



# Exploring the Role of Nonprofits in Community Development

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## ABSTRACT

Nonprofit organizations have historically played a vital yet evolving role in community development across economic, social, and political landscapes. This paper examines the multifaceted contributions of nonprofits in addressing community needs, fostering inclusive growth, and promoting civic engagement. Through an interdisciplinary lens, the study examines the evolution of nonprofit roles, theoretical frameworks underpinning their functions, and their impact in diverse community settings. Key dimensions analyzed include nonprofit typologies, their roles in social service delivery, economic revitalization, advocacy, and policy implementation. Drawing on empirical case studies and performance metrics, the paper highlights successful initiatives and ongoing challenges faced by nonprofits, including issues of funding, volunteer management, and collaboration with government and private sectors. The findings suggest that while nonprofits act as vital agents of change, their effectiveness is closely tied to institutional support, accountability mechanisms, and community participation. The study concludes by emphasizing the need for integrated strategies that enhance nonprofit capacity, promote public-private partnerships, and prioritize long-term sustainability in community development efforts.

**Keywords:** Nonprofit organizations, community development, civic engagement, public-private partnerships, social capital, economic revitalization.

## INTRODUCTION

Nonprofits play a historically important, if currently ambiguous, role in economic and community development. Consequently, the conceptual lenses used to understand nonprofit organizations have developed in at least three broad streams, focusing on nonprofits as economic entities, as civil society organizations, and as elements of the welfare state. While these approaches are not mutually exclusive, adherents of one have often paid little attention to those in other streams. However, a growing body of writers has been working across disciplinary boundaries, occasionally with the benefit of hindsight, to produce more nuanced and comprehensive models of the roles of nonprofit organizations. First, nonprofits provide an outlet for entrepreneurial and stakeholder control in the face of information asymmetries. For example, parents and other demand-side stakeholders have relatively little expertise about child development. They may choose to form a nonprofit childcare centre because they do not trust for-profit or government agencies to treat children well or efficiently. Such centres would thus represent entrepreneurial stakeholder control in the kind of services parents, not staff, want. Similarly, as it is more difficult for donors to monitor the performance of a large multinational charity than that of a local organization, this implies that large charities might be controlled by a financial elite whose interests diverge from those of grassroots supporters. Co-optee controlled by a financial elite might put more effort into projects such as high-profile awareness raising that are unlikely to be the highest priority of poor stakeholders who fund water and sanitation. Thus, the mix of stakeholder and agentic control (whether co-optative or enterprising) is a function of the structure of information asymmetries surrounding a nonprofit organization [1, 2].

### Historical Context of Nonprofits

Nonprofits in America have been serving for 250 years in many areas of public service delivery, from culture, education, and recreation, to healthcare, and those groups unnecessarily excluded from these

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services are because of social, cultural, or political identity. The following information provides a brief history of these sectors, as well as some contemporary notes. Approximately 10% of today's workforce is employed in the third or nonprofit sector, the preferred term as not all organizations involved are tax exempt. However, these terms are interchangeable in the interest of easy reading. Colloquially, "voluntary sector" is used in the U.K. and "charities" in New Zealand. To have 10 full-time staff members today would suggest an expansion project for a group to be run as a charity; however, most early American 501 organizations were not run by volunteers. The concept of mission drift in nonprofits arises when it is questioned whether the organization maintains its original values and goals, and falls out from there, negatively in terms of contribution to the community it serves. In Bhopal's case, the legacy of mission drift and its many associated factors resulted in ignored warnings, tensions between staff and others in the organization, the run-around of money in the form of bureaucratic waste, and the eventual loss of revenue brought about by scandal- awareness of ethical responsibility plays well as prevention [3, 4].

