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Have Community, Will Travel

Ethnic-based community development corporations reflect the changing face of contemporary America. By [SHOMON SHAMSUDDIN](#)

Not long after the attack on the World Trade Center in 2001, Afreen Alam noticed some changes in her Jackson Heights, N.Y., neighborhood. The South Asian residents who had routinely walked the streets rarely ventured out of their homes anymore. Neighbors moved away without warning. She even heard stories about young men disappearing. “There was an intimidation factor after 9/11, [particularly] for visibly practicing Muslims,” says Alam. “People didn’t know where to go. They didn’t know their rights.”

It was around this time that Alam heard of an organization that was helping residents who suffered economic losses as a result of the terrorist attacks. Chhaya Community Development Corporation was conducting a major campaign to inform the community about federal aid available from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). “A lot of businesses went under after 9/11,” says Chhaya founder and executive director Seema Agnani. “Staff weren’t around; people weren’t going out and buying. We tried to help people access federal assistance for business interruption suffered in the aftermath.”

A disproportionate number of the cabdrivers, restaurant workers, street vendors, and other laborers who worked in that area of downtown

Manhattan were South Asian, mainly immigrants from India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Caribbean nations such as Guyana and Trinidad. Many lost jobs, and even their businesses; yet few were seeking help. The lack of knowledge and information about available assistance was certainly a factor, but it wasn’t the only one.

“The discrimination was there. [It was] an atmosphere of distrust and fear,” says Agnani. “Kids were beaten up. Women and girls were being harassed if they were wearing a hijab.” The rising anti-immigrant sentiment, specifically against South Asians, as well as the language barrier, deterred community members from seeking assistance through mainstream channels such as government agencies, social service providers, and charitable organizations.

In an effort to educate the community, Chhaya published advertisements in local ethnic-language newspapers and handed out flyers in South Asian commercial districts. Its multilingual staff helped people with limited English skills fill out applications for assistance and track the status of their files. As a result, families with little or no resources received money, food, shelter, and clothing to help them get back on their feet.

Chhaya’s ability to meet the urgent needs of the marginalized South Asian community exemplifies a significant change in the community organizing movement: the rise of ethnic-based, or culturally defined, community development corporations.

Changes in Traditional CDCs

Ethnic-based CDCs, or EBCDCs, are different from other community development corporations in several ways. The most obvious difference is how each defines the community it serves. EBCDCs have a much broader definition of community, choosing to serve immigrants of a specific national or ancestral origin, rather than by a geographical neighborhood. Traditionally, a CDC represents the community in which it was first formed. Many groups started with leaders and activists organizing and empowering



Chhaya staff members work with the Queens Credit Union Project doing a survey of immigrant housing conditions at a South Asian-American community empowerment street fair in Jackson Heights, Queens.

neighbors, which naturally led to a focus on neighborhoods.

Another difference is in the makeup of organizational leadership. Leaders of typical CDCs don't often come from the communities where they work. The leaders and staff of EBCDCs are usually immigrants themselves, often first- or second-generation immigrants who are familiar with the cultural barriers and have found ways to overcome them. In a sense, they become an intermediary between the immigrant world and the new world. Many have been educated or trained in fields such as planning, policy, social work, and law, and are familiar with the American system.

Having lived in an immigrant household, many leaders experienced first-hand the difficulties facing immigrants in a new land and have learned from their own struggles and those of their parents. Christopher Kui, executive director of the New York-based Asian Americans For Equality (AAFE), says, "Many of us were immigrants, too, so we shared the aspirations of the community. We knew what programs to develop in order to help people get access to the best of mainstream society."

The place-based definition was unmistakably reinforced by the choice of the organization's name, a trend that can be traced back to the inception of the community development movement when Robert F. Kennedy toured the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood of New York. The Bedford-Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation emerged in 1967 as one of the first CDCs in the country. A precedent was established that would be followed by more than 3,000 organizations over the next 40 years.

From Place-Based to People-Based

Although neighborhoods were commonly used to identify the client base represented by most CDCs, cultural changes began to emerge that prompted organizers to explore other avenues of community building—growing acceptance of and identification with ancestral or cultural roots; increasing numbers, visibility, and diversity of immigrants moving to the United States, especially to urban centers; and first- and second-generation immigrants becoming actively involved in the social-justice movement.

The convergence of these factors led to a growing awareness that needs of ethnic communities were not always met under the existing traditional community-development paradigm. Immigrants' unfamiliarity with the legal system and lack of knowledge about civil rights left them vulnerable to fair-housing violations and employment discrimination. Linguistic and cultural barriers prevented many from seeking help, accessing social services, and obtaining government benefits.

