

What did SPARCC
spark? Evaluation
Findings from
the Strong,
Prosperous,
and Resilient
Communities
Challenge

FINAL EVALUATION REPORT EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*Center for Community Health and Evaluation
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This report was prepared by the [Center for Community Health and Evaluation \(CCHE\)](https://www.cche.org) as part of the SPARCC evaluation with funding support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF). The views expressed here do not necessarily reflect the views of RWJF. CCHE designs and evaluates health-related programs and initiatives throughout the United States. For more information, please contact Lisa Schafer at lisa.m.schafer@kp.org.

What is SPARCC?

The Strong Prosperous, and Resilient Communities Challenge ([SPARCC](#)) was a cross-sector initiative that took place from 2017-2022 in six metropolitan regions throughout the United States. SPARCC’s goal was to catalyze changes in the way metropolitan regions grow, invest, and build through approaches that aimed to counter decades of racially discriminatory policies and investments. SPARCC’s vision was implemented by multi-sector collaborative tables in six regions

or “sites,” with three national organizations (“national team”) functioning as an intermediary that provided support and funding to sites. Representatives from the tables and national team formed a community of practice focused on SPARCC’s goals. SPARCC was supported by multiple funders in its six years. SPARCC’s policy and capital-related outcomes were generally a joint effort between the national team and sites (referred to as “SPARCC”).



Sites

Collaborative tables funded to implement SPARCC work



Photo of members of the Atlanta SPARCC team in a garden.

ATLANTA



Photo of members of the Bay Area SPARCC team at a SPARCC learning community convening.

BAY AREA



Photo of members of the Chicago SPARCC team at a SPARCC learning community convening.

CHICAGO



Photo of members of the Denver SPARCC team at a SPARCC learning community convening.

DENVER



Photo of members of the LA SPARCC team at a SPARCC learning community convening.

LOS ANGELES



Photo of members of the Memphis SPARCC team at a SPARCC learning community convening.

MEMPHIS



Support

- Funding (e.g., operational grants)
- Capital resources
- Peer exchange, support, and networking
- Technical assistance
- Subject matter expertise & resources (including data)
- Communications



National team

Intermediary team of organizations that provided support and funding to sites as well as participating in systems change efforts themselves

Enterprise Community Partners (Enterprise) | Low Income Investment Fund (LIIF) | Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC)

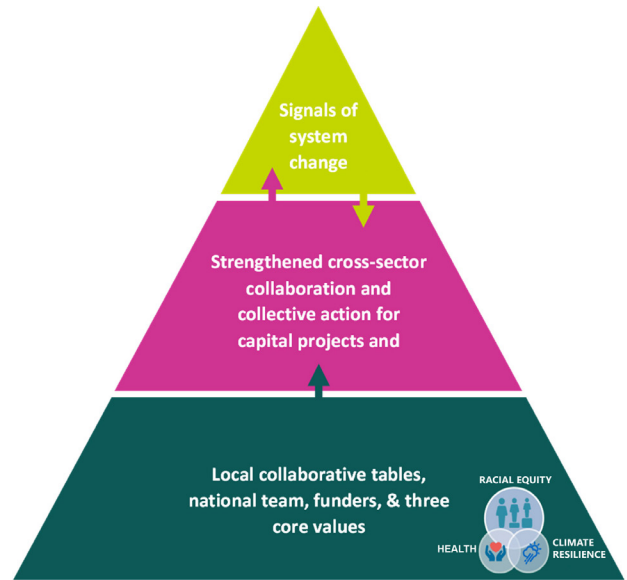
¹ The Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco was an implementing partner for the first three years of SPARCC only (2017-2019). It did not receive or disburse any funds related to SPARCC

² SPARCC’s first three years were funded by the Ford Foundation, JPB Foundation, Kresge Foundation, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF), and The California Endowment. Its final three years were funded by the Balmer Group, JPB Foundation, Kresge Foundation, and RWJF.

