the
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exchange

A PERIODICAL ON EMERGING STRATEGIES IN EVALUATING CHILD AND FAMILY SERVICES

from the director's desk

Heather Weiss

We revisit the inspiring and complex work of community change in this issue of *The Evaluation Exchange*. In 1997, when we last devoted an issue to community-based initiatives (CBIs), evaluation approaches that addressed the constraints of traditional evaluation techniques were largely new. Groundbreaking work was being done in projects like the Cleveland Community-Building Initiative and Banana Kelly, a community-based organization in the South Bronx. Infrastructure to support neighborhood-level change, such as the National Neighborhood Indicators Project, had recently been developed. And early lessons about generating local solutions to local problems along with alternative ways of understanding whether CBIs "work" were beginning to emerge.

The Aspen Institute Roundtable on Comprehensive Community Initiatives for Children and Families has published several principal references on the development and evaluation of CBIs. With this issue we have sought to provide another forum for those engaged in place-based, anti-poverty work to share recent strategies and discuss challenges.

Evaluation of comprehensive community initiatives is becoming more sophisticated. Evaluators and communities are joining to develop "new social technology, or set[s] of ideas and ways of implementing them," as one of our authors, Xavier de Souza Briggs, states. Many communities have had success with their initiatives and have also come to value evaluation and build the capacity to carry it out.

However, implementing community-building initiatives has become even more challenging in today's political and economic climate. Cutbacks and demands for outcomes often too ambitious for a given timeframe are testing the capacity and patience of stakeholders. These include evaluators who are challenged with maintaining objectivity while collaborating with other actors to improve an initiative.

And as several authors point out, there has never been greater need for evaluation approaches that take into account scientific rigor and experimental research while addressing the complexities of systems change work in community settings. The authors discuss new pathways for confronting this challenge.

Through *The Evaluation Exchange* we have witnessed and documented the evolution of greater pressure for results. Government agencies are watched more closely to ensure efficient spending of resources and proof of outcomes. Nonprofits have ratcheted up their management functions and foundations have been called on to show the social value of their work in return for privileged tax status. Communities connected to these entities are therefore under pressure too, enduring considerable risk as they craft comprehensive change goals.

Many of the articles stress what must not be lost in the drumbeat for accountability, namely "learning" from data and evaluation. Successful community building depends on stakeholders regularly applying data to problem solving. While learning may be an easily identified objective, achieving it requires data, time, and skill, which can sometimes be found internally, but must often be brought in from the outside. And learning must begin up front, as designers and evaluators build knowledge early on about how communities *already* plan, assess their progress, and apply information to decision making.

We think this issue of *The Evaluation Exchange* will provide you with thought-provoking ideas around these themes. As always, we welcome your thoughts and contributions.

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> ## theory&practice

Sustainability: Does Evaluation Have a Role?

Julia Coffman and Marielle Bohan-Baker of HFRP offer ideas for the role that evaluation can play to ensure that initiative stakeholders discuss sustainability before it is too late to be useful.

Initiatives aimed at community-wide change contain a basic premise, whether articulated or not—the initiative's work will be continued if its results warrant it. Hoping for or expecting sustainability, however, does not always translate into action, and sustainability efforts are often too little too late. Typically, sustainability is considered something to be dealt with in an initiative's later years, once some of the results are in, or when sufficient time has passed after start-up to consider questions of what should be sustained and how.

Evaluation can play a critical role in helping stakeholders start discussing sustainability early enough and maintain that discussion over time. This goes well beyond the traditional view of how evaluation can support sustainability, which is that if the results are good, data and reports can be used as marketing tools to solicit additional funding. While this function is important, evaluation can make an even more vital contribution.

Evaluation can support initiative sustainability by:

- Facilitating a focus on sustainability during strategy development
- Tracking progress and regularly feeding back information that can be used to ensure that sustainability is on course

Supporting Sustainability During Strategy Development

Sustainability should be integrated into an initiative's strategy from the very beginning so that plans for what will happen when the funding ends are incorporated at the outset.

The strategy development process illustrated in the figure on the next page shows evaluators and evaluation as facilitating various stages of strategy development. Evaluators, for example, can offer information in the form of a needs assessment or analysis of funding trends to support *strategic analysis*. They can also facilitate aspects of *strategic planning*, such as the development of the initiative's theory of change or its goals and objectives. Finally, evaluators can inform *strategic management* by reporting back information from the evaluation itself.

This model requires evaluator involvement in the initiative from its beginning as part of the core strategy development team. It also requires that evaluators and the evaluation be flexible and be predictive of, and responsive to, the initiative and community's needs. This approach fits well with the complex nature of most community-based initiatives, which typically evolve over time with no set script.

The model does *not* propose that evaluators actually make decisions about what the initiative's strategy should be. Rather, it proposes that evaluators, who are uniquely skilled in the language and process of strategy development and often have the most comprehensive perspective on an initiative, play a *supportive* and *advisory* role in its development.

However this model also carries risks. It can compromise the evaluator's objectivity, and is therefore not one that all evaluators subscribe to, nor one with which stakeholders may be comfortable. While too much distance from the initiative may diminish useful insight, too much involvement can cause problems. Evaluators who use this approach need to build in a set of checks and balances to help manage the risks.

Initiative stakeholders and evaluators together can support sustainability by making sure the types of questions and decisions in the table on page 4 are raised and addressed in a systematic way. For example, sustainability should be considered when determining what gets funded, how long to provide funding, which organizations are se-

lected to participate, and what structures and supports are needed to support that sustainability.

Supporting Sustainability During Evaluation

Evaluation can also support sustainability by treating it as a variable to be operationalized and tracked over time, encouraging learning from an initiative's early stages. Few evaluators take this more purposeful approach either in their evaluation design or in their reporting.

Sustainability can be thought of as a way to ensure continuation of at least four initiative aspects: (1) funding for the initiative's organizations or projects, (2) the ideas, principles, beliefs, and values that underlie the initiative, (3) relationships that the initiative supports or encourages, and (4) the initiative's outcomes.

Once the right focus is determined, evaluators need to operationalize sustainability so the evaluation can track it over time. Below are examples of data that evaluators might look for in the four areas. This is not a comprehensive list; the articulation of indicators to track these areas depends on the initiative being evaluated.

