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# Balancing Political Power: Community Economic Development and Institutional Design

*K. Sabeel Rahman*

Community Economic Development (CED) has been a central area of focus for practitioners, clinicians, and legal scholars, emphasizing questions of community benefits, affordable housing, access to justice, and much more. As the urban inequality crisis has continued to worsen, advocacy groups and practitioners have begun to experiment with more creative approaches to social change that lie at the intersection of traditional public-interest lawyering, social-movement organizing, and institutional design. These innovative approaches represent a potentially valuable area for practice and innovation in urban economic justice.

As scholars of law and social movements (including several on this panel) have rightly noted, an increasingly important overlap exists between strategies of legal change and grassroots organizing (e.g., Scott Cummings, *Law and Organizing*<sup>1</sup>). In the community-development space, this turn to organizing has been further nuanced by a parallel turn to governance. In cities like Detroit, Oakland, and elsewhere, grassroots advocacy groups have begun to propose novel governance arrangements as a way to increase not only the substantive economic outcomes of city development deals but also the community participation in formulating and monitoring these deals. Thus, the Partnership for Working Families, for example, has developed a community oversight board with the City of Oakland, which empowers local constituencies to help oversee, implement, and hold accountable developers and the city itself to meeting local benefits benchmarks. Similarly, Detroit recently considered and narrowly rejected a grassroots-proposed, municipal-wide community-benefits ordinance.<sup>2</sup> While community-benefits agreements have a rightly fraught history of legitimizing inequitable urban development, these experiments suggest a valuable next wave of innovation that aims to create more systematic community empowerment.

This turn to institutional design and governance represents a return in some ways to some of the more radical origins of the welfare rights

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1. SCOTT CUMMINGS & INGRID EAGLY, *A CRITICAL REFLECTION ON LAW AND ORGANIZING* (2001), <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/473524bg>.

2. Detroit residents approved a narrower, compromised community-benefits ordinance.

movement, the grassroots war on poverty, and the early era of community economic development. For practitioners today, this institutionalist turn could be crucial to redressing the problems of urban inequality. At a systemic level, inequitable urban development is rooted in disparities of political power—particularly between communities and developers, and between communities and city officials. These disparities in economic and political power interact and are especially stark in the context of urban planning and development decisions. Efforts like the novel approaches to community benefit agreements (CBAs) offer some valuable insights into how social movements and practitioners can develop more systemic and institutionalized forms of power that can influence central processes of urban development. These insights can be adapted to a range of community development decisions, including the problem of privatization and governance of infrastructure, and city and regional zoning and planning decisions.