SPARCC's key design elements

- **Systems change initiative:** SPARCC aimed to shift conditions that hold racially discriminatory community development practices and investments in place (e.g., practices, policies, relationships, investments).
- **Building the foundation:** Investments were designed to strengthen local and national collaboration, resulting in capacity and infrastructure outcomes that would signify systems change.
- **"Three lenses":** SPARCC's articulated core values of racial equity, health, and climate resilience were expected to be evident in all its work.

SPARCC's theory of change for influencing the system of community development



SPARCC evaluation

The [Center for Community Health and Evaluation \(CCH\)](#) served as the evaluation and learning partner to SPARCC with support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF). The evaluation aimed to assess SPARCC's contributions to systems changes at the local and national levels and capture and share facilitators and challenges to support learning and adaptation. Data informing this report came from multiple sources over the initiative's six years, including interviews with various SPARCC partners, an annual survey of site table members, and review and observation of SPARCC events, program documents, and communications materials.

SPARCC evaluation findings

Based on analysis of all data, the evaluation identified six key findings. The first three present policy, capital, and organization change outcomes, followed by three findings related to the groundwork that enabled them. The full report provides more details about the data sources and findings.



Policy: The SPARCC initiative directed efforts on policies related to community development at the national and local level. Most of the work at the national (i.e., the field, as well as federal policy) focused on informing policy and building the will to make future policy changes. At the local level, sites achieved a broad range of policy successes, including public policies, private or non-governmental policies, and contributions to policy adoption and implementation.

Context: SPARCC's **policy work was heavily influenced by the national policy environment.** When federal policies were less aligned with SPARCC goals and values (2017-19), the national team focused on supporting sites' local and regional policy efforts. Changes in the executive branch after the 2020 election brought opportunities to broaden SPARCC's visibility and influence at the federal level. National team members and site partners worked together to amplify positive changes coming from the ground up via community-based organizations and residents.

Key outcomes:

- SPARCC generated **supportive policy resources for advocacy at the national and local levels** including the development of a [national policy platform](#) and materials providing guidance to site partners for accessing federal funds.
- SPARCC partners' **substantial advocacy with the federal government helped crystallize ideas about equity into tangible approaches** for policies that shape community development. This included collective comment letter writing and testimony to various federal agencies (i.e., communications developed from SPARCC and its participating partners), as well as providing case studies and best practices that informed federal priorities (e.g., Build Back Better plan, Inflation Reduction Act).
- With time, most SPARCC site tables were able to **strengthen their positions as actors to move forward local policy priorities** that help address historic disinvestments in legacy communities of color and communities living with low incomes.
- **SPARCC sites achieved a broad range of policy successes.** At least four sites had policy wins in the following areas, four of which are aligned with the focus areas in the site-informed SPARCC policy platform (indicated with an *):
 - Housing as a human right*
 - Restorative and regenerative economy*
 - Health equity
 - Arts and culture
 - Equitable transit-oriented development (ETOD)*
 - Park equity*



Photo showing about 15 people from Causa Justa gathered on the steps of a public building holding a sign reading “Protect Oakland Renters.”

