The Impact of the Sustainable Communities Initiative on Engagement and Collaboration in Planning: Experiences From Four U.S. Regions

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Abstract

In 2010 and 2011, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development awarded 74 Sustainable Communities Initiative Regional Planning Grant (SCI-RPG) program grants. The grants supported 3-year regional planning efforts that prioritized inclusive processes and addressed the interdependent challenges of economic prosperity, social equity, and environmental protection. This article examines the experiences of four 2010 SCI-RPG grantees, investigating the impact of the SCI-RPG program on public engagement and collaboration. Using survey data, interviews, and document analysis from these regions, we consider how SCI-RPG helped to break down silos between jurisdictions and organizations, and how it increased representation of underserved populations in planning decisions. We find that SCI-RPG successfully created greater awareness of the connections between the "three Es" of sustainability, increased interjurisdictional and cross-section collaborations, and generated more effective public engagement efforts. However, we question the potential for plan implementation and continuation of these outcomes. We conclude with implications for planning and policy, and we offer recommendations for future federal large-scale planning programs.

Introduction

In 2008, when the United States was faced with increasing economic distress, federal agencies sought better ways to leverage agency financial investments that could facilitate economic recovery initiatives. In response, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT), and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) established the Partnership for Sustainable Communities (PSC), recognizing their collective ability to influence community-level conditions and heighten the potential for local economic opportunity. As part of PSC, HUD's Sustainable Communities Initiative (SCI) allocated $165 million to support regional planning and development efforts that coordinate planning and investment in housing, transportation, infrastructure, economic development, natural resources, workforce, and other critical community development issues.

The Sustainable Communities Initiative Regional Planning Grant (SCI-RPG) funding was awarded in government fiscal years 2010 and 2011. Each grant supported a 3-year regional planning effort that prioritized inclusive processes and the intent to address the interdependent challenges of economic prosperity, social equity, and environmental protection. When reviewing grant applications, HUD, DOT, and EPA screened for applications that identified clear plans for involving underserved populations and those not typically involved in planning, including low-income households, minorities, youth, seniors, people with disabilities, and those people with limited English proficiency (EPA, 2010). Economically distressed communities received extra points in the application review, in accordance with the federal goal of removing regulatory and policy barriers to sustainable community development in distressed areas.

To be considered for SCI-RPG, applicants had to design a consortium of cities, counties, private, and nonprofit partners who would govern the project and work collectively to achieve intended outcomes of the grant. Most successful regions dedicated considerable time preparing the grant application, which required working together to coordinate interest, outline goals, and detail ways in which representatives from the different jurisdictions and sectors would make decisions and carry out the regional planning efforts (Chapple and Mattiuzzi, 2013). For some at the table, it was the first time their organization had representation in planning efforts. A total of 74 regions were funded through the SCI-RPG program, 45 of which were funded in the 2010 fiscal year.

The 2010 regional grantees were the first to navigate an innovative federal approach that not only incentivized regional planning, but also sought to fundamentally change the way communities understand and enact regional sustainability planning. In theory, regional planning informed by an inclusive public input process and conducted with multi-jurisdiction and cross-sector collaboration could better address the interdependent challenges of issues, such as affordable housing provision, access to jobs, and environmental protection. To date, researchers have examined ways in which these large-scale goals are approached at the local level, in terms of process (Gough, 2015) and implementation (Frick et al., 2015).

This article examines the experiences of four 2010 SCI-RPG program grantees and is the first to investigate consortia members' perceived success of the SCI-RPG process in terms of its impact on public engagement and collaboration. Using survey data from these regions, we consider how SCI-RPG helped break down silos between regional stakeholders and how it helped address longstanding underrepresentation of underserved populations.

Building Capacity for Regional Sustainability

Policies to create more sustainable communities—communities with access to jobs, affordable housing, education, and healthy environments—have been central in recent discussions in planning research and practice. In the past decade, most scholars have focused on sustainability at the local scale, examining motivations, actions, and implementation by cities (Daley, Sharp, and Bae, 2013; Feiock et al., 2014; Portney, 2013; Zeemering, 2009). However, we know that in order to be effective, sustainability requires a long-term strategic approach that leans on the collective commitment of multiple localities in a region (Wheeler, 2013). Although regional sustainability programs have the potential to yield greater results, they are more complex and politically complicated, and can strain localities' limited capacities for service delivery and policymaking.

Regional planning demands that involved organizations learn new behaviors, form new relationships, and set new expectations and norms for the practice of planning. In response to changing policies, for example, organizations must learn how to develop and negotiate shared goals and create a structure for multi-jurisdictional collaboration, which is not an easy task; organizational theory suggests that cultivating a collaborative relationship between organizations is challenging, and that "… unless the number of individuals in a group is quite small, or unless there is coercion or some other special device to make individuals act in their common interest, rational, self-interested individuals will not act to achieve their common or group interest" (Olson, 1965: 2).