Traditional community development corporations rarely had the staff capacity to do this brand of outreach. The more basic needs such as obtaining a Social Security card, filling out immigration paperwork, and enrolling children in school, fell outside the housing-construction and preservation scope of established CDCs.

EBCDCs emerged in the early 1970s to serve a variety of ethnic populations all over the country. Their reach and diversity are apparent in the membership of groups like the National Coalition for Asian Pacific American Community Development, an umbrella organization for ethnic-based CDCs. Its partners hail from places such as San Francisco, Los Angeles, New Orleans, Philadelphia, Seattle, Washington, D.C., and Kailua, Hawaii, serving Chinese, Korean, Filipino, Japanese, Vietnamese, Thai, Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, and other communities. (Although the United States is considered the most popular destination for immigrants, the EBCDC movement is not unique to this country. Black and minority ethnic housing associations have existed in Great Britain since the late 1980s.)

The shift from a place-based to a people-based definition of community did not necessarily represent a sharp break with contemporary practice. For some organizations, there was considerable overlap between the two.

AAFE grew out of a 1974 protest against employment discrimination at a Chinatown construction site in New York City. The high concentration of Chinese and other immigrants in the neighborhood created a logical base for its operations. In its early years, the organization focused on fighting illegal sweatshop raids, harassment of garment workers, and abusive landlords in Chinatown. Eventually, AAFE expanded its role to include housing and economic development to serve clients of any nationality throughout the city. In 1996, the organization opened a second office in Flushing, Queens, which is home to a large Chinese population, and also significant numbers of Koreans and South Asians.

While working for AAFE in the late 1990s, Seema Agnani, Chhaya's founder, and other advocates started talking about forming an organization dedicated to the development of the South Asian community. Vanitha Venugopal, director of housing at the Queens borough president's office at the time, and a founding member of Chhaya CDC, says, "I saw first-hand that residents from our community had no knowledge of basic housing information whether they were renters or homeowners. They lacked a basic understanding of issues such as zoning, rent regulations, [or] their rights to decent and safe housing. [A]s a result [they] paid too much in rent, lived in poor conditions, or faced eviction because they did not know how to seek help."

Venugopal, now a program officer with the Surdna Foundation, says, “Residents from our communities were not aware of the network of assistance organizations that existed. Even if they were aware of these organizations, language and other social barriers held them back from seeking assistance.”

Initially, Agnani’s idea was to expand AAFE’s services to meet the needs of the South Asian population living in Chinatown and the Lower East Side. Progress occurred in fits and starts, mostly because employee turnover made it difficult to maintain translation services and establish permanent programs. She consulted with local leaders about ways to best serve the community, and in October 2000, with the support of AAFE, formed Chhaya CDC as an independent organization. (Chhaya means “shelter” in several South Asian languages.)

Chhaya CDC’s objectives are: 1) To develop ways to meet the need for housing assistance and social services through partnerships, legal assistance, tenant advocacy, education and outreach on housing rights and opportunities; 2) To encourage the South Asian community to participate in the planning of their communities; 3) To bring together leaders to form a clearer picture of community-development and social service needs; and 4) To foster understanding within South Asian and other immigrant communities of how civic institutions function and can be used to further socioeconomic development.

The choice to serve an entire population, instead of a single neighborhood, was a deliberate one. “Because the community is so spread out, there is no single neighborhood base. It was a very conscious decision that we made to call ourselves a citywide group,” says Agnani.

Geographic Challenges

According to U.S. Census data, more than 250,000 South Asians live in New York City. While Queens is home to nearly two-thirds of this population, significant numbers reside in Brooklyn, the Bronx, and Manhattan. Within each borough, South Asian immigrants have settled in many different neighborhoods. In Queens alone, there are seven neighborhoods with more than 5,000 South Asian residents and 10 neighborhoods with between 1,000 and 5,000 community members.

Serving such a large geographic area, Chhaya has had to find new ways to reach its target population. Instead of solely relying on clients to come to the office, staff travel to different parts of the city to conduct community outreach. Religion plays an integral part in the lives of many members of the community, so Chhaya routinely distributes information outside of mosques in Jamaica and gurdwaras (sikh temples) in Richmond Hill.

Chhaya also produces a television program covering housing and community development issues that regularly appears on the ITV (International Television) network, which is watched in thousands of homes in the New York City area.