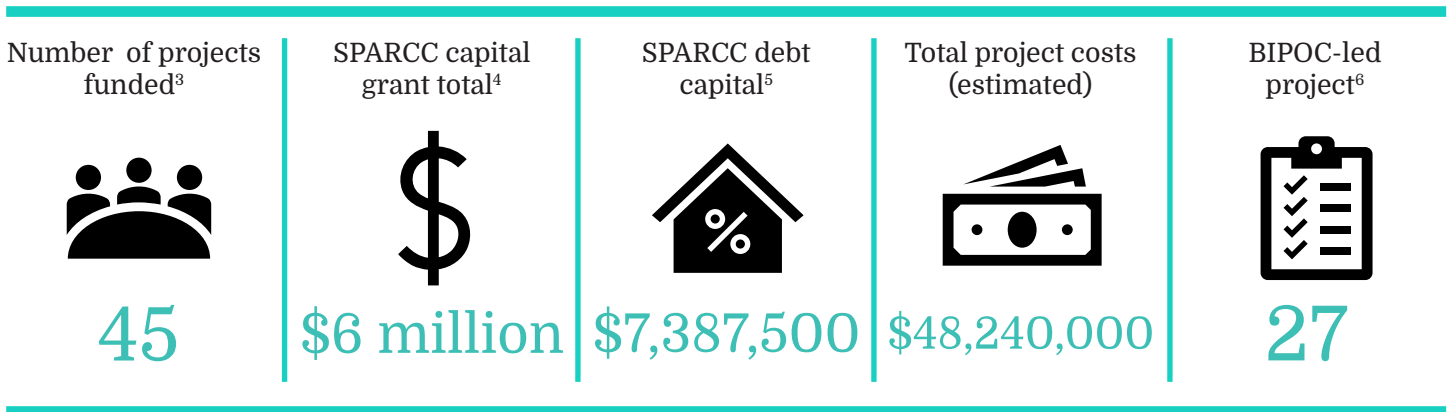
Lessons from evaluation data:

1. SPARCC's policy work got more traction later in the initiative because it takes time to lay the foundation needed to achieve policy change.
2. Facilitators enabling SPARCC's national influence:
 - **Framing.** SPARCC elevated the integration of racial, health, and climate justice in many forums and inspired and equipped people to think in more holistic ways, which generated new opportunities for funding, projects, and partnerships.
 - **Technical terms and processes translated into usable concepts.** SPARCC translated technical terms like building efficiency, climate resilience, and equity so they could be understood in a way that communities could apply them.
 - **Culture of embracing innovative ideas.** SPARCC's deliberate focus on sharing ideas and connecting partners shaped how work unfolded on the ground.
 - **Expansion of SPARCC's influence.** Multiple SPARCC partners (local and national) transitioned into jobs within local and federal government and other community development institutions. They reported infusing SPARCC values and approaches into their work.
 - **Valuable intermediary policy expertise, resources, and connections.** Relationships between the national team and sites helped local entities understand the content and process of federal program creation and funding.

2

Capital: SPARCC's initial vision for capital work clashed with on-the-ground reality and capital deployment was far less than anticipated. However, more importantly, the initiative revealed barriers to community-led development and prompted adaptation to approach and process. This resulted in advancements in the field related to community ownership and contributions to community-driven capital projects in all sites.

Context: SPARCC's vision for its capital work was to deploy many millions of dollars to community-driven capital projects in each site, but several challenges slowed deployment of funds. **Lack of collaboration with local communities during initiative design** resulted in SPARCC launching with insufficient relationships and trust between the national team and sites. This contributed to a **mismatch between the types of funding and resources available through SPARCC and what was needed for the community-driven capital projects** prioritized by sites. Over time, the national team shifted its approach from top-down efforts to build sites' capacity to absorb SPARCC funds to a more relationship-based partnership approach focused on understanding and removing barriers for priority projects.



Key outcomes:

- Despite challenges, the SPARCC national team adapted and contributed funding and support to at least three capital projects in each of the six sites. In total, **SPARCC disbursed over \$13 million across 45 capital projects** to historically disinvested communities.
- Capital projects contributed to a **range of community assets**, including new facilities (e.g., small-business spaces, community centers), affordable housing units, and transit stop adjacent soccer fields. Several supported community ownership models.
- The partnerships behind the capital projects deepened the national team and the field's **understanding of entry points for feasible capital projects** at the six sites, as well as common barriers and potential solutions.
- The SPARCC national team and all six sites **promoted and expanded knowledge, capacity, and infrastructure to support community ownership models**.
- SPARCC **demonstrated new approaches for community-driven development** including expanding participation and engaging community in capital processes and intentionally and explicitly integrating racial equity, health, and climate resilience into capital projects.

³ This includes multiple property acquisitions and/or separate investments with one borrower/grantee that are counted separately.

⁴ Capital grants were philanthropic funding for capital projects that did not need to be repaid and had more flexible requirements.