### **Theoretical Frameworks**

Many scholars have looked at community development through the lens of place, defining neighborhoods, hamlets, and even modern administrative boundaries. Because of this, the Local 2030 study instead looks at community development as something that occurs within a well-defined geographic sliver that is home to residents who share a class identity and whose futures appear linked to the future of a specific part of the city. Yet, the experience is defined not only by things that are happening internally; it exists in a larger economic, political, and social world that makes possible or limits the range of potential actions available to community nonprofits and others. Thus, prior to examining the trends in nonprofit activity, this introduction briefly examines the more expansive context in which that activity occurs. It is the last remaining of Philadelphia's once-abundant byzantine morass of low-income, deeply racially segregated districts that stretch back to the settlement patterns of the Dutch. Long partially industrial, manufacturing was decimated by the late 1970s, and the years since have seen disinvestment and abandonment. Community nonprofits have, of course, always played a role in this shadowed urban hinterland. The nature of the partnership that has long existed between nonprofits, the public sector, and forces of capital is worth investigating. But so too is what appears new, or at least intensified, about the current state of nonprofit activity, as these agencies mobilize in ways not seen in the prior years of decline [5, 6].

### **Types of Nonprofit Organizations**

Nonprofit organizations serve specific social or environmental missions in their communities, operating tax-free and providing benefits to the public good in return for exemptions from taxes. In Montgomery County, nonprofits have significantly impacted the local economy by connecting wealth to underserved populations. The local economy depends on the vitality of the nonprofit sector, which comprises over 9,500 organizations employing around 0,000 people and occupying 29.1 percent of commercial space. These organizations act as an economic buffer against broader trends like recessions and federal budget cuts, often innovating where for-profit companies do not. Research shows that government-funded programs can be less effective than private/public initiatives, and mixed delivery of public services can create superior solutions for complex issues, particularly for diverse low-income populations. In the childcare industry, where business failures are common, affordable, high-quality childcare is essential for working families, especially following the Welfare-to-Work Program legislation passed in 1996. To address this need, the Montgomery County-Municipal Government funded the Innovative Partnership, a coalition of childcare administrators and service providers, to enhance resource delivery and support services for childcare and after-school businesses. This initiative aimed to improve quality while maintaining affordability and was successful; participating pilot sites had no net loss of staff when the industry faced high turnover. Graduates of the program secured higher-paying jobs, and the eight child care centers involved developed extensive resources, including manuals and routines that remain in use. By 2004, these efforts transitioned fully to the digital age, with 15 out of 21 businesses succeeding as high-quality centers. The nonprofit umbrella company has been essential in identifying needs, creating plans, and executing strategies for nonprofits and the Montgomery County-Municipal Government [7, 8].

### **Key Roles of Nonprofits in Community Development**

There are five key roles nonprofits play in community development, and their everyday actions. They are: social services, economic development, social capital, policy implementation, and policy advocacy. These roles are described in depth in the following paragraphs. Also, an examination of a single nonprofit in

Butte, Montana, elucidates how one institution can tackle these roles in its everyday functions. The nonprofit roles framework has recently been developed to articulate the diverse contributions and functions of nonprofit organizations. When described in terms of the multiple roles nonprofits can and do play, argued that a single nonprofit action or broader public policy action can fulfill multiple nonprofit roles. This perspective suggests that individual nonprofit actions may serve a variety of intentions and goals that are not immediately apparent. More broadly, there is recognition in the scholarly community that individual nonprofit organizations may have expressed priorities that are more symbolic or expressive than instrumental. The diverse priorities of individual nonprofits can act as a barrier to crafting effective and efficient long-term relationships with the government. Broadly, government agencies are cognizant of the diverse roles nonprofit organizations can and do serve, but the roles are often thought of in silos. For example, the government is most aware but may also be most apprehensive of nonprofits with a strong political advocacy role. Nonprofit policy advocates may use a variety of tactics to communicate their policy preferences to government representatives through lobbying, the judicial process, public relations campaigns, regulatory proposals, and ballot initiatives [9, 10].

