily grass-roots struggles and shaped by a new inclusionary vision.

To accomplish this third step, it will be necessary for Asian CBOs to reexamine their experience, broadly evaluate existing programs, and synthesize any critiques. There must be a forum that can bring together key actors for an extended dialogue. The objective is to identify major gaps in CED activities and target a few priority proposals. These can serve as a platform for a concrete campaign to change the way government and foundations address CED in Asian communities.

Conclusion

These three steps provide a strategic plan for CED work in Los Angeles' low-income Asian communities. The plan should not be interpreted rigidly, since each community and its institutions face different conditions. The value of this plan is that it can serve as the basis for keeping CED work accountable to constituents, as well as promoting innovative approaches to the problems facing disadvantaged communities.