⁵ Debt financing refers to loans or loan packages originated for capital projects, sometimes combined with other SPARCC capital resources (e.g., capital grants, PRI, or guarantee). Loans were subject to underwriting requirements and had to be repaid.

⁶ The BIPOC acronym refers to Black, Indigenous, and People of Color — communities that have commonly experienced systemic racism. BIPOC-led projects are those for which the founder, senior leader, or primary development contact identified as BIPOC.



Photo showing about 50 people from the SPARCC sites and national team gathered at the SPARCC community of practice convening in Chicago.

Lessons from evaluation data: In general, community-led development that advances racial equity requires major disruption to existing capital systems. Some of the barriers SPARCC encountered were due to the relatively traditional power structure of national community development finance institutions (CDFIs). This influenced the types of funding available, underwriting requirements, and expectations for borrowers, among other aspects of the process. More specifically:

1. **Community-led development requires changes within CDFIs and other funding institutions.** This includes providing more flexible capital resources alongside collaborative technical assistance and revisiting their definition of “risk.” The typical tools, processes, and requirements employed by CDFIs perpetuate inequitable development.
2. **Community-led development requires new measures for success,** including more qualitative elements that go beyond deals made and dollars deployed to more community- and process-oriented elements.
3. **Community-driven development requires structures for community engagement and decision making,** including a local champion with capital expertise, connections to CDFIs, knowledge about local context, and trusting relationships with community members.
4. **Community-led capital projects take time** since they require working differently, conducting meaningful community engagement, understanding barriers, and collaboratively identifying or developing solutions.



Organizational practice change: Participation in SPARCC contributed to organizational practice changes at all three intermediaries that consistently made up the national team (Enterprise, LIIF, and NRDC). Representatives from all three drew direct links between SPARCC and new or different practices within their organizations that reflected SPARCC values.

Context: SPARCC’s design expected the national intermediary organizations to be both drivers and targets of the systems changes SPARCC sought.

Key outcomes: Multiple representatives from all three intermediary organizations reported that SPARCC influenced their organizations' approaches to prioritizing racial equity even amidst larger, external movements (e.g., the 2020 national, racial reckoning). This included:

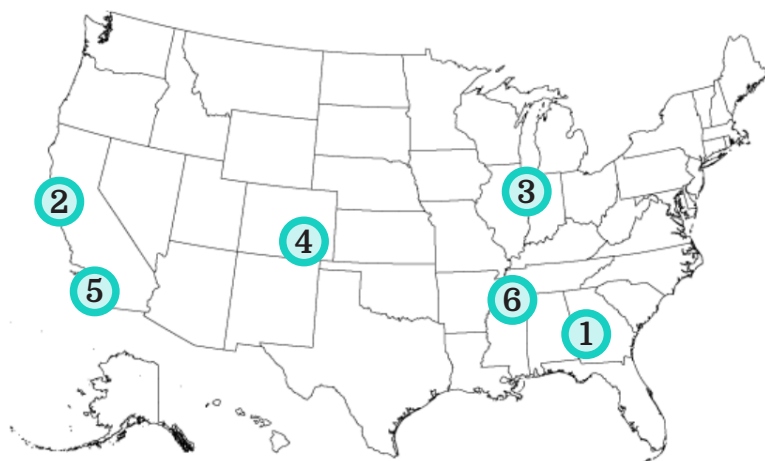
- **Changes in internal discussions** to explore how their organizations can more deeply add value to communities or meet community needs. They also reported giving more attention to community-level leadership and voice.
- **Development of other programs or initiatives** focused on advancing racial equity that were informed by and incorporated SPARCC's values and approaches.

Lessons from evaluation data: The expectation that SPARCC's intermediary organizations be both drivers and targets of the systems changes SPARCC sought allowed the evaluation to look at what was shifting within three large national organizations within the community development sector. This meant data could be gathered and shared back with national partners for reflection on if and how their organizations were changing because of participation in the SPARCC initiative.