1. *Organizations and/or Projects*
   - Success in obtaining additional funding
   - Presence of revenue-generating strategies to support initiative-related work
   - Presence of multiple funders to support initiative-related work

2. *Ideas* – maintaining the initiative's core principles, values, beliefs, and commitment
   - Core ideas operationalized in policies and structures
   - Initiative principles applied to other projects
   - Commitment to continuing work started or supported under the initiative (e.g., generation of new ideas, migration of initiative ideas and new projects)

3. *Relationships*
   - Collaboration involving higher-order ways of working together (e.g., joint projects or products)
   - Collaboration present over time (not just a one-shot effort)
   - Collaboration that is not initiative-driven

4. *Outcomes*
   - Codification of outcomes (e.g., in policy, procedures, and legislation)
   - Support/demand (from public, policymakers, etc.) for outcomes
   - Continued involvement/commitment of people over time

While these four areas might pertain to many initiative evaluations, they are typically not examined through the lens of sustainability. Using a sustainability lens means examining how these aspects develop over time and collecting information to determine their prospects for continuing once the initiative ends.

Evaluation's role in supporting sustainability is ongoing, from the beginning of the initiative to the end. While these approaches will not solve the sustainability challenge, they offer ideas for where communities can find unexpected allies among evaluators.

This article is adapted from the paper, Evaluation's Role in Supporting Initiative Sustainability, *available at www.gse.harvard. edu/hfrp/pubs/pubslist.html#role.*

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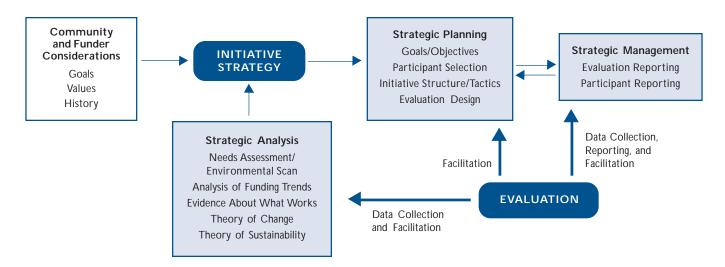## RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT AND EVALUATION

Figure adapted from Hambrick, D., & Frederickson, J. (2001). Are you sure you have a strategy? *The Academy of Management Executive, 15*(4), 48–59.

WAYS TO INCORPORATE A SUSTAINABILITY FOCUS INTO STRATEGY

STRATEGIC ANALYSIS	Needs Assessment/ Environmental Scan	• Obtain up front participants' perspectives about their organizational and initiative-specific sustainability needs and wants.
	Analysis of Funding Trends	• Get a sense of what other funders are supporting or are willing to support and whether it matches the initiative's focus.
		• Identify regional or community foundations that are potential supporters.
	Evidence About What Works	• Include sustainability as a criterion when gathering evidence about what works.
	Theory of Change	• Estimate how long the funder(s) need to commit to the initiative or its focus in order to make a difference.
	Theory of Sustainability	• Determine what aspects of the initiative need to be sustained.
		• Determine what needs to be in place to achieve sustainability. (E.g., Do long-term large grants engender dependency? Should funding be tapered?)
STRATEGIC PLANNING	Goals/Objectives	• Make sustainability a goal and establish objectives for getting there.
	Initiative Participant Selection	• Develop selection criteria that fit with both the theory of change and the theory of sustainability.
		• Make expectations about the funder's role in sustainability clear up front.
		• Have participants include a plan for sustainability in proposals.
	Initiative Structure/Tactics	• Provide structure that can support sustainability (e.g., matching funds, technical assistance, funder outreach, public relations).
		• Include grantees whose role is to provide sustainability support.
		• Give funders a role in achieving sustainability (e.g., outreach to community foundations, institution building, spin-offs, and endowments).
	Evaluation Design	• Make sustainability an outcome to be tracked to feed back formative and summative information.
		• Incorporate opportunities to report back on sustainability.
		• Track contextual variables that will impact sustainability.
STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT	Evaluation Reporting	• Build in points to ask, "Does this initiative deserve to be sustained?"
		• Build in opportunities to reflect on and make midcourse changes based on what is being learned about sustainability.
	Grantee Reporting	• Develop periodic reporting mechanisms that can help grantees assess where they are in sustainability efforts.

Using Geographic Data for Neighborhood Revitalization

Josh Kirschenbaum and Victor Rubin from PolicyLink reveal what has been learned about effective practices and potential uses of community mapping.[1]

Geographic information systems (GIS)—computer-based applications that map and analyze information and data relative to geography or location—have gained national attention as a powerful resource for supporting neighborhood revitalization and community development. The central value of a map is that it quickly tells a story about what has happened or is currently happening in neighborhoods or larger communities. Effective maps do more than illuminate key indicators, trends, or relationships among factors. Their accessibility and appeal can draw new people into the discussion of plans, policies, and programs. This broadened access and understanding improves local decision making and consensus building, which translates into improved program design, policy development, organizing, and advocacy.

Community mapping is also extremely valuable to evaluators of local initiatives, and this value should increase greatly over the next several years as more systems gather data covering longer periods of time about neighborhood conditions and program performance. Many of the best community mapping systems are linked to neighborhood indicators projects. Such projects are repositories of data on housing conditions, land uses, population characteristics, local assets, human services, public safety, and other categories of information relevant to many evaluations.[2] Such neighborhood data are useful as context for an evaluation of a local initiative or project, or they may represent the key outcomes to be measured. Also, over time the evaluators of community initiatives may reciprocate by contributing data that they have collected to local indicators projects.

The keys to successful application of GIS in community settings are technology, time, staff expertise, and funding. Most community-based organizations do not have the staff or resources to build their own GIS applications base. Instead, broad partnerships of technology intermediaries, municipal governments, and community groups are being formed in many cities. Community-based organizations play key roles in these partnerships, including determining what data needs to be mapped and how the maps are used for improving neighborhood conditions. In this arrangement, the community development practitioners shape the GIS systems and outputs; they operate as "map shapers" and "map users," rather than as "map developers."

Community maps can take several forms ranging in complexity. *Context maps*, the simplest, represent one variable distributed across a unit of neighborhood geography (e.g., income level shown for census tracts) and mainly provide background information. *Display maps* are relatively more complex, illustrating single or multiple variables distributed across a neighborhood for much smaller units of geography, usually a single household or building (e.g., the conditions of individual properties at the parcel level). *Analytical maps* are the most sophisticated, layering and analyzing relationships among multiple variables in the same area. An analytical map might combine income at the census tract level and condition of individual properties at the parcel level and highlight how the two variables relate to each other.