### **Case Studies of Successful Nonprofit Initiatives**

Imagine standing in the heart of a vibrant, successful, and revitalized community. What do you see? Do you see newly renovated buildings and shops that have brought significant foot traffic and economic boom to the neighborhood? Or perhaps you envision worry-free children playing in clean, safe parks. Maybe you hear the murmurs of a group of people excitedly waiting outside of a newly built performance space or the loud chatter of a busy community job center. No matter the image, they all share one common characteristic – that of a place in which the community has come together to foster economic development, which in turn has helped to create the space for social activities to grow and prosper. Nonprofit organizations often play a critical role in the development of community initiatives designed to improve and revitalize the physical, economic, and social conditions of neighborhoods. The following are six case studies of such efforts that highlight effective strategies and methods in community revitalization. These cases illustrate how arts and cultural organizations, as a specialized form of nonprofits, may potentially bring community attention to physical and economic conditions, and in doing so, help leverage funds and resources for community programs. However, the data also suggest a rather complex picture of community-albeit-nonprofit initiatives that can serve as a potential guide to both industry practitioners interested in involvement in community programs and public agents interested in forming partnerships with these organizations [11, 12].

### **Challenges Faced by Nonprofits**

For decades in the United States, nonprofits, foundations, and governmental organizations have worked with local communities to help them achieve their goals. These partnerships have been formed around issues as broad as child abuse and neglect and as narrow as street lighting and graffiti removal. Yet maintaining and structuring these partnerships is not an easy task; community organizations face formidable challenges. There are 1.2 million nonprofit organizations registered in the United States. Having both the elected officials and a funding source accept a proposal or request has proven to be a difficult task for many organizations due to the competition that exists among the 1.2 million. Additionally, officials might limit the determination of which organizations are viable concerns due to bureaucratic constraints or simply because of a lack of articulation on the part of community groups. Collaboration, particularly during today's climate, is also difficult to secure as the number of nonprofits has increased, but communities have also seen significant disinvestment. Since collaborators are essential for a group to achieve its goals, this particular circumstance sets a negative precedent right from the start. Furthermore, funders rarely provide resources that cover capacity building, and due to the extensive nature of this particular non-profit, they simply don't have enough staff to accommodate the needs of residents. This is common among many non-profits in the San Francisco Bay Area and the Salesian Community Development Organization reports having 20 employees for a community of over 4000 [13, 14].

### **The Role of Volunteers in Nonprofit Work**

Virtually all nonprofits are dependent on the work of volunteers: as board members, fund-raisers, clerical and administrative workers, and public relations agents. In addition, many organizations depend either completely or in part on volunteers for direct service delivery. Understanding volunteers and volunteerism is critical to the operation of these nonprofits. The topic of volunteers is quite an interdisciplinary one, since it encompasses the disciplines of social work, psychology, management, sociology, and organizational theory. Most nonprofits are interested in how to get and keep volunteers.

What motivates people to offer their time and talents with no monetary compensation? Most research has tended to focus on the intersection of the volunteer and the organization. However, the research undertaken for this project is an extension of that investigation. This project examines the volunteer role within larger contexts and also looks at the impact of the volunteer role on the person doing the volunteering as well as on the other aspects of the organization, other volunteers. Just as the volunteer role occupies the same life space as other roles, the volunteer is also in other roles outside of the volunteering context. How may the person's life outside of the volunteering role alter the volunteer role within the organization? Likewise, the experience of being a volunteer at one organization will also be influential upon the next organization; thus the organization as a whole affects the volunteers it draws. A second line of inquiry is concerned entirely with organizational aspects of volunteering. What role does the organizational culture play in the motivation, retention, and satisfaction of volunteers? Similarly, volunteer work may be perceived as being either a threat or a support of paid staff, depending on how threatening or supportive the work of either group might be perceived by the other. Additionally, a volunteer role that is perceived to rank lower than that of the paid staff will be less satisfying to the volunteer. A volunteer role perceived to rank higher may be of potential benefit to an individual's career [15, 16].