Local cross-sector collaboration: SPARCC strengthened and leveraged the relationships of site tables, local community members, and broader networks. This collaborative infrastructure is a foundational component of systems change.

Context: The foundation of local SPARCC implementation was collaborative "tables" that provided the infrastructure for multi-sector partnership to advance SPARCC's goals.



- ① TransFormation Alliance (Atlanta)
- ② Bay Area 4 All
- ③ Elevated Chicago
- ④ Mile High Connects (Denver)
- ⑤ SPARCC LA
- ⑥ North Memphis V.O.I.C.E. Coalition

Key Outcomes:

- Site tables started SPARCC with differing levels of existing infrastructure and collaborative relationships and varied in how they developed and operated—there was not a one-size-fits-all approach.
- Most tables improved their collaborative structures and processes during SPARCC. This included bringing together new partners, building relationships and trust among partners, amplifying community voices, establishing communication and decision-making structures, and having dedicated staff to support the table and the work.

- **Table building was not a clear-cut, linear process** and most reported challenges and ups and downs in collaboration over SPARCC’s six years.
- **Building and maintaining relationships and trust, as well as the structures and processes necessary for effective collaboration, required time and ongoing investment.** The experience of SPARCC’s tables illustrated the dynamic and evolving nature of multi-sector collaboration, reinforcing that maintaining effective structures is never “done.” SPARCC funding was an essential ingredient over its six years.
- SPARCC tables were also a **mechanism for fostering local leadership**, which contributed to advancing the site-level policy and capital outcomes discussed above.

Lessons from evaluation data: Time, funding, and intentionality are necessary to establish and maintain effective multi-sector collaboration. Five tips that emerged from reflections across the six sites:

1. **Focus on the “how” and the “why” as well as the “what” from the beginning.** The strategies and the work will keep changing; however, the reasons people show up, how they work together, and the relationships built are what will last.
2. **Invest in relationship and trust building** among members early and often, even when people are reluctant. This takes time, persistence, and patience.
3. **Make racial equity mandatory.** Racial equity work requires all members embrace this core value without exception or negotiation.
4. **Prioritize equity, diversity, and inclusion experience over subject matter expertise.**
5. **Pay people for their time** and be accountable to that value with consistency and transparency.

5

Racial equity: Racial equity emerged as the primary value and a necessary first step to achieve community development goals related to health and climate resilience.

Context: SPARCC’s design made explicit connections between and initially framed its focus on racial equity, health, and climate resilience as “three integrated lenses.” Though both sites and the national team initially struggled to understand and put these three integrated values into practice, this focus did prompt more holistic thinking about the work. **Within the first two years of the initiative, racial equity emerged as SPARCC’s primary concept in response to sites’ advocacy encouraging the national team to explicitly name it and have it anchor the work.** Importantly, **putting racial equity first influenced both what the national team and the sites prioritized (i.e., collaborative partnership development, types of work) and how they conducted the work (i.e., the approach and processes).**



Photo showing three people from the Memphis team standing with their arms around each other, smiling at a SPARCC community of practice convening.

Outcomes: SPARCC did community development work differently from established norms, in service of racial equity.

- SPARCC's capital work evolved to include **intentional attention to BIPOC-serving capital projects**, including BIPOC developers, which challenges typical practices and mindsets within community development. This taught national partners how traditional capital models that required community-based organizations to take on debt perpetuated racial inequities.
- Leaning into the SPARCC value of racial equity required **the national team to continue to tangibly shift power to the sites** while working with them in doing work on the ground. This included engaging sites in co-designing SPARCC strategies and processes, investing in adaptive leadership development for sites, and sharing decision making with site partners. Over time, **the national team worked more in partnership and with increased flexibility** in processes.
- **Investing in and embedding arts and culture** was a key SPARCC strategy to advance racial equity. Both the national team and sites made concrete investments in and efforts to embed arts and culture into their work to lift and honor BIPOC voices and culture, acknowledge past and current racial oppression and violence, and promote resilience and healing.
- Sites and the national team saw **opportunities for SPARCC funders to embody a mindset that they are also part of the system needing to change** to advance racial equity. National team members reflected that funders of racial equity initiatives must explicitly acknowledge philanthropy's roots in white supremacy and examine the barriers to directly funding BIPOC-led organizations.