Mapping for community development and social services purposes involves five broad steps that begin and end with the voice of local communities:

1. *Identify community issues*. Authentic community mapping starts with community-based organizations and residents applying their in-depth understanding of local conditions to identify assets and issues, set goals and outcomes, and determine the appropriate types of geography and presentations. Designing and leading the mapping process allows residents and organizations to ensure that the maps accurately reflect the community's needs.

2. *Determine appropriate geography*. Community mapping projects can use a range of geographic units for mapping, ranging from individual parcels to census tracts to entire neighborhoods. Most initiatives will include several different levels of geography.

3. *Collect data*. Community mapping initiatives are only as strong as the data on which the maps are built. Maps that are most useful in a community context will likely consist of information from many sources, including public statistics, administrative data, commercial data, and survey data.

4. *Create maps using GIS*. The production process involves hardware, software, data, people, and methods. Many community organizations partner with technology or mapping intermediaries, such as universities, to maintain the GIS technology.

5. *Use maps to promote community building and neighborhood revitalization*. The ultimate purpose of community mapping is to improve programs, policy advocacy, and research. Effective community groups will use GIS outputs and maps as a foundation for campaigns to promote community building and transform data and spatial analysis into action.

[1] This article is drawn from Kirschenbaum, J., & Russ, L. (2002). *Community mapping: Using geographic data for neighborhood revitalization*. Oakland, CA: PolicyLink. A similar version, including numerous links to mapping websites that illustrate the points made here, can be found as part of the Equitable Development Toolkit at www.policylink.org.

[2] See the website of the National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership, a project of the Urban Institute, at www.urban.org/nnip.

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Alternative Designs for Community-Based Research: Pittsburgh's Early Childhood Initiative

Stephen Bagnato, Robert Grom, and Leon Haynes describe an evaluation design for Pittsburgh's Early Childhood Initiative that provides scientific rigor in a community setting.

Little agreement exists about how evaluations of social intervention programs should be conducted. Traditional social scientists argue for the use of laboratory-based, control group, randomized designs as the gold standard, but this approach lacks generalizability to real-life settings. Alternative evaluation designs are necessary to document the elements of intervention programs that predict outcomes in natural community settings. Yet critics charge alternative methods with a lack of experimental rigor.[1] An evaluation approach known as *authentic assessment and program evaluation research* meets the demand for rigor while addressing the community setting context.

Pittsburgh's Early Childhood Initiative

In 1994, as part of the Early Childhood Initiative (ECI), the Heinz Endowments organized the business, corporate, agency, and foundation sectors in Pittsburgh to expand quality early care and education programs and options for unserved children in high-risk neighborhoods. The overarching mission of ECI is to foster preschool and school success for children of poverty, whose typical retention and special education placement rates in kindergarten have ranged between 18% and 40%.

A consortium of business, community, and foundation leaders designed the goals, approach, and expected outcomes of ECI. This design was based on seven core features of successful early childhood programs for children at developmental risk that were identified by Craig Ramey and Sharon Ramey in their article, *Early Intervention and Early Experience*.[2] The seven core features include: (1) longitudinal interventions starting in infancy and monitored through functional benchmarks; (2) intensive, comprehensive, and individualized programs and supports; (3) integral parent participation; (4) high program quality and frequent monitoring; (5) direct child interventions; (6) community-directed programs and integrated services; and (7) follow-through of child and family supports and program evaluation into the primary grades.

Several Pittsburgh urban neighborhoods have participated in this collaboratively designed and privately funded joint venture. Braddock's 4 Kids Early Childhood Initiative and the Wilkinsburg ECI are two of the most distinctive of these community-driven ventures. A community leadership council established in Braddock forged a relationship between Woodland Hills School District, Head Start, and various formal and informal resources in the community (e.g., churches, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development community councils, and local hospital networks) to link services for children and families. In Wilkinsburg, Hosanna House, a broad community service center, incorporated family support programs as central features of their early care and education programs. In fact, these communities have lead efforts to incorporate the School Readiness Group, a nonprofit early childhood consortium, in order to harness the influence of cross-community partners to advocate for government, foundation, and agency funding.

SPECS Authentic Program Evaluation Research Model

In 1996 the Heinz Endowments and the ECI Management Council, composed of business, corporate, foundation, and community members, selected an interdisciplinary research team from Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh and the UCLID Center at the University of Pittsburgh known as SPECS (Scaling Progress in Early Childhood Settings), as the winners of a national competition to conduct ECI's longitudinal evaluation.

SPECS' evaluation approach—authentic assessment and program evaluation research—helps community-based programs demonstrate "how good they are at what they do." It has been validated in the field through evidence-based research conducted through "natural experiments" in real-life community settings rather than laboratory settings.[3] SPECS' strategies are unique and effective because they:

- Use a collaborative research model with community partners for the formative and summative research phases.
- Ask whether the program works in a natural setting rather than a laboratory setting.
- Assess *all* children, families, and programs in the study without exclusions.
- Apply the developmentally appropriate quality guidelines of the National Association for the Education of Young Children, the Division for Early Childhood, Council for Exceptional Children, and the Head Start Performance Standards.
- Do not use traditional "tabletop testing" and remove the child, teachers, or parents from their natural situation or "developmental ecology."
- Rely on ongoing observations from consistent caregivers in the child's life.
- Sample skills within the preschool's developmental curriculum that are teachable and predictive of future kindergarten success.
- Offer ongoing feedback to teachers, parents, and the community about children's learning and needed program refinements.

[1] Yoshikawa, H., Rosman, E. A., & Hsueh, J. (2002). Resolving paradoxical criteria for the expansion and replication of early childhood care and education programs. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 17*(3), 3–27.

[2] Ramey, C. T., & Ramey, S. L. (1998). Early intervention and early experience. *American Psychologist, 53*(2), 109–120.

[3] Bagnato, S. J., Suen, H. K., Brickley, D., Smith-Jones, J., & Dettore, E. (2002). Child developmental impact of Pittsburgh's Early Childhood Initiative (ECI) in high-risk communities: First-phase authentic evaluation research. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 17*(4), 559–580.

- Operationalize a longitudinal repeated-measures design using HLM and path analysis strategies.[4]

SPECS' research methods track progress and inter-relationships among multiple factors like children's development (e.g., basic concepts, literacy, social skills, and self-control behaviors), parenting and family strengths, the standards and "best practices" of early childhood programs, and neighborhood resources and interagency partnerships in systems reform efforts.

