The Cedar-Riverside neighborhood in Minneapolis, located adjacent to the University of Minnesota on the West Bank of the Mississippi River (Figure 1), has served as a settlement for new immigrants for more than two centuries, starting with the influx of families from Eastern European countries during the 1800s. More recently, significant numbers of immigrants from Africa, and to a lesser degree Asia and Latin America, have chosen this neighborhood as their new home. One of the newer immigrant groups to arrive in the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood is the Oromo, the largest cultural group within the Horn of Africa, centered in Ethiopia. The Oromo Community of Minnesota (OCM), a nonprofit organization created in 1985 to provide assistance to new arrivals, estimates that 12,000 Oromo now live in Minnesota, with the largest concentration living in Cedar-Riverside.

The Oromo have increased their presence in Cedar-Riverside during a time of growing dissent in the neighborhood regarding community development prospects—a situation that was exacerbated when historic Dania Hall, a 113-year-old landmark on Cedar Avenue that was in the process of being redeveloped as a community center, was destroyed by fire in 2000. Cedar-Riverside has lacked a unified community voice for many years. The lack of unity is ultimately disempowering and makes the neighborhood vulnerable to future development without input from or regard for the community. In response, the West Bank Community Development Corporation (CDC) has made it a priority to unite new immigrants and longer term residents in efforts to revitalize the neighborhood.

Within this context, the West Bank CDC initiated the Oromo Community Engagement project in response to a sense of disconnection with their new Oromo neighbors and colleagues. Prior to this project, the Oromo have focused on their own community development efforts but have been less engaged in collaborative planning processes and, for the most part, underrepresented in the creation of a common vision for neighborhood revitalization. The West Bank CDC intends to ensure the interests of the Oromo are not overlooked during planning for future community development projects.
In spring of 2007, I was hired through CURA’s Neighborhood Planning for Community Revitalization (NPCR) program to work as a graduate research assistant for the Oromo Community Engagement project. The purpose of my internship was to help the West Bank CDC gain a better understanding of the Oromo and identify how the organization could increase engagement with Oromo residents living and working in the neighborhood. This article summarizes the findings of my internship project.

**Research Purpose and Methodology**

I used a qualitative research design to assess the potential for engaging the Oromo community in planning for the redevelopment of the Dania Hall site and the portion of Cedar Avenue that runs through the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood. Research included interviews with key stakeholders, participation in community events, initiation of community organizing, and personal observations. Interviews focused on topics such as the history of the Oromo and Oromo immigration to Minnesota, understanding the interests and priorities of Oromo stakeholders regarding community development, issues of concern to Oromo residents, significant roles or relationships in the Oromo community that should be respected, core cultural values of the Oromo, and existing relationships between Oromo residents and other cultural/ethnic groups in Cedar-Riverside.

I supplemented the qualitative data with recent literature on Oromo social, cultural, and political history, as well as recent literature on best practices in multicultural community engagement. Rather than maximizing the number of stakeholder interviews conducted, I spent a significant amount of time building relationships with and learning from a core group of community leaders. Through this process, I was able to identify the strengths, interests, priorities, and values of the Oromo community, and assist in the bridging of relationships between the Oromo and other neighborhood stakeholders.

My research culminated in a series of recommendations to the West Bank CDC’s board, staff, and neighborhood stakeholders that identified specific action steps they can take to work in partnership with Oromo residents, as well as other new immigrants, on community development initiatives. Key concepts that emerged as the foundation for action steps included creating cultural competence, bridging social capital, building a multicultural coalition for community action, and expanding the capacity of new immigrants to enter the community development field.

