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Many communities in the United States are riddled with vacancies and foreclosed properties. Laura Wolf-Powers at the University of Pennsylvania explored the efforts of community development practitioners in the United States to prevent the recent epidemic of mortgage foreclosures and lessen its devastating effects. The article, titled “Understanding community development in a ‘theory of action’ framework”, in Planning Theory and Practice proposes that the response of community planners to the foreclosure crisis was based on three distinct and differing theories of action.

The first, based on the idea that the residents of distressed neighbourhoods suffer from a lack of social capital, reflects the hypothesis that the activation of positive network ties and the reinstatement of desirable social norms are the keys to economic revitalization. The second; people must more actively engage the private sector and embrace market-led regeneration in order to thrive. The third theory rests on the principle that the condition most troublingly absent from struggling neighbourhoods is a concern with equitable outcomes, as well as lack of influence on the mechanisms of policy-making.

Wolf-Powers proposes that the theories of action motivating neighbourhood regeneration policy were in conflict, and that this conflict constrained practitioners and policy-makers from delivering a greater measure of relief to affected neighbourhoods and households. Wolf-Powers argues that it can be simple for practitioners – and for the funders and government agencies that support them – to rationalise away conflict between competing theories of action in community development. But, she says, this conflict needs to be brought to light and debated. More specifically, recognition of place-based deprivation and disinvestment as products of structural injustice (rather than simply of individual or market failures) is a key step toward finding more effective public policies for combating them.

<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14649357.2014.905621>

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