The Results of the Early Childhood Initiative

The SPECS evaluation team carefully tracked the progress of 1,350 enrolled children between 1997 and 2003. The team observed and profiled progress three times each year, focusing on thinking, language, early literacy, social, behavioral, and play skills. They regularly provided feedback to teachers and parents to guide their teaching and care. They also conducted program quality evaluations in 25 programs in nine Pittsburgh neighborhoods (Braddock, Wilkinsburg, Sto-Rox, East Liberty, South Side, Highlands, Hill District, Homewood, and Steel Valley).

SPECS' research on ECI's impact showed major outcomes in four areas (for details see the box):

- Children beat the odds and learned early skills for school success.
- Mentored programs achieved stringent quality standards.
- With teachers' help, parents learned new ways to nurture their children's development.
- Communities proved their leadership and made their programs successful.

To download the full SPECS report or executive summary go to www.uclid.org:8080/uclid/ech_specs.html.

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[4] HLM (Hierarchical Linear Modeling) is an analysis that estimates the effects of social units—groups, neighborhoods, schools, workplaces, organizations, communities, social networks, or whole social systems—on individuals. Path analysis refers to the method by which the path of the cause and effect relationship among variables is determined.

HOW CHILDREN BENEFITED FROM THE EARLY CHILDHOOD INITIATIVE (ECI)

Developmental Progress

- On entering the program, 86% of the children were classified as "high risk" for shortcomings in overall thinking, language, and social and school-readiness skills. Fourteen percent of the students were deemed to be both high-risk and developmentally delayed, which would qualify them for early intervention or special education services in Pennsylvania. The documented national rate for developmental delays is 3% to 8%.
- The longer that children participated in high quality ECI programs, the greater the developmental progress and achievement of early school success skills.
- After nearly three years in the program, the high-risk group showed at least average developmental progress without the typical setbacks for children of poverty documented in national research.
- The delayed group showed an accelerated rate of developmental progress into the average range that was 160% of the typical or expected rate in normal child development.

Social and Behavioral Progress

- ECI children in the full high-risk group achieved normal social skills and self-control behaviors compared to national peers.
- 18% of the children at entry into ECI showed significant problems with social skills and self-control behaviors that would qualify them for mental health diagnosis and support; this challenging behavior problem-group achieved normal social and behavioral skills after nearly three years of ECI participation.

Early School Success

- 125 of the children in the ECI program transitioned to kindergarten and first grade over this period.
- In the school districts from which students were recruited, an average of 23% of children are retained or "held back" in kindergarten and first grade, and 21% are referred to special education programs. After nearly three years of ECI participation, less than 2% were retained and less than 1% were referred for special education.
- End-of-year "blind" follow-up assessments by kindergarten and first grade teachers on the Basic School Skills Inventory-Revised, a nationally standardized achievement test of early learning skills, demonstrated that ECI children who transitioned to school performed at an average to above-average range compared to their national peers.

Hand in Hand—Evaluation and Organizational Development

Andrew Mott, Director of the Community Learning Project and former Executive Director of the Center for Community Change, stresses the importance of building on existing grassroots approaches to assessment and learning.

Nowadays progress in low-income communities depends heavily on the success of grassroots groups in taking the initiative to improve their neighborhoods. No other organizations, public or private, are prepared to take on this extraordinarily important role.

This situation greatly increases the importance of developing ways to help grassroots organizations assess their work, examine what's working and what isn't, and learn how to strengthen their organizations and increase their impact.

Evaluations of grassroots efforts must therefore be designed to help organizations learn and build capacity. For foundations that fund community organizing and other grassroots efforts, an emphasis on internal learning and capacity building is crucial. Without strong, increasingly knowledgeable, and competent organizations to take the lead, foundation grants simply cannot lead to the desired impact.

This approach poses a major challenge to conventional thinking about evaluation. While funders must continue to be concerned about tracking and assessing performance, they must become at least equally concerned about designing evaluation systems that build grantees' capacity and help them learn. For most funders, this view requires a radical rethinking of their approach to evaluation and their relationship with their grantees.

First, funders must understand the internal systems that a grassroots group may have already developed to track and reflect on its performance. Without understanding how an organization currently learns, a funder risks undermining learning systems that the organization has found useful. Grantees are often forced to set up an entirely separate evaluation system to satisfy grant requirements, a step that can weaken rather than strengthen an organization and can jeopardize the grant's success.

Many funders and professional evaluators fail to recognize the discipline and thoroughness of some community organizations in developing internal reporting and assessment systems. Most community organizers, for example, write weekly reports quantifying such accomplishments as how many new people they met with, how many they recruited as members, and how many assumed new leadership roles. Many also require periodic written reflections from their organizers. These reflections make

Funders must understand the internal systems that a grassroots group may have already developed to track and reflect on performance.

self-assessment routine and provide the basis for discussion, critique, and suggestions by the organizer's peers and supervisors. These are valuable systems that should be built on and reinforced. Any supplementary assessment techniques should be made as compatible and complementary as possible.

Funders and external evaluators should understand equally well the roles that organizing networks, technical assistance groups, organizational development consultants, and other learning partners may play in helping grantees with assessment and learning. Although these groups are not likely to think of their work as "evaluation," they enable grassroots organizations to assess their organizational development, operations, and impact.

Some grassroots organizations turn to peers for help in assessing their work and exploring possible improvements. They see great advantages in having people whom they trust and who have "been in their shoes" take a serious look at their operations and provide honest feedback on what could be strengthened, what problems are emerging, and what activities should be expanded or rethought. Like support organizations and consultants that work extensively in similar communities, peers can bring great practical insight and knowledge to the task of assessment. These learning partners offer "added value" to assessment by drawing from their own experience and knowledge of how other grassroots groups have addressed similar community issues and organizational dilemmas.

Many groups use another strategy for peer learning. They meet regularly with peers, either informally or as a formalized peer learning group or learning circle. This cross-fertilization of ideas exposes each group to ways other groups have tackled similar issues, thus stimulating learning and creativity. Such peer learning also fosters self-assessment as the participants evaluate other groups' ideas and strategies against their own. Peer learning strategies commonly persuade an organization to change in significant ways.