**Project Findings: Understanding the Oromo**

For many centuries, the Oromo functioned with their own rich cultural, political, and religious systems as an independent nation within Africa. Their independence was lost through the systematic invasion of their territory in the 1880s as part of the military effort to build what is now Ethiopia. In an attempt to regain sovereignty, the Oromo have been organizing a political movement, which is gaining momentum. Political tensions have concurrently escalated in Ethiopia, forcing a growing number of Oromo, including government employees, professionals, activists, and academics to flee the country as refugees or political asylees. Consequently, the Oromo community has a significant number of highly educated and skilled people who have chosen Minnesota as their new home. The Oromo are very passionate about their vision for peace and equality in their homeland, and maintain this as a high priority even as they establish new roots in the United States. The social capital of the Oromo community clearly extends beyond the local level. Cedar-Riverside has become a hub for Oromo networking on a national and international scale. Each year, the neighborhood and surrounding area are the host locations for many significant Oromo events, including the national conferences of the Oromo Studies Association, Oromo Liberation Front, Oromo Youth Association, and Oromo International Lutheran Church. Each event draws hundreds of people to Minneapolis.

A large number of Oromo refugees lived in extreme poverty in Ethiopia. Given these circumstances, Oromo leaders reported that it is a challenge to provide services and link people with resources sufficient to build the capacity for all refugees to fare well in their new home. These challenges are multiplied when the cultural oppression the Oromo experienced is taken into account. A study conducted in Minnesota and reported in the April 2004 issue of the *American Journal of Public Health* revealed that 69% of all male and 37% of all female Oromo refugees surveyed had been victims of torture before leaving Africa.

Of great concern to the Oromo is the well-being of elders and youth in the community. Elders are the least likely to become fluent in a new language or successfully gain employment in their new home. Youth, on the other hand, are challenged to catch up with their U.S.-born peers and define their future within the current political, social, and economic climate. The OCM, in order to address the needs and interests of their people while preserving a strong cultural identity, have placed a very high priority on establishing their own community center.

Barriers to Oromo participation in community development efforts are similar to those experienced by other new immigrants. At the neighborhood level, relationships and networks created around community development tend to become entrenched, with little change in leadership roles and structures. This makes it difficult for newcomers to meaningfully participate in the development process. At the same time, long-term neighborhood leaders see the population of the neighborhood
changing and want to engage new immigrants, but are unsure about the best way to include them in initiatives. Even the most well-intentioned attempts by community development organizations to involve new immigrants often result in a narrow role for newcomers as either token participants or followers of the existing neighborhood leadership, rather than as equal partners. Finally, new immigrants often are not aware of the potential benefits of participation in established community development organizations at the neighborhood level or how to access this particular social capital network. However, as new immigrants build their own organizations, such as the OCM, the opportunity for community development partnerships based on equity and mutual interests will grow.

Project Recommendations

The recommendations that emerged from this project are focused on how to increase engagement with the Oromo community in neighborhood planning and to bridge the relationships among the Oromo community and other neighborhood stakeholders. Most of these recommendations are not limited to engaging the Oromo community, but rather suggest ways the West Bank CDC and other organizations can pursue multicultural coalition building with many underrepresented groups for community development purposes.

Creating cultural competence.

Cultural competence has supplanted notions of cultural sensitivity and cultural awareness, with the aim of placing a higher value on the knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, and skills necessary to respectfully and effectively work with others in a multicultural society. The process of understanding one’s self in relation to others, especially in the context of multicultural community development, must parallel an analysis of race dynamics and a commitment to undoing racism in our society. Second, it requires a deep sense of curiosity and interest in the life stories of others, which moves us into the process of mutual discovery and partnership building. To accomplish these tasks, the West Bank CDC and others interested in multicultural coalition building can take a number of steps to increase cultural competence. For example, the West Bank CDC can intentionally create safe spaces for informal dialogue, cross-cultural learning, reflection on self-identity, and discussion of privilege and oppression.

Bridging social capital.

In a 1995 article published in the Canadian Journal of Policy Research, Robert Putnam describes social capital as the value individuals and communities gain from reciprocal relationships and networking. Each of the ethnic populations in the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood has its own social capital, which has been strengthened through the development of their own organizations, creating an environment where the entire neighborhood can be strengthened through the bridging of social capital among subgroups.