### **Collaboration with Government and Private Sector**

Collaboration can enhance synergy and stability for nonprofits but requires careful attention to dynamics. Existing studies inform how collaboration occurs in specific contexts. Interorganizational collaboration is driven by shared interests, highlighting strategies that foster cooperation. Philanthropic nonprofit efforts often hold the private sector accountable, promoting social change. Publicly funded organizations tend to collaborate via contracted partnerships. Experience shows that public-private partnerships provide sustained advantages such as funding, infrastructure, influence, and public trust. Nonprofits, through grassroots connections, are credible partners for local public initiatives. By focusing on local needs, they can tailor advocacy and services to civic challenges. Flexible funding mechanisms have empowered nonprofits, enabling long-term planning that responds to changing conditions. Resources that politically support nonprofit advocacy help create stability and enhance collective thinking in cities, leading to effective monitoring of social issues. Consequently, cities are increasingly prioritizing relationships with advocacy organizations in times of need or unexpected events [17, 18].

### **Measuring the Impact of Nonprofit Programs**

This study aims at the development and application of a performance measurement system in monitoring and enhancing the effectiveness of nonprofit programs. Performance measurement is normally designated as the regular collection, reflection, evaluation, and interpretation of a set of measures that determine how well an activity is operating. The performance measurement also contains an assessment of the progress toward specified aims and the use of these signals in enhancing the provision of activities. It is often measured in terms of outputs or activities, although there are calls for increased attention to the achievement of broader objectives. Courtesy of this wider target, a range of indicators of both outputs and outcomes should be included. Pilot programs of interest are, however, evaluated only in terms of their ability to produce outputs – i.e., the amount of activity generated or participants reached. Indicators are used to record these outputs and can measure, for instance, the amount of information or capacity building training provided, or be an indication of the number of networking meetings or other types of activity. It is possible to measure some aspects of impact and outcome, such as a greater knowledge or understanding exhibited by including any participant, or evidence of increased networking encouraged. A mix of self-reporting and other evidence gathered independently of individual implementing teams is often used. It has been shown that the measurement of even short-term measures of impact can be useful in altering behavior and improving the organization's performance. Nevertheless, it is often more difficult to specify the exact cause of the impact and outcome, and such measures need to be used with caution [19, 20].

### **Innovative Approaches in the Nonprofit Sector**

Over the past decade, nonprofit organizations in Western democracies have grown in relative importance, and the interest of professors in the nonprofit sector as well as research about those organizations has increased. Nonprofit organizations did not wait until they were “discovered” to get together and operate to achieve shared goals, so there is a vast amateur and professional literature from several disciplines on various aspects of nonprofit organizations. A large portion of the existing professional literature is composed of normative texts. Among other things, this literature offers advice to people planning to establish a nonprofit organization, to potential contributors on how to make wise donations, to nonprofit

organizations on how to manage their fundraising campaigns, etc. This paper departs from the normative perspective in order to describe the realities of nonprofit organizations and thereby provide students of a sector that has recently become the subject of intense interest with a more comprehensive set of analytical tools. There are two aspects to the activity of nonprofit organizations that are intertwined and often confused, namely the formal aspect and the operational aspect. Nonprofit organizations differ from state and for-profit organizations in their form of organization, as seen in tables showing the differences among nonprofit organizations, on the one hand, and state and for-profit organizations, on the other. These tables usually present nine or ten characteristics. Nonprofit organizations are organizations that belong to what may be called the third or independent sector, or alternatively, the voluntary sector. In this context the term nonprofit organizations is to be preferred because in several Western democracies it is enshrined in law and the relatively legal system is thus able, *de Lege lata*, to distinguish clearly between nonprofit organizations, on the one hand, and for profit and state organizations, on the other [21, 22].