Some participatory evaluators approach organizational assessments using techniques that closely resemble those used by organizational development specialists and other learning partners who are not "evaluators." These participatory evaluators offer advantages over peers or partners as they have stronger methodological skills, a more distant relationship to the group, and usually greater credibility with external audiences. They may be chosen by the group and enjoy the advantages of trust and candor. Those who are truly participatory routinely engage leaders and staff in every aspect of the evaluation, from design through analysis.

All these approaches—self-assessments, assessments by peers and partners, and assessments by evaluators who are truly participatory—offer great advantages for grassroots organizations. These approaches help groups learn, adapt, and strengthen

Related Resources

Mott, A. (2003). *Evaluation: Good news for funders*. Washington, DC: Neighborhood Funders Group.

Facing the Challenge of Evaluating a Complex, Multi-Site Initiative

Beth Weitzman and Diana Silver from New York University's Center for Health and Public Service Research offer their experience integrating a comparison group design into a theory of change approach.

To overcome some of the limitations of experimental and quasi-experimental designs, evaluators have employed a "theory of change" (TOC) approach to evaluate comprehensive community initiatives (CCIs).[1] This approach helps identify underlying assumptions, focuses on processes and systems within communities, clarifies desired outcomes, and embraces the complexity of comprehensive interventions. Yet some researchers question the adequacy of TOC to address rival hypotheses to explain findings.[2]

Our evaluation of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's (RWJF) Urban Health Initiative (UHI), which shares many characteristics of CCIs, integrates the TOC approach with a quasi-experimental design to address the question, did this initiative make a difference? We believe this integrated approach addresses issues of initiative complexity while also measuring its effect.

UHI, a 10-year effort to improve the health and safety of young people in five cities, is "non-prescriptive." Cities were allowed to select the health focus, target age group, particular strategies, and leadership. RWJF did, however, provide guidelines. Cities were required to focus on changing systems, not expanding programs. Cities had to use data, "best practices," and evaluation tools to select and manage their efforts. Sites needed to mobilize a variety of leaders, both in and outside of government. Finally, RWJF expected measurable improvements *citywide* in outcomes for youth.

As the evaluators, we faced two significant challenges. First, how would we define this non-prescriptive, multi-city intervention? Second, what credible evidence could we assemble to assess whether changes in the participating cities were due to the UHI intervention?

Defining the Intervention

We first developed a theory of change with the RWJF for UHI *as a whole*. We believed that the RWJF had, implicitly, a theory of change that was more than the sum of the sites and that defined the intervention. The theory encompasses the RWJF's broad guidelines and assumptions about improving outcomes for urban youth. It focuses on the complex processes that UHI

is to influence, and the tools it is to use. Interim outcomes include the increased use of data for decision making, increased public expenditures on youth, and the development of prevention-focused public and private policies. We then developed city-specific "theories of change," regularly updated with key stakeholders, to help us compare the local experience with RWJF's theory. Using a national TOC, our research speaks to the questions of whether a foundation can inspire new processes at the local level, whether these processes create meaningful changes in policies, and whether these changes result in better outcomes for youth. Our design embraces local variation as the *intent* of UHI.

Integrating a Comparison Group Approach

Having determined how to define the "intervention," the problem of how to test whether any changes we might observe could be credited to UHI remained. Prior TOC evaluations have compared program theory with program experience, as do we. Still, we believed that we could strengthen our approach by integrating a comparison group into the design. This would help us rule out other explanations for findings in both interim and final outcomes.

If we were to find that UHI cities more consistently used data and best practices over time, should we conclude that UHI activities were responsible? Key informant interviews in comparison cities might reveal similar changes, perhaps because of technological breakthroughs, occurring during this period. Similarly, improvements in health outcomes, such as teen pregnancy, could result from national economic trends and national attention to them, and not because of UHI. And, if rates of some problems were worsening in other cities, but holding steady in UHI cities, that comparison would strengthen the argument that UHI had an impact.

We needed a group of cities to which interim and final outcomes could be meaningfully compared. UHI participating cities were not randomly selected. They shared several distinctive features, including population loss, substantial concentrations of African Americans and people in poverty, and wealthy suburbs. These cities also shared—and were selected because of—high rates of health and safety problems for young people. What criteria should we use to select a group of comparison cities?

We chose to select comparison cities based on measures of their underlying economic and demographic conditions, not on health and safety indicators. We reasoned that these contextual features both explained and constrained the capacities of cities to change public and private systems. We gathered data on these conditions for the 100 largest cities in the U.S. and used cluster analysis to see which cities were most "like" the UHI cities. While the UHI cities looked most like each other, the analysis also yielded a group of cities that shared many key features, underscoring the notion that the lessons of the UHI intervention might be generalizable. Having selected 10 cities that resembled the UHI cities, we compared how these cities fared on

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[1] A theory of change approach can be defined as "a systematic and cumulative study of the links between activities, outcomes, and contexts of the initiative." From Connell, J. P., & Kubisch, A. C. (1998). Applying a theory of change approach to the evaluation of comprehensive community initiatives: Progress, prospects, and problems. In K. Fulbright-Anderson, A. C. Kubisch, & J. P. Connell (Eds.), *New approaches to evaluating community initiatives, Volume 2: Theory, measurement, and analysis* (pp. 15–44). Washington DC: The Aspen Institute.

[2] Hollister, R. G., & Hill, J. (1995). Problems in the evaluation of community-wide initiatives. In J. Connell, A. Kubisch, L. Schorr, & C. Weiss (Eds.), *New approaches to evaluating community initiatives, Volume 1: Concepts, methods, and contexts* (pp. 127–171). Washington, DC: The Aspen Institute.

A conversation with

Prudence Brown

Prudence Brown is a Research Fellow at the Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago where she works in the Program on Philanthropy and Community Change. Her work focuses on the documentation and evaluation of community change initiatives, new approaches to learning from and providing assistance to these initiatives, and the role of philanthropy in community change. Prior to joining Chapin Hall, she was Deputy Director of the Urban Poverty Program at the Ford Foundation.

Q What challenges do comprehensive community initiatives (a.k.a. community-building initiatives) present to those who design, implement, and evaluate them?

A Among the most significant challenges is that we have very little impact data to answer the question of whether comprehensive community initiatives[1] are effectively revitalizing distressed communities. There are at least two reasons for this. The first is due to the complexity of evaluating these initiatives and the second is related to the design of the initiatives themselves.

