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### Recommended Citation

Savage, Kayla and Yelich Biniiecki, Susan (2017). "The role of community benefits agreements for community development, social justice adult education, and program planning," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2017/roundtables/14>

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# **The Role of Community Benefits Agreements for Community Development, Social Justice Adult Education, and Program Planning**

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this roundtable is to facilitate discussion and debate about the role of community benefits agreements in community development, social justice education, and program planning within community development contexts.

**Keywords:** community benefits agreements, social justice education, program planning, community development

Community Benefits Agreements (CBAs) have been utilized for large-scale urban developments since the late 1990s and are considered a tool for economic growth in community development. A CBA is a legally binding contract or set of related contracts that set forth a range of benefits for the community in regard to the development project, resulting from substantial community involvement (Gross, 2007). The developer is in direct negotiations with a community group and its members that the development directly impacts for benefits they will receive from the project. In exchange for the negotiated benefits, the community group agrees to publicly express support for the development through numerous ways.

The traditional CBA process has been noted in the literature as an opportunity for equity (Been, 2010; Marcello, 2007) putting forth a process for the empowerment of minority and low-income citizens (Musil, 2012). However, the traditional CBA remains unproven in the field of community development as an effective tool in development and program planning for adult learners. Additionally, the role of the CBA in facilitating reciprocal learning among stakeholders of all levels of power remains unexplored. Revisions to the traditional CBA process grounded in social justice education may make it more just for enforcement and leverage by community group citizens who stand to benefit. The purpose of this roundtable is to facilitate discussion and debate about the role of community benefits agreements in community development, social justice education, and program planning within community development contexts.

## **Critique of Community Benefits Agreements**

Though there are many critiques as there are cited benefits of CBAs for community development (Been, 2010; Salkin & Lavine, 2008), there are also important considerations for social justice adult education and program planning. A program commonly utilized in urban development is eminent domain (Harris, 2015) to replace failing or blighted property with new structures. This process can result in the community of people being affected by both direct and indirect costs of the project without receiving benefits equal to the costs, while developers experience the greatest benefit from the project (Harris, 2015). Well-designed and strategically executed CBAs can be a tremendous tool for communities to afford working-class, minority, and low-income residents a chance for more equitable and democratic results under the economic development driven eminent domain practice (Harris, 2015).

## Reframing the Use of Community Benefits Agreements

For community development practitioners, adult educators, and program planners, a reframe of the “economic development” mindset must shift to include the concerns of the community in the form of benefits and reciprocity in learning among all stakeholders through the CBA process. Community development professionals, city officials, and private citizens have a real opportunity to facilitate social justice education through the framework of the traditional CBA process. The first step is to look at who is part of the community benefit negotiations and then ask the questions to those at the table: Who is missing from the negotiations? Why are they missing? How might we facilitate learning grounded in social justice?

Creating an inclusive planning and adult learning process through CBAs relates to interdisciplinary literature and research in community development, social justice adult education, and program planning. The CBA can be an influencing factor in program planning (Hendricks, 2001) related to the engagement of communities (Byun, Ryu, & Cervero, 2009) as well as the ethical use of power (Cervero & Wilson, 2001). In addition, the CBA itself can be situated within a framework of social justice education to foster critical consciousness (Tharp, 2012) for all stakeholders (Goodman, 2011). More discussion and idea exploration within this intersection of literature is necessary for equitable and sustainable development in urban areas.

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