### **Future Trends in Nonprofit Community Development**

Introduction. Community development is a large and complex tapestry, replete with agencies, programs, and initiatives at the local, national, and international levels. The nonprofit sector plays a prominent role in all aspects of the endeavor. In the US, the role of the nonprofit sector in community development exhibits four long-standing themes: (a) the creation of neighborhood centers and social service organizations; (b) the growth of Community Development Corporations; (c) political activism; and (d) the involvement of larger health and educational institutions in community economic development. The article will first review the characteristics, basis, and recent patterns of this work, and then go on to address future trends, challenges, and prospects. Basic Fundamental Work Strategies. Population diversity is a foundational aspect of successful community development. Successful community development requires an integrated approach. It is a work that generally suffers too much from being segmented into professional ‘specialties’...Nonprofits have emerged as a driving force in the community development field, changing the ways in which governments and for-profit developers must operate...Too often in the past, local governments—to the detriment of their cities and their long-term fiscal health—have sought ‘quick-fix’ solutions to revenue generation, and have ceded substantial financial ground in the process—subsidies to sports complexes and short-term sales and property tax abatements to industry and malls. Therefore, co-opting Federal money for development focused, via nonprofit ‘intermediaries’, on the long-term capitalization of human resources, could be a win-win-win-win policy for all parties involved. Patterning Future Strategy Directions. As an agency that is both spatially and socially situated within local environments, community nonprofit agencies play a pivotal role. They are key in how neighborhood affects individual residents, as neighborhood characteristics undoubtedly play a large role in the assimilation process. They can thus also be influential in how neighborhoods facilitate community membership, because neighborhoods established with such an intention can more forcefully carry out community stabilization and revitalization strategies. This helps hinder the social disruption and neighborhood decay often brought by mass influx and overwhelming rate-of-change, and gives newcomer groups the time to successfully establish themselves [23, 24].

### **Policy Recommendations**

The effect of gentrification and urban economic growth on urban neighborhoods is a topic of growing interest among community development practitioners and scholars. Critics write of a “new urban crisis” where gentrification drives out the disadvantaged and neighborhood diversity suffers further decline. Nonprofit community service providers, feeling the squeeze between increasing demand and community opposition, are increasingly turning to commercial endeavors to sustain or expand earnings. For-profit community services not only betray the non-managerial ethos of many nonprofits, but they can also erode the accessibility of services that poor communities depend on. Additionally, rising land value is encouraging profit-minded developers of for-profit information service firms to partner with nonprofit landholders. An examination of the roles of nonprofits, for-profits, landholders, and workers in a small generalization service industry enabled a deeper understanding of the effects of gentrification on low-income urban neighborhoods. Town planners and urban geographers have long debated the scale that gentrification assumes, and yet what facilities and conditions render it possible. The case of Greenpoint will contribute to this debate by discussing 2 of the conditions needed for gentrification: the industrial decline, and later, the process of “centrifugation” or reorientation of central business district economic activities to the detriment of neighborhood locals [25, 26].



## CONCLUSION

Nonprofits are indispensable to the ecosystem of community development, serving not only as service providers but also as advocates, economic catalysts, and agents of social cohesion. This paper has demonstrated the diverse roles they occupy, ranging from delivering critical social services to shaping policy and mobilizing grassroots movements. Despite the challenges of limited resources, volunteer retention, and competitive funding landscapes, nonprofits continue to innovate and adapt in response to complex community needs. Case studies reinforce their capacity to foster tangible change, particularly when supported through collaborative frameworks involving government and the private sector. For nonprofits to realize their full potential in driving sustainable community development, there must be a concerted effort to enhance capacity building, ensure mission alignment, and create measurable systems for evaluating impact. Future policy and research must therefore prioritize strengthening the operational infrastructure of nonprofit organizations and cultivating inclusive, cross-sector partnerships that center community voices and long-term resilience.

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