Chhaya’s services go beyond those typically offered by community development corporations. “The definition of CDC work is also broadening,” Agnani says. “It’s not necessarily [only] building [housing] any more. For us, the CDC movement is much broader than bricks and mortar.” Chhaya provides translation services in several different languages, including Bengali, Hindu, and Urdu, and offers English as a Second Language classes. It also represents clients in landlord-tenant disputes in housing court and does advocacy work on immigration and affordable housing.

Chhaya has expanded its role and influence by forging partnerships with other South Asian organizations, as well as with groups targeting various ethnic communities. It has developed youth programs and joined forces on common issues such as immigration reform with the Latin American Integration Center. It has also worked with traditional neighborhood-based community development corporations such as Forest Hills Community House to deliver workshops on first-time homeownership and predatory lending.

Some long-time observers of the community-development movement are concerned that EBCDCs divide neighborhoods by catering to a narrowly defined group and might create barriers to broader participation or involvement. Much of the criticism stems from fear that EBCDCs could exacerbate the tension surrounding the immigration debate.

More broadly, critics also see EBCDCs as discordant, or even incompatible, with the founding principles of the community-development movement. The implicit mission of community organizing and community development, which is rooted in the civil-rights-era fight against segregation, is to foster equality through housing integration, economic development, and civic participation. EBCDCs, in contrast, might be viewed as separating communities by narrowly defining them.

Changes in the CDC Paradigm

Earlier generations of community activists believe that CDCs must bring together neighbors who might have different

backgrounds, incomes, social status, and cultures. Leaders of ethnic-based community development corporations have responded to these criticisms in the following ways:

1. *Ethnic-based organizations are open to all groups.* The mission of EBCDCs is not to exclude other groups from their services. While their focus is on a specific group, their services are not limited to those community members alone. On the contrary, organizations welcome participation from all communities. This is especially true in areas with great diversity, such as New York City. “Our workshops are very diverse people of all ethnicities attend our events. We get African-American, Latino, and white participants. We even had a Canadian immigrant at one of our recent events,” says Agnani.
2. *EBCDCs provide services to groups who are not always reached by traditional community development corporations.* Some ethnic populations are unable to access services from existing organizations for a number of reasons, for example, language barriers, concern about immigration status, and cultural norms. Recent immigrants, who might be averse to civic participation for the same reasons, could be ignored or invisible to traditional CDCs. By providing culturally sensitive and multilingual translation services, EBCDCs attract people to the community-development movement who might not otherwise become involved.
3. *Ethnic groups are not monolithic.* Immigrant populations are comprised of people from a variety of backgrounds. The South Asian community, for example, represents tremendous diversity in terms of religion, language, and culture. South Asia has a long history of national, religious, and ethnic conflict whether between India and Pakistan, Hindus and Muslims, or other groups. Uniting South Asians under the community-development umbrella is no small accomplishment. Drawing these factions together exemplifies and advances the inclusive spirit upon which community development was founded.
4. *EBCDCs are part of a larger community-development movement.* Ethnic-based CDCs do not operate in isolation. Almost all of these organizations build coalitions with other EBCDCs and with traditional community development corporations. Along with a host of other organizations, Chhaya has joined Housing First!, an alliance of organizations, businesses, and individuals committed to working together to solve New York City’s affordable-housing crisis.

Ethnic-based CDCs do not represent a break with existing practice; they demonstrate an evolution of the community-development movement. Organizations like Chhaya CDC are simply responding to changing conditions. Agnani says, “I think we do the same things as CDCs that serve established communities. [The needs] get a little bit more complex in immigrant communities because of immigrant status issues, cultural, and language issues, but fundamentally it’s not different. These are working people who are peacefully living in the city and need access to resources and stability.”

Into the Future

As immigration continues to change the face of America, community development corporations have adapted to fill new roles. Although ethnic groups are often identified with specific districts, like Chinatown, Little Italy, or Koreatown, many immigrants are dispersed over large metropolitan regions. By redefining the community in terms of population, not location, EBCDCs have changed the way community organizations operate.

Leaders of EBCDCs believe their organizations play a crucial role left unfulfilled by the traditional community development movement. As Agnani points out, the South Asian population in New York “is an extremely underserved community that is one of the strongest bases of the local economy. Existing community development corporations have not changed with the population, and we are simply responding to meet a need.”

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RELATED RESOURCES

- [Chhaya CDC](#)
- [Asian Americans For Equality](#)
- [National Coalition for Asian Pacific American Community Development](#)