The promise of new organizational capacity and resources may be a "special device," drawing in partners for collaboration. Recent research proposes that old behaviors and norms for planning can be "unlearned," and new behaviors, such as those that accommodate sustainability, efficient land use investments, and regional coordination, can be reinforced by funding, increased resources, and organizational capacity (Lubell, Feiock, and De La Cruz, 2009; Wang et al., 2012). Therefore, to enable new behaviors at the local level, regional sustainability efforts must systematically enhance political, financial, and technical support to build organizational capacity for policy change.

Implementation of regional planning efforts continues to be challenging because of complicated governance in the United States; localities, not regions, possess authority over land use and zoning decisions. Although an overall regional vision acts as a guide, local governments have little incentive to navigate complex intergovernmental issues and cooperate in key areas, such as land use, affordable housing provision, and equity. In the United States, regions' limited authority to make decisions on land use and implement plans prevents large-scale effective regional planning. In most states, regional authorities possess no power or "teeth" to implement, but they can offer incentives. Regional initiatives are frequently caught between local governments that guard their right to determine local land use decisions, and higher-level governments that are unable or unwilling to support attempts at regional coordination.

The mix of participants in regional sustainability efforts is critical. Research shows that participation in collaborative networks tends to advance communitywide sustainability policies (Daley, Sharp, and Bae, 2013). Participation of a broader network of organizations bolsters the capacity of the group through knowledge and expertise in sustainability, and makes implementation more effective (Hawkins and Wang, 2012). Scholars find that involvement of diverse and interdependent

stakeholders can enhance the success and longevity of a collaborative network if a process is established to facilitate joint knowledge development and create shared social and political networks (Innes, Booher, and Di Vittorio, 2010).

Arnstein's "ladder of participation" has framed much of the dialogue on citizen participation and inclusive engagement during the past 50 years (Arnstein, 1969). Both Arnstein and others (Booher and Innes, 2002) suggested that more participatory approaches to policy development result in more just and equitable outcomes, especially for communities that are traditionally marginalized from planning processes. Citizen support for sustainably initiatives can increase the legitimacy of sustainability actions and enhance the political will to invest in and implement policies, and, similarly, oppositional interest groups can act to constrain policy implementation (Sharp, Daley, and Lynch, 2011).

Participation not only enhances meaningful interactions, but it also facilitates learning and education about the issues. A deeper understanding of the interconnections between economic development and environmental protection, for example, may also build trust in government (Wang, 2001) and its sustainability efforts.

Methods

To analyze the SCI-RPG experience of engagement and regional collaboration, we used survey and interview data focused on four case study regions: Gulf Regional Planning Commission (GRPC) in the Gulf Coast of Mississippi; the Metropolitan Area Planning Commission (MAPC) in the Boston, Massachusetts region; the New River Valley Planning District Commission (NRVPDC) in southwestern Virginia; and the Puget Sound Regional Council (PSRC) in the Seattle-Tacoma region of Washington. We purposefully chose four regions that had great diversity of geographic location, population, and previous experience with regional planning.

The survey was designed to obtain information about the perceived impact of the SCI-RPG process on civic engagement and collaboration across sectors and jurisdictions within the region. Survey questions included a mix of multiple choice, Likert scale, and open-ended questions. Draft surveys were reviewed for input by external reviewers, including relevant staff at HUD, and resulted in clarification in language, which was incorporated into the survey protocol.[1]

In July 2014, the survey was distributed via email utilizing the REDCap™ online surveying tool to consortium members in the four regions under investigation. The lead grantee for each of the four regions provided a comprehensive list of the consortium members and contact information. The consortiums led by GRPC, MAPC, and NRVPDC had membership ranging from 26 to 67 members. PSRC was an outlier, however, having a much more robust consortium structure with 372 members. The PSRC planning oversight committee, which consisted of organizational stakeholders, was similar to the size of other consortia.

In total, the survey was emailed to all consortium members identified by each regional planning consortium (n = 493). To improve survey response rates, we utilized the Dillman method of contacting respondents three times to encourage online survey completion.

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[1] The protocol was submitted and approved by the Institutional Review Board (Project # HM200011943) at Virginia Commonwealth University (appendix A).

To further inform the research questions, we conducted 1-hour phone interviews with representatives from each of the four regional organizations that served as the lead grantees for SCI-RPG. Each representative was active in the consortium for the duration of the SCI-RPG funding period and could speak to the process and perceived impacts on engagement and collaboration.