On the evaluation side, we know that traditional evaluation methods are not well suited to capture the breadth and complexity of evolving community change initiatives. We have done some initial work on alternative approaches using, for example, a theory of change framework. Another positive is that new community statistical systems and geocoding technologies have made it possible for community change initiatives to use demographic and administrative data to guide local strategy development and tracking. But we have yet to invest the kind of sustained resources needed to use these new measurement tools and test these alternative evaluation approaches over the life of an initiative. So we continue to struggle—with limited success—with problems of measurement and attribution, trying to causally relate specific initiative components to the range of outcomes they are meant to produce. I don't think we should give up on this struggle, but I would like to see a greater commitment to a broader learning agenda, which would have an immediate benefit to those working to create community change.

On the program side, organizers of comprehensive community initiatives often face significant implementation problems because they underestimate their resources, capacity, time, and political will. This makes it very difficult to distinguish the strength of the driving ideas from the success or failure of their implementation. When you compound the problems of weak theories and unrealistic expectations with insufficient resources and lack of implementation capacity, it is not surprising that we are not learning as much as we should from current work on the ground.

Q How are comprehensive community initiatives changing as a result of these challenges?

A I worry that community initiatives are being scaled back due to disappointment in their outcomes, rather than addressing the need to match time and investment with the desired outcomes. I'm not opposed to wild ambition and far-reaching goals. People involved in these initiatives tend to be deeply committed to social justice and poverty alleviation and they know that a powerful vision can help them stay the course. And funders and organizers find that ambitious goals and bold actions can galvanize support for an initiative in the boardroom and on the street. But translating vision into action requires discipline, clarity, and a realistic assessment of what can be accomplished within a specified time period. We know that significant neighborhood change typically takes decades rather than years so we have to be willing to make that kind of sustained investment or live with more modest goals.

The fact that community change work is more complex and longer-term than was perhaps initially anticipated has led some

> *I'm not opposed to wild ambition and far-reaching goals … But translating vision into action requires discipline, clarity, and a realistic assessment of what can be accomplished within a specified time period.*

[1] The author uses the term "comprehensive community initiatives" to identify initiatives that are based on two core principles: (1) comprehensiveness (recognition and response to the linked nature of community circumstances) and (2) community-building (recognition of the value of strengthening neighborhood capacity to foster and sustain changes in community circumstances).

funders to rethink their own roles and become more strategic about aligning their goals and strategies.[2] This means disciplining strategy with theory-based logic, improving understanding of community history and context before taking any action, and investing more in long-term community capacity in recognition that the most pervasive and sustainable changes stem from a community's ability to envision, develop, and lead its own solutions. Funders may also have to shape a role for themselves that goes beyond grantmaking to leverage their clout, credibility, and institutional resources on behalf of community change.

Q What are the primary lessons that designers and stakeholders of comprehensive community initiatives ought to apply?

A Much of the work reflecting on the ongoing experience with comprehensive community initiatives culminated in the Aspen Institute's *Voices From the Field II: Reflections on Comprehensive Community Change*, developed by the Roundtable on Comprehensive Community Initiatives for Children and Families.[3] That exercise was useful for bringing together different kinds of players—from communities, from the evaluation field, and others—to ask, "What lessons do we draw?" Many of those lessons relate to the importance of sound *theory* and coherent *strategy* and the processes for developing them. *Voices From the Field II* also underscored the need for investment in both the internal capacities of communities and their connections with outside political, economic, and social resources and forces.

As *Voices From the Field II* suggests, theory should not be an abstraction, but rather a concrete statement of plausible, testable pathways of change. At every level of a community change effort people should be able to articulate in very simple terms where they want to go, what they are doing that will get them there, and how they know they are moving in the right direction. This is the first building block for good practice. It allows initiative organizers to learn and make adjustments, to compare what is ac-

tually happening on the ground with what they thought would happen, and to understand the factors that may be causing any discrepancy. At this point in the field's development, I would be very happy if all community change initiatives had this infrastructure for learning embedded in their ongoing practice. Evaluation goals and methods can be built on this foundation. But if you don't have these basic mechanisms in place, systematic learning and evaluation are very difficult.

While there is increasing attention to the process of developing theory, strategy, and benchmarks, community-based groups typically have so few resources and so little management capacity that they often generate lists of benchmarks and outcomes for a proposal, but then put them aside and do not make them part of ongoing practice. When it is time to write the renewal proposal they bring out the lists and rework them, but this process does not create vehicles for learning and self-assessment as an end in itself—an important contributor to long-term impact.

Both this self-assessment process as well as broader learning can be facilitated by a coach.[4] The role of this person is to observe funders and communities, ask them questions about strategy, help them clarify their choices, and recognize and work through fundamental tensions. The purpose of this technical assistance is to institutionalize a learning culture that involves continual dialogue, reflection, and experimentation, and places a high value on learning from what is and is not working. A coach is often able, for example, to see more clearly than either the funder or the community change agents when there is initiative "drift" or a disconnect between the vision behind the initiative and the action on the ground. A real commitment to learning requires that this disconnect be examined in an open and honest manner. Sometimes an evaluator can play this role, but often it requires a learning coach who has no other function except to help create a safe and productive space in which to provoke critical thinking, encourage accountability, and generate learning. Aggregating this kind of learning across initiatives has a lot of promise to make all of our work in this field more effective.

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[2] For a more extended discussion of these issues, see Brown, P. Chaskin, R. Hamilton, R., & Richman, H. (2003). *Toward greater effectiveness in community change: Challenges and responses for philanthropy*. Chicago: Chapin Hall Center for Children, University of Chicago. Also available this fall in *Practice matters: The improving philanthropy project* at www.fdncenter.org/for_grantmakers.
[3] Roundtable on Comprehensive Community Initiatives for Children and Families, Author. (2002). *Voices from the field II: Reflections on comprehensive community change*. Washington, DC: The Aspen Institute.

[4] See Brown, P., Hirota, J., & Pitt, J. (2000). New approaches to technical assistance: The role of the coach. *Community: A Journal of Community Building for Community Leaders, 3*(1), 20–27.

Hand in Hand

themselves as organizations. They fit naturally with the organizations' own priorities and learning processes, and thus avoid, or at least limit, the tensions, lack of candor, and perceived lack of relevance and value that often afflict external evaluations.

Such approaches to evaluation are usually overlooked in the U.S. However, they are more commonly accepted in the global South and among international nongovernmental organizations where years of pioneering have led to growing sophistication in participatory monitoring and assessment techniques and to linking evaluation with organizational development.