Lessons from evaluation data: Work to advance racial equity requires pushing on existing systems, structures, and processes — it is long-term and emotional work requiring persistence to change the status quo. SPARCC's racial equity focus elevated:

1. The importance of **BIPOC leadership** in racial equity efforts.
2. The essential role of **trust and relationships**.
3. The benefits of **humility combined with flexibility**.



Supportive structures: In addition to initiative resources (e.g., funding), SPARCC established three key structures that were essential supports in effectively operationalizing the initiative: the SPARCC national team (intermediary), intermediary-grantee relationships, and SPARCC's community of practice.

The intermediary: SPARCC national team

- The SPARCC national team's **investment in its operations, as well as relationship and trust building**, improved its effectiveness in implementing SPARCC. Particularly important, beyond relationships and trust, was articulating clear team roles, establishing decision making and communications processes, and managing the various organizational cultures.



Photo of person speaking into a mic at a SPARCC community of practice convening.

Intermediary-grantee relationships: SPARCC national team and sites

- The collaborative relationship between the SPARCC national team and sites demonstrated **how to work together on a national initiative**, in a way that helped ground SPARCC’s strategies in community priorities and advance racial equity. This included:
 - **Increased flexibility.** Over time, the national team shifted existing practices to better support the sites by reducing process burdens.
 - **Ongoing and intentional relationship and trust building.** SPARCC’s effectiveness relied on open, candid input and feedback from sites, which benefitted from the national team consistently listening, demonstrating flexibility and creative problem solving, dedicating space for conversations about race and power, and showing up to see how they could help to achieve sites’ goals. This required both time and funding.



Photo of around 50 people in Chicago posing in front of a big mural of people's faces.

Community of practice

A community of practice is a group of people who share a common concern or interest and come together to pursue individual and collective goals.

- SPARCC’s community of practice **supported relationship development, cross-site learning, and partnership.**
- **It benefited from intentional investments in building trust** and became more functional and valued as a result. The national team’s approach to the community of practice was an example of how they shifted from a top-down power dynamic to more collaborative and trust-based strategies that centered the role of sites as partners in decision making.
- Its legacy is demonstrated in **sites’ continued collaboration beyond SPARCC.** At the conclusion of SPARCC in 2022, all SPARCC sites were positioned to be in “impact tables” to continue building on work in areas aligned with SPARCC’s policy platform (e.g., equitable transit-oriented development, housing as a human right, park and open space equity, restorative and regenerative economy). RWJF provided two-year grants to each impact table starting in 2023, with an additional investment in a cross-site learning hub.

Lessons from evaluation data: SPARCC's supportive structures were largely grounded in helping people work together more effectively including structures for relationships and trust building, collaboration and partnership, and information sharing and peer support. When building supportive structures to operationalize a complex initiative, one should:

1. Be intentional early and often about **relationships and trust building**.
2. **Establish a collective vision**, which can be challenging across multiple partners but is essential in collectively moving towards the initiative's goals.
3. **Co-design the role of the intermediary with relevant representatives from sites/communities** and be transparent about where the resources go.
4. **Approach the work with openness and flexibility**, which allows for learning and adapting and increases effectiveness.

Trusting relationships are an essential ingredient in the complex, multi-sector collaboration required in systems change and/or racial equity initiatives.

Initiatives like SPARCC benefit from active engagement and input from intended beneficiaries (e.g., community members, BIPOC leaders).

Flexibility and adaptation are critical across all strategies within systems change work.

Systems change work takes time and requires long-term investment, a willingness to accept risk, and partnership beyond three-year funding cycles.



Photo of a soccer field in Atlanta under a metro overpass. Soccer ball in the foreground with "soccer in the streets" logo, lot of community members on the side of a field in the background.