Results and Discussion

We used the survey instrument to collect information about the perceived outcomes, obstacles, and opportunities that SCI-RPG introduced on public engagement and collaboration across sectors and jurisdictions. We received 110 responses to the survey (a 22-percent response rate). Of the total survey responses, 23 percent (26 respondents) represented MAPC, 25 percent (27 respondents) represented GRPC, 15 percent (16 respondents) represented NRVPDC, and 37 percent (41 respondents) represented PSRC (exhibit 1).

The great diversity of stakeholders who responded yielded a more representative assessment of the SCI-RPG process and early outcomes. Most of the survey respondents represented local government (37 percent) or nonprofit (21 percent) stakeholders. An equal number of respondents were advocacy- or interest-group stakeholders (11 percent) and regional planning organization staff (11 percent). Fewer respondents held the roles of technical assistance provider or consultant (7 percent each) or interested citizens (6 percent). Although respondent perceptions of the SCI-RPG process or outcomes varied slightly based on their stakeholder type (for example, government, nonprofit, or advocacy group) within the regional consortium, analysis did not confirm any significant differences. Therefore, results are reported in aggregated form, highlighting selected differences among the four regions when applicable.

Exhibit 1

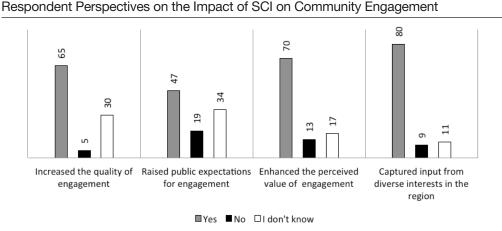Overall Survey Response and Response Rate by Region

Region	Responses	Sample	Response Rate (%)	Regional Response Rate in Sample (%)
GRPC	27	67	40	25
NRVPDC	16	28	57	15
PSRC	41	372	11	37
MAPC	26	26	100	24
Total	110	493	22	100

GRPC = Gulf Regional Planning Commission. MAPC = Metropolitan Area Planning Commission. NRVPDC = New River Valley Planning District Commission. PSRC = Puget Sound Regional Council.

Impact on Public Engagement

Surveys of consortium members identified multiple benefits to community engagement from the SCI-RPG process (exhibit 2). Approximately two out of three respondents agreed that the process had increased the quality of community engagement (65 percent) and improved the value of community engagement (70 percent). Respondents from all four regions recognized the important role that dedicated engagement resources had on the capacity to design more intentional and sophisticated approaches to seeking public input. Examples of innovation in engagement included digital

Exhibit 2

Respondent Perspectives on the Impact of SCI on Community Engagement
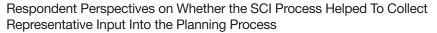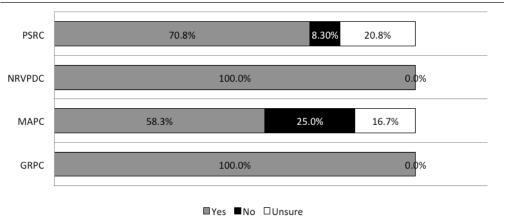

SCI = Sustainable Communities Initiative.

storytelling, theater, and role playing, as well as a number of different planning games intended to encourage input from diverse voices and perspectives and redefine the "public meeting." Many respondents linked their engagement innovations with the value of community engagement. As one PSRC consortium member reflected, "dedicated staff for outreach provided guidance and technical assistance around engagement… grants provided financial resources to assure independent and authentic engagement."

Although most respondents agreed that the value of engagement was heightened by the SCI-RPG experience, only about one-half of respondents (47 percent) agreed that it raised public expectations for future community engagement. This inconsistency between high recognition of the value of engagement and limited anticipation that it will alter future expectations of engagement may be explained by the strong understanding of the resources needed for meaningful public engagement. Pointing out this complexity, a PSRC representative explained, "[the grant] fundamentally changed the way that we have done outreach to local communities…and it raised expectations for what we are going to do in the future. That is a little scary. There has been a wide recognition of the value of the approach that we have taken and we will try to figure out how exactly to maintain these relationships and continue to resource [this approach]." Another PSRC consortium member added, "better community engagement has become important for individual stakeholders throughout the region…unfortunately, without the funding to thoroughly invest in this goal, small jurisdictions especially struggle to live up to their commitment."

Effective public engagement strategies are not one size fits all. Different approaches must be tailored to engage specific target audiences, especially those that are harder to reach and less likely to attend public meetings. Most respondents felt that SCI-RPG excelled at cultivating new forms of community engagement, particularly among voices that have not traditionally been included in planning efforts (exhibit 3). Four out of every five consortia respondents (80 percent) agreed that the SCI-RPG process helped collect community input that was representative of diverse interests in the region, such as age, race, income, or location.