These strategies deserve far stronger support within the American evaluation community and from funders in the U.S. When properly structured they can result in assessments based on relationships of greater candor and increased access to the experience and insight of the people most involved in the evaluated work. Furthermore, unlike traditional evaluations, these learning partnerships also usually result in stronger organizations, more effective programs and issue work, and greater impact—the ultimate goals that all funders and grantees share.

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Complex, Multi-Site Initiative

several health and safety indicators and found them to be similar to the UHI cities.[3]

Our evaluation design uses multiple methods to test assumptions against both the program theory and the comparison group. We conduct key informant interviews in the UHI and comparison cities to investigate interim outcomes from the TOC concerning leadership, collaboration, and the use of data. Similarly, our national telephone household survey of parents and youth has samples in each of the UHI cities and in the group of comparison cities as a whole. Administrative data on health and safety indicators are collected and analyzed for the UHI cities, the comparison cities, and the rest of the top 100 cities.

Some intensive (and expensive) methods do not readily lend themselves to the comparison group approach. Neither annual site visits nor our public expenditure analyses can easily be done in both the UHI and comparison cities. Still, this integrated design gives us greater confidence that we can discern credible lessons for funders, practitioners, and evaluators about the ways

[3] For more information see Weitzman, B. C., Silver, D., & Dillman, K. (2002). Integrating a comparison group design into a theory of change evaluation: The case of the Urban Health Initiative. *American Journal of Evaluation, 23*(4), 371–385.

in which this particular initiative did or did not lead to innovations in policies and programs for youth and to changes in health and safety outcomes attributable to those innovations.

For more information on the national evaluation of the UHI, go to www.nyu.edu/wagner/chpsr.

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Community Youth as Evaluators

When evaluating community-wide programs or initiatives, it can be extraordinarily helpful to seek out and incorporate the diverse perspectives of that community initiative's target population. The Department of Children, Youth, and Their Families (DCYF) in San Francisco certainly takes this lesson to heart through their Youth IMPACT project, one of the largest youth-led evaluation efforts in the nation.[1] Begun in 2000, DCYF's Youth IMPACT is a group of between 10–15 youth from diverse backgrounds who were assembled to research 40 community-based organizations (CBO) funded by DCYF. The group conducted focus groups and administered questionnaires with youth participants and performed site observations of youth programming in order to answer two primary research questions: (1) How well are CBOs in San Francisco serving children and youth? and (2) What makes a CBO feel trustworthy to youth? By using youth as the evaluators of community youth programming, DCYF was able to incorporate youths' voices into the development and improvement of their programs, something the organization viewed as crucial. The evaluators also found that the target youth were more comfortable opening up to people their own age. At the same time, the youth evaluators learned valuable new skills, such as writing and presentation skills and the ability to work with a diverse group of people. As Khalillah Hill, a Youth IMPACT team member, notes: "By us being youth ourselves we know what youth want and need, and through that we'll be able to work towards providing better services for youth."

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[1] Youth IMPACT. (2001). *Youth IMPACT: Youth-led evaluation 2001*. San Francisco, CA: Department of Children, Youth, and Their Families.

Storytelling and Statistics: A Synergistic Combination

Deborah Johnson illustrates how storytelling can help unearth powerful impacts. She shares two case studies from the Boys and Girls Club.

As an external contractor evaluating the Jeffrey A. Cowan Boys and Girls Club in inner city Long Beach, California, I struggled to find statistical significance in traditional outcomes such as academic improvement or having a consistent relationship with a caring adult. After three years, survey and other data produced few consistent results. The poorly defined curriculum and high transiency rate didn't help. Of the 150 students assessed each year, only 26 provided three consecutive surveys.

Fortunately, I moved beyond the statistics and into families' homes with annual visits to five children and their mothers. All were extremely poor. Only one spoke English. They survived on welfare and odd jobs. Most had strung out the goodness of brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles as long as they could. They survived day-to-day, hand-to-mouth, with no hope that things would change.

But things did change. And they changed for the better in four of the five families. The stories of two of those families follow.

Case Study 1 – March 2000

JH sprawls on a bed beneath a light blanket, staring at the small television teetering on a small stand. The bed dominates the closet-sized room. In a cabinet beneath the only window, open boxes of crackers and cereal rest next to a six-pack of juice. Light spills through a half-open door, revealing bathroom bottles, towels, clutter. Outside drunken neighbors yell at each other. She and her mother have been living in the motel for four months.

"We don't have a refrigerator so I buy cold food and milk every day. I have to sleep on the floor because she won't sleep next to me. Last weekend I went to a friend's house to cook a turkey they'd given us at the Boys and Girls Club," her mother tells me.

Case Study 1 – Two Years Later

If I saw her walking down the street, I wouldn't recognize her. Two years ago, she was smaller and quieter. Now when she opens the screen door, she is tall, thin, with long, stylized hair and silver bracelets glittering on both wrists. When we meet, a shadow of the old withdrawn self briefly crosses her face. But it disappears quickly.

In a living room in one of Long Beach's better neighborhoods, JH sits comfortably in a La-Z-Boy chair surrounded by exercise equipment and books. In the next room, her foster mother folds clothes. A Chihuahua cuddles next to JH. For more than an hour, JH talks. She tells me about school, her part-time job, her love for Harry Potter books. A good student, JH has a lightness in her voice. She doesn't skirt painful memories. She seems much more open about who she is, how she feels, and what she needs.

Case Study 2 – April 2001

The door of the low-ceilinged, two-bedroom apartment opens to a concrete courtyard. Inside people large and small jostle in the kitchen. Covering almost very inch of the wall are clowns. "Are you a collector?" I ask.

Of her six children and five grandchildren, five live with RM. A large woman, RM dropped out of school in eleventh grade. Today she's on welfare. Her car gave out a year ago. She relies on family and friends to take her places. I ask how many friends she has. "The apartment manager and her daughter," she replies. Her brother takes her to the grocery store once a month. She doesn't want to work so she can watch her children. "My kids don't go out and play," she says. "If I can't see them, I can't trust what they're doing." Three of the children belong to the Boys and Girls Club. She likes it because "there's somebody watching them."

Case Study 2 – A Year and a Half Later

When she comes to the door, it is obvious RM has undergone a major transformation. Her eyes sparkle; she is active and interested. At a friend's urging, she has taken a job as a home health care aide for an elderly friend. She works five mornings a week. She likes the job so much she has just joined the home workers union. Her mother died and with a small legacy, she fixed up the apartment and bought a car. Her doctor changed her diabetes medication and she has more energy. She has been to parenting classes and learned how to discipline her children. She says that she no longer wants to worry about things she can't control. She feels as if she has her own life now.