One method the West Bank CDC can use to bridge social capital is to initiate an outreach strategy. Each board and staff member could conduct at least five one-on-one conversations with community leaders from cultures other than their own within a designated period of time. At the completion of the interview process, all who participated would be invited to an event to celebrate and summarize the
potential areas of mutual interest for working together in the future. The West Bank CDC also recently launched an information-sharing website about current Cedar-Riverside community-development initiatives that has the potential to bridge social capital among various groups in the neighborhood if it is expanded for this purpose.

**Strengthening a multicultural coalition for community action.** The West Bank CDC has already initiated multicultural coalition building through its efforts to redevelop the Dania Hall site. However, because of the long timeframe of the redevelopment process and the inherent limitations of the site itself, a narrow focus on this project could potentially diminish the ability of the West Bank CDC to foster multicultural community development and ultimately weaken the impact of the organization.

These challenges call for an approach to multicultural community development that also incorporates organizing around short-term neighborhood issues. The West Bank CDC and the OCM are aware of the pressing issues in the neighborhood related to light-rail transit, youth, land use, access to public spaces, future housing development, public safety, and expansion and rehabilitation of the Brian Coyle Center, a neighborhood community center. Although the West Bank CDC is in the initial stages of bringing people together around these issues, a more disciplined strategy must be pursued. Successful collective action in a multicultural context requires ensuring that the goals meet the interests of all involved, that stakeholders are coming to the table with a sense of equity and shared responsibility; and that public action on issues in the short-term produces measurable results that reinforce the value of collective action. As a benchmark, the West Bank CDC and coalition partners should incorporate public action into strategic planning efforts, with specific goals and outcomes, on at least a quarterly basis.

During this internship project, the West Bank CDC and other organization partners started building momentum in this direction by implementing a multicultural organizing strategy, gaining neighborhood consensus around the future light-rail stop being planned for the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood. At a large public meeting attended by approximately 200 people in April 2007, the coalition known as Dania Partners, which includes the OCM, received a commitment from the Metropolitan Council to include the neighborhood’s preferred light-rail stop on Cedar Avenue in an engineering study and to meet with the Dania Partners throughout the planning process. This was a substantial show of unity, as all sectors and neighborhood subgroups joined together for a common purpose, using their collective power to create positive changes. Of particular significance was that 90% of the attendees at the public meeting were new immigrants and that interpretation was provided in Somali and Oromo.

**Expanding capacity for new immigrants to enter the community development field.** In a 2003 report titled *Community Development in Dynamic Neighborhoods*, Catherine Fernandez observed that the community organizations that are most successful in partnering with new immigrants for community development are those that engage in continual self-assessment of their technical and organizational capacity to meet the interests of an ever-changing constituency. The West Bank CDC could incorporate such self-assessment into its strategic planning processes by broadening its assessment to include not only internal stakeholders, but also the Oromo community and others in the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood. Strategic planning and capacity building should overtly include succession planning to create a more diverse workforce as aging community development leaders approach retirement from the field.

The West Bank CDC and other neighborhood organizations sincerely want to ensure all subgroups of the community are represented in decision making. As the Oromo and other new immigrants to Cedar-Riverside realize their full potential and expand their work beyond providing assistance to new arrivals, involvement in community development will become more appealing. However, without an intentional effort to create equity and develop capacity, obstacles such as structural racism and tokenism will be difficult to overcome. Another strategy to expand capacity is designing internship and work-study opportunities in partnership with postsecondary educational institutions. These partnerships would provide an opportunity to mentor and pass on knowledge about community development to the next generation, which is an important value in the Oromo community. Another option is for the West Bank CDC to invest in and provide technical assistance to leaders in new immigrant communities through a leadership training program focused on community-development techniques.

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