Exhibit 3

Respondent Perspectives on Whether the SCI Process Helped To Collect Representative Input Into the Planning Process

GRPC = Gulf Regional Planning Commission. MAPC = Metropolitan Area Planning Commission. NRVPDC = New River Valley Planning District Commission. PSRC = Puget Sound Regional Council. SCI = Sustainable Communities Initiative.
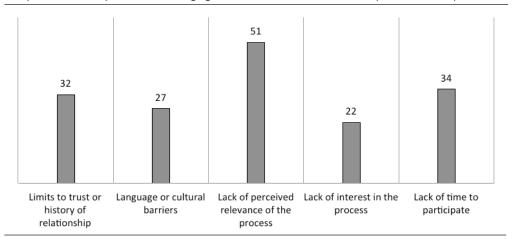
Challenges in Engaging Underrepresented Voices

One of the requirements of the SCI-RPG process was to engage underrepresented audiences and persons traditionally marginalized from the planning process. Despite more attention and resources invested toward engagement, consortium members recognized persistent barriers to engaging diverse community voices. The most cited barriers (exhibit 4) were stakeholders' lack of perceived relevance of the SCI-RPG processes (51 percent), lack of time to participate in the engagement events (34 percent), and limited trust or negative history of relationships with public planning (32 percent).

More than one-half of the respondents recognized that underrepresented stakeholders wrestle with the relevance of a long-range planning process on their current needs. A local government respondent from the Puget Sound region stated, "We were talking about long range initiatives 20 or more years in the future to people who need help understanding how to access opportunity today." Other respondents linked the lack of relevance and limited time, and they came to the same conclusion as a GRPC consortium member who said, "there are bigger issues of priority on the minds of disadvantaged."

In open-ended responses, survey respondents focused on challenges related to history of distrust between community stakeholders and planners. One NRVPDC consortium member observed "long-standing trust issues based on past planning efforts in which [minority residents] had felt marginalized and dismissed." Some respondents felt that these barriers stemmed from limited local precedent in direct public discussion about the role of race, income and social equity in planning decisions. One respondent shared that, "non-confrontation and white privilege get in the way of confronting issues openly and without funding or mandate [to do so], these issues are not regularly factored into governmental or economic policy decisions." Many respondents recognized that it

Exhibit 4

Respondent Perspectives on Engagement Barriers With Underrepresented Populations

was difficult to engage issues of race and equity, especially in regions with historical or recent racial equity challenges. One respondent noted that "without the actions of the advocacy organizations, HUD and [technical assistance] providers, race wouldn't have been on the table at all."

Finally, 24 percent of respondents identified barriers preventing engagement, including individuals that were against regional planning because they felt it infringed on their property rights (exhibit 4). Some regions, such the New River Valley, faced this challenge more than others. The New River Valley region found that some individuals that felt threatened by regional sustainability planning chose to not participate in the public meetings, and others were openly hostile to exploring issues around affordable housing or energy conservation. As a NRVPDC consortium member explained, "…it is very difficult to engage people who are ideologically committed to defeating any regional effort." However, NRVPDC was able to transcend these barriers by changing its approach: "We didn't set out to change anybody's philosophical opinions," explained Kevin Byrd, representative from NRVPDC. "The quicker we got to that point, the happier everybody was while working on this project. We just continued to do what we do, and do it well. We certainly got feedback from people that opposed the work and didn't see value in it, but more and more people were engaged because they saw value in what we wanted to do and they wanted to direct policy," he said (Byrd, 2014).

Innovations To Improve Engagement

Despite ongoing challenges, SCI-RPG program grantees recognized the important role that engagement innovations played in improving access to and representation of underrepresented populations in the SCI-RPG process. A common "innovation" noted by respondents was that the SCI-RPG structure gave underrepresented stakeholders power and voice in the process. A GRPC respondent found that, "by far, the most innovative and best practices were those consortiums that gave under-represented groups a seat at the decision-making table." Elaine Wilkinson, representative of the GRPC consortium, reinforced this notion. "… If we did not have ethnically and racially

diverse representation within our consortium, we probably would not have really understood what we were doing when we were going out and talking to communities" (Wilkinson, 2014). Still, some respondents felt that the consortia did not have enough representation of community-based groups. "[More participation by] Fair Housing coalitions, the NAACP, Latino organizations and community based neighborhood groups would give some validity to the process," noted a MAPC consortium member.

All four regions recognized the essential role of the SCI-RPG funding that was used to increase involvement of community-based organizations and equity groups by offsetting the costs of collaboration. Respondents explained that they could use the grant funds to finance community-based organizations' outreach efforts and their consultation on issues of regional concern, although the scope of the regional plan was out of their traditional purview. "It's not that equity groups would not want to [be involved]," explained a MAPC consortium member, "but their mission may be focused on finding housing for homeless populations, not to plan for zoning…and [given] their limited time and resources, collaboration was made easier when we could say here is a pot of money that could fund organizations like yours to work with us."