Listening to the families' stories taught me to look more deeply at the Club's impact. I asked, "Why did families bring their children here in the first place?" From more than a decade of working with community-based organizations, I knew that one reason was the Club's recruitment strategy. Several times a year, staff members walked door to door through the neighborhood, talking to any parent they could find. Parents also liked the fact that the staff belonged to the same cultural, ethnic, and economic backgrounds as they did. And the Club provided a tremendous service—essentially free childcare ($20 a year) until 8pm five days a week for families struggling on minimal paychecks.

In our first interviews, most of the mothers described their lives as quite isolated: children came home quickly, doors were locked early in the evening, and television sets were on constantly. But when a child joined the Club, a crack in the isolation developed. It may have been small—only a few hours several days a week—but it represented something much larger. How the families functioned, whom they talked to, and what they trusted changed. Resistance to outsiders diminished. And the next time a friend urged a woman to take a job or a social worker recommended a parenting class, the advice was heard, not dismissed. As one mother said, "Through the Boys and Girls Club, we got a taste of freedom. That just carried on and a lot of things came into our life."

Mixed Methods and Moving to Opportunity

Elisabeth Jacobs reflects on the value of mixed-methods research in a policy context, highlighting the example of Moving to Opportunity, the five-city demonstration program of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

A clearer understanding of the links between communities and individual outcomes would benefit policymakers seeking to design and implement targeted, effective, and efficient programs. Embracing mixed-methods research is critical for clarifying our understanding of neighborhood effects. Detailing the causal relationship between communities and outcomes for the families and individuals in these communities requires both qualitative *and* quantitative methodologies.

Being Shamelessly Methodologically Eclectic

Policy evaluations traditionally collect quantitative data. Via broadly distributed surveys, institutional reporting, and other means, policy researchers garner statistical information on the outcomes of the individuals affected by a given policy. Unfortunately, the collection of qualitative data is far less routine. While quantitative data can provide a picture of a community's opportunities and obstacles, qualitative analysis offers a unique opportunity to unearth how those effects occur. Moreover, qualitative research can enrich our sense of neighborhood effects by corroborating the aggregate trends in the quantitative survey-based research. Finally, qualitative data can enliven our understanding of the social issues at stake and provide a more human story for policymakers, funders, and the public.

Policy evaluators can think about qualitative research as methodological *value added*. As Rossman and Wilson describe in their aptly titled article, *Numbers and Words Revisited: Being "Shamelessly Methodologically Eclectic"* (1994), qualitative research can complement quantitative analyses in at least four ways:

1. *Corroboration* of patterns in the numbers. Do the qualitative and the quantitative results tell the same story?
2. *Elaboration* of the statistical evidence. The qualitative "enhances, clarifies, and illustrates" in ways that can be enormously important for extracting lessons.
3. *Development*—using the results of one method to shape the other method. For example, qualitative results can be used to shape later iterations of surveys used to collect quantitative data.
4. *Initiation* of additional and sometimes entirely new and even divergent conceptual directions and research angles beyond those suggested by the statistics or prior literature.

Not only can qualitative research be value added to survey-based evaluation projects, it can also elucidate aggregate-level community variables. It provides clearer answers to questions about patterns of social influence, development of micro-level patterns of social organization, nuances of job search behavior, and other multi-stage social processes.

Neither qualitative nor quantitative research can single-handedly provide comprehensive policy evaluation. Without corresponding broad-based survey research and quantitative analysis, qualitative analysis cannot reliably indicate the scale or representativeness of particular effects. Without the "thick description" qualitative analysis provides, quantitative survey data cannot reveal the nuances of the social processes they enumerate. The synergy of both allows for a comprehensive analysis that can balance a persuasive, generalizable analysis with nuance and complexity.

Methodological Diversity and Moving to Opportunity

Moving to Opportunity (MTO), a demonstration program sponsored by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), provides an excellent example of the rich substantive findings that mixed-methods approaches to policy evaluation can yield. The program targets very low-income families with children living in public housing or receiving project-based assistance under Section 8[1] in five cities—Boston, Baltimore, Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles—and aims to enable these families to move out of high-poverty neighborhoods into low-poverty neighborhoods in the same metropolitan area.

HUD has implemented an experimental design aimed to answer two critical questions:

1. What are the impacts of mobility counseling on families' neighborhood choices and on their housing and neighborhood conditions?
2. What are the impacts of neighborhood conditions on the education, employment, income, and social well-being of MTO families?

HUD's design randomly assigns participants in MTO into one of three groups. The experimental group receives Section 8 rental certificates useable in only low-poverty areas as well as counseling and assistance in finding a private unit to lease. The comparison group receives regular Section 8 rental certificates with no geographical restrictions, as well as typical benefits and assistance from HUD. Finally, the control group continues to receive its current project-based assistance.

HUD's five-year evaluation of MTO is centered around a large-scale, "structured" survey of child and family well-being that draws on decades of research on neighborhood influences on family and child outcomes. Besides this core of quantitative research, MTO evaluation work has included several important qualitative elements.

Given the traditional adherence to quantitative methods amongst economists, it is perhaps a bit ironic that one of the

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[1] The Section 8 Housing Assistance Program was enacted by the Housing and Community Development Act of 1974. Section 8 housing rental certificates subsidize low-income families' housing costs so that they can afford housing in the private market.

most telling examples of the synergies made possible from mixed-method research comes from a team of economists. In 2001, Kling, Liebman, and Katz published *Bullets Don't Got No Name: Consequences of Fear in the Ghetto*, which illuminated the importance of safety concerns in the mobility decisions of low-income parents in public housing projects in high-poverty neighborhoods. Based on a series of 12 in-depth interviews with MTO-participating families in Boston, the study emphasizes the need to focus research on health, child behavior, and employment in order to capture major effects of change in neighborhoods. Subsequent quantitative results showed that the largest effects were for the very indicators that the qualitative interviews suggested would change.

The authors discovered four main reasons for incorporating mixed-methods into their MTO analysis:

1. It *refocused their quantitative data collection* on a different set of outcomes.
2. It enabled them to develop an *overall conceptual framework* for thinking about the impact of high- and low-poverty neighborhoods on