Regions used the SCI-RPG funding to support community-based organizations that could give them access to underrepresented groups. In fact, when asked what role community development corporations (CDCs) played on the consortium, the largest number of respondents (46 percent) selected the response that CDCs "increased access to nontraditional stakeholders." PSRC dedicated one-third of its $5 million grant toward engagement, focusing on nontraditional stakeholders. As explained by Ben Bakkenta, representative for the PSRC grantee, the consortium reserved $450,000 in direct aid to communities in the form of small grants of up to $15,000, resulting in awarding 36 grants to 31 community-based organizations throughout the region that work with nontraditional stakeholders. Noting the impact of this structure, one of the CDCs that received funding shared that this opportunity "put resources to support active, on the ground participation from non-traditional partners in underserved communities in an unprecedented way" (Bakkenta, 2014).

In regions with opposition, consortia chose to innovate by reframing communication and using data to illustrate the overarching goals of the regional planning process. For example, the MAPC region tracked its *participation gap* at meetings—the difference between who was present at public meetings and the demographics (that is, race, ethnicity, age, income, and homeownership) of the overall study area. Illustration of this difference helped to clarify the degree to which input was gathered from a representative public. The MAPC region created important opportunities for public education when the consortium purposefully elevated its attention to equity during the planning process. Holly St. Clair, representative of the MAPC region, explained, "at meetings we would pull up an environmental justice map and someone would say, 'I don't know what environmental justice has to do with where we are going to place jobs,' and we could say ok, let's talk about that" (St. Clair, 2014). In fact, 60 percent of respondents said the SCI-RPG process improved the linkages between economic development and social equity.

Following strong political opposition by the Tea Party, the NRVPDC consortium decided to rethink its program and approach. The region developed an alternative way to engage discuss local and regional issues, creating opportunities for people of all political affiliations to participate in the process. The region designed Built NRV: A Planning Game for Public Engagement as a novel way
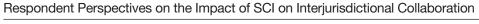
to encourage conversations around community planning. As part of this game, citizens talk about the things that are most important to them when it comes to their neighborhood and communities through a series of hands-on interactive exercises. As explained by a consortium member from that region, "requiring the players [of the game] to make decisions about how to plan this community as individuals and as a group… encouraged productive and often difficult conversations in a way that made everyone feel comfortable." Participants across the region quickly identify their own priorities and explore how they fit in with community values and resource constraints.
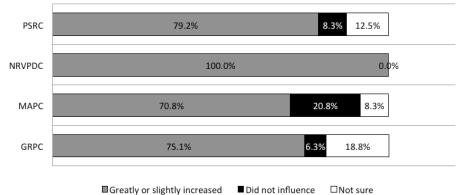
Impact on Collaboration

Surveyed consortium members corroborated the benefits of the SCI-RPG process to enhancing collaborations with other jurisdictions and sectors in the regions. Most respondents (approximately 80 percent of the total) felt that the mandate to develop a regional consortium positively influenced collaboration on planning issues between jurisdictions (exhibit 5). Of those, about one-half (49 percent) felt that the mandate increased collaboration slightly, and 30 percent of respondents indicated that it greatly increased collaboration. Many respondents elaborated in open-ended responses on the impact of SCI-RPG on collaboration in their region. Themes that emerged in these responses included enhanced communication and improved understanding about the interdependencies of community indicators.

A general sentiment from the survey was that too often political jurisdictions are more competitive than cooperative with one another, but that the SCI-RPG structure helped create more collaboration. One respondent noted that the experience "further demonstrated that every jurisdiction has its own unique challenges, but overwhelmingly, the jurisdictions share many of the same issues… SCI opened the door for other coordination outside the program and increased regular communication." Additionally, this experience put different levels of government on the radar for respondents. One region noted, "We didn't have much reason to care about HUD before, but this project raised the issue of housing in a new way for our agency."

Exhibit 5

Respondent Perspectives on the Impact of SCI on Interjurisdictional Collaboration

GRPC = Gulf Regional Planning Commission. MAPC = Metropolitan Area Planning Commission. NRVPDC = New River Valley Planning District Commission. PSRC = Puget Sound Regional Council. SCI = Sustainable Communities Initiative.

Survey respondents also identified collaborations created between nontraditional partners—or organizations that do not typically work with each other—as an outcome of the SCI process. Most frequently, survey respondents representing local planning agencies cited nonprofits, educational organizations, and advocacy groups as examples of new partners. Most respondents (75 percent) responded positively regarding collaboration with nontraditional partners, indicating that the SCI mandate either slightly increased or greatly increased the collaboration between nontraditional partners in the region (exhibit 6). Of these respondents, 41 percent felt that this type of collaboration increased greatly, and 34 percent indicated that it increased slightly. Open-ended comments revealed that the opportunity afforded by SCI to interact with nontraditional partners helped to improve understanding about the interdependencies of community conditions, needs, and planning approaches.

Overwhelmingly, respondents felt that SCI-RPG helped to broaden the stakeholders in regional planning efforts. One respondent observed, "a lot of folks who had not sat around the same table related to planning efforts finally came together, which makes incredible sense, but I doubt that there would have been such strong cross-sector collaboration without such a mandate." Another respondent noted how the project process built new relationships "primarily through the shared experience, but also by exposure to new points of view." Other respondents felt that the process made local jurisdictions more aware that nontraditional partners exist and should be included in future planning initiatives. Most respondents (65 percent) did anticipate that relationships developed through the regional consortium would continue following completion of the SCI-RPG grant, and several respondents cited examples of new, unrelated collaborative projects which were enabled by a better understanding of partner needs, interests, and resources.

Finally, although the majority (84 percent) of respondents indicated that they would be interested in helping to implement the goals outlined in the plans created from SCI-RPG (exhibit 7),

Exhibit 6

Respondent Perspectives on the Impact of SCI on Building New Partnerships

GRPC = Gulf Regional Planning Commission. MAPC = Metropolitan Area Planning Commission. NRVPDC = New River Valley Planning District Commission. PSRC = Puget Sound Regional Council. SCI = Sustainable Communities Initiative.
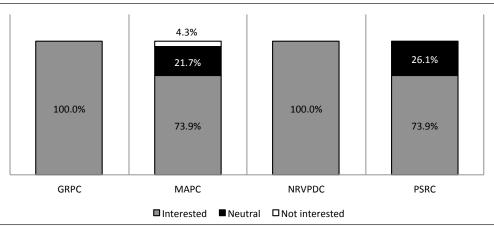
Exhibit 7

Respondent Interest in Assisting With Plan Implementation

GRPC = Gulf Regional Planning Commission. MAPC = Metropolitan Area Planning Commission. NRVPDC = New River Valley Planning District Commission. PSRC = Puget Sound Regional Council.

respondents cited many concerns related to implementation, including future funding provision, the influence of political will, and the presence of a collective vision for implementation. One respondent captured some of these common sentiments, saying "planning is only useful if it can be implemented. It is not clear how the funders of SCI can help the regions they invested in transform from the planning to implementation phase…there is a great opportunity here beyond just developing a plan."

Implications for Future Policies

SCI-RPG intended to impose a structure for regional planning that would be driven by the inter-relationships of economic development, social equity, and environmental protection, governed by a consortium representative of regional interests, and informed by broad participation, including underrepresented stakeholders. Based on the data analysis considered in this article, for at least for four grant-recipient regions, this federal experiment in incentivizing sustainable regional planning across the United States was largely successful. SCI-RPG helped these grantees achieve greater awareness of the principles of sustainability, increased interjurisdictional and cross-section collaborations, and incentivized more effective public engagement efforts. However, this analysis presents an opportunity to discuss areas in which the federal program could improve in terms of its structure and potential for implementation.

SCI-RPG demonstrated great impact on the introduction of new regional partners across jurisdictions and sectors, even for jurisdictions that had limited experience with collaboration. It is possible that the purposeful structure to support collaboration in SCI-RPG is an example of the necessary "special device" that Mancur Olson suggested as a precondition to collaboration (Olson, 1965). However, without additional funding to support staff time, especially for partner

organizations, collaboration may be limited. Moreover, without a common purpose toward plan implementation, these new relationships, which are not yet institutionalized, are not likely to continue. Importantly, implementation of the resulting regional plan will demand continued collaboration between local jurisdictions; implementation depends on the political will of localities to adopt land use policy changes that adhere to the regional plan.

Due to the nature of local governance and ephemeral elected officials, the political will to implement a long-term regional sustainability plan is not guaranteed. Although elected officials may have originally committed to policies and strategies laid out in plans, the realities of local politics make it challenging to balance economic development and equity goals, especially with public pushback from developers. Federal officials from HUD, DOT, and EPA should engage local elected officials with the goal of increasing their commitment to the regional sustainability plan. Retreating back to the silos and giving up on innovations for engagement will not serve changing communities.

As an overarching assessment, although survey respondents recognized positive impacts of SCI on planning engagement strategies and regional partners, many questioned the next steps and future vision of the 3-year investment. It appears that HUD provided little guidance or recommendations on a path toward implementation for these consortia, leaving regions with an impressive set of goals but no confidence in how to integrate them into practice and policy, and leaving local leaders with an uncertain immediate future. In reality, the complexity of governing and implementing this project may require ongoing internal and external governance mechanisms. Likewise, financial investment is essential for plan implementation, especially for smaller jurisdictions with limited staff and resources. In some cases, the new partnerships formed through SCI have capitalized on the diversity of funding opportunities available through their broadened networks; instead of only public-sector resources, partners are seeking nonprofit and private-sector funding for subsequent planning and implementation. To facilitate implementation of the regional plans, the federal government could consider aiding and incentivizing efforts by dedicating additional resources or further elevating the importance of these plans in other grant competitions it resources.

A sustainable community and region broadly engages its diverse stakeholders and learns from the shared experiences and needs of its citizens. Sustainable communities also enable and maximize the utility of all their realized and potential assets through synergistic collaborations across jurisdictions and sectors. This study demonstrates that SCI-RPG successfully seeded novel and effective innovations in planning outreach and engagement, and introduced new potential for regional planning in the United States. Without future investment in these efforts, a tepid legacy of SCI-RPG experiment may prevail, with HUD opening the door to regional thinking and partnerships, but ultimately, and perhaps ironically, failing to sustainably implement or institutionalize regional sustainability goals in perpetuity.

Appendix A

The Sustainable Communities Initiative Survey Instrument is reproduced on the following pages.

Sustainable Communities Initiative

Please complete the survey below.

Thank you!

The survey will collect information about the process and and impact of the Sustainable Communities Initiative (SCI) regional planning grant awarded to your region.

Questions will focus on:
1. Strategies used to encourage public participation
2. Topics of broad concern across your region
3. Influences of the process on relationships between localities and/or organizations

There are no wrong answers and you should respond to survey questions based on your opinion or assessment.

Your survey response will remain anonymous, so your answers will not be connected to your name or organization.

Other regions awarded SCI regional planning grants are also completing this survey. The information collected from this research will be used to identify best practices and inform future planning efforts.

Thank you for taking the time to share your insights related to the SCI regional planning process.

With what region are you primarily associated?	☐ Gulf Regional Planning Commission (GRPC) ☐ Metropolitan Area Planning Commission (MAPC) ☐ New River Valley, Virginia (NRVPDC) ☐ Puget Sound Regional Council (PSRC) ☐ Other (specify)
Please explain your regional affiliation:	_____
What role did you primarily assume in the SCI regional planning process?	☐ Regional planning organization staff ☐ Other governmental stakeholder ☐ Non-profit stakeholder ☐ Advocacy or interest-group stakeholder ☐ Technical assistance provider or consultant ☐ Interested citizen ☐ Other (specify)
Please explain your role in the SCI process, including how you participated and the objective of your involvement:	_____

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REDCap

Confidential

What was the primary role for local community development corporations (CDCs) and nonprofits in the SCI regional planning process? (CHOOSE TWO ITEMS)

☐ Helped communicate the relevance of the process to regional stakeholders
☐ Provided expertise and analysis
☐ Increased access to non-traditional stakeholders
☐ Identified planning goals and planning actions
☐ Ensured a fair process
☐ We did not interact with these groups
☐ Other (specify)

Please explain the "Other" role for local community development corporations and nonprofits in the SCI regional planning process:

_____

What was the primary role for advocacy or interest-based groups in the SCI regional planning process? (CHOOSE TWO ITEMS)

☐ Helped communicate the relevance of the process to regional stakeholders
☐ Provided expertise and analysis
☐ Increased access to non-traditional stakeholders
☐ Identified planning goals and planning actions
☐ Ensured a fair process
☐ We did not interact with these groups
☐ Other (specify)

Please explain the "Other" role for advocacy or interest-based groups in the SCI regional planning process:

_____

These questions ask you to reflect on any influence of the SCI regional planning process on COLLABORATION.

In your opinion, has the SCI regional planning process:

	Yes	No	Don't Know
Built local capacity for collaborative planning efforts?	☐	☐	☐
Reduced the "costs" of collaboration through funding provision?	☐	☐	☐
Built trust between organizations?	☐	☐	☐
Developed a common framework/goals for organizations to support?	☐	☐	☐

To what degree do you think the structure of the SCI mandate to develop a regional consortium influenced collaboration on planning issues between JURISDICTIONS (i.e., city/county/region/town) in your region?

☐ Greatly increased collaboration
☐ Slightly increased collaboration
☐ Did not influence collaboration
☐ Slightly decreased collaboration
☐ Greatly decreased collaboration
☐ I don't know

Briefly elaborate on your observation related to changes in inter-jurisdictional collaboration, including anything related to the process that may have influenced collaboration:

_____

To what degree do you think the structure of the SCI mandate to develop a regional consortium influenced collaboration between NON-TRADITIONAL PARTNERS in your region?

☐ Greatly increased collaboration
☐ Slightly increased collaboration
☐ Did not influence collaboration
☐ Slightly decreased collaboration
☐ Greatly decreased collaboration
☐ I don't know

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Briefly elaborate on your opinion related to changes in collaboration with non-traditional partners in the region, including factors that might promote or hinder new partnerships:

_____

Do you anticipate that relationships developed through the regional consortium will continue after the SCI grant is completed?

☐ Yes
☐ No
☐ Unsure

Please explain any other influence that you think the SCI regional planning process has had on COLLABORATION between organizations, groups or agencies:

_____

These questions ask you to reflect on the influence of the SCI regional planning process on YOUR REGION.

In your opinion, has the SCI regional planning process:

	Yes	No	Don't Know
Increased the quality or sophistication of community engagement?	☐	☐	☐
Raised public expectations for community engagement?	☐	☐	☐
Contributed to the perceived value of community engagement?	☐	☐	☐
Helped to introduce the interrelationships between economic, environmental and equity needs?	☐	☐	☐

How do you think the integration of required housing assessment (e.g., Fair Housing Equity Assessment) in the SCI regional planning process will influence future policies or plans in your region? (CHOOSE UP TO THREE ITEMS).

☐ It will likely influence comprehensive planning
☐ It will likely inform zoning ordinance amendments
☐ It will likely promote coalition building
☐ It will likely support future community development investments
☐ It will likely influence future transportation policies or investments
☐ It will likely influence other inclusive housing policies
☐ It will likely influence collaboration on policies or plans
☐ It will not likely influence future policies or plans

Please explain any other influence that you think the SCI regional planning process has had on YOUR REGION:

_____

These questions ask you to reflect on PARTICIPATION strategies used in the SCI regional planning process.

In your opinion, has the SCI regional planning process helped collect community input that is representative of diverse interests in the region (i.e., age, race, income, location)?

☐ Yes
☐ No
☐ Don't Know

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What barriers, if any, challenged the engagement of underrepresented or disadvantaged populations?

☐ Lack of time to participate
☐ Lack of interest in the process
☐ Lack of perceived relevance of the process
☐ Language or cultural barriers
☐ Limits to trust or history of relationship
☐ Other (specify)

Please explain your answer: _____

In your opinion, what were the top TWO effective and/or innovative approaches to engaging underrepresented or disadvantaged groups in the SCI regional planning process?

_____

What were the top TWO challenges in promoting policies which met the needs of disadvantaged populations (i.e., affordable housing, workforce education, green space, etc.) in the regional planning process? (CHOOSE TWO ITEMS)

☐ Political opposition
☐ Difficulty engaging issues of race and class
☐ Experience working on issues of social equity
☐ Barriers to engagement with underrepresented or disadvantaged groups
☐ Limitations in influencing local regulatory decision making
☐ Funding or resource limitations
☐ We did not face challenges
☐ Other (specify)

Please explain your answer: _____

These questions ask you to reflect on the influence of the SCI regional planning process on YOUR ORGANIZATION.

In your opinion, has the SCI regional planning process:

	Yes	No	Don't Know
Introduced new policy areas that your organization previously did not address?	☐	☐	☐
Focused new connections for your oganization between economic development and social equity?	☐	☐	☐
Provoked a new internal commitment to social equity?	☐	☐	☐
Emphasized a regional lens for land use/development?	☐	☐	☐
Improved relationships between yours and other organizations in the region?	☐	☐	☐

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In your opinion, has the SCI regional planning process influenced your organization's traditional approach to community development in any of the following ways? (check all that apply)

☐ It established my organization as a leader in community development research or advocacy
☐ It revealed new and potential community development partners
☐ It increased my organization's ability to facilitate community discussions
☐ It improved my organization's perceived expertise in community development
☐ It introduced new data
☐ It introduced new community needs
☐ It has not influenced my organization's approach to community development
☐ Other (specify)

Please explain your answer:

_____

Please explain any other influence that you think the SCI regional planning process has had on YOUR ORGANIZATION:

_____

This final section asks for your OVERALL assessment of the SCI regional planning process:

In your opinion, what is the biggest accomplishment of the SCI regional planning process that would not have been possible without the structure or financial support from the federal grant?

_____

How willing would you be to help implement the plan that resulted from this process?

☐ Greatly willing
☐ Slightly willing
☐ Neutral
☐ Slightly unwilling
☐ Greatly unwilling

Is there anything else you would like to share about the SCI regional planning process and your involvement?

_____

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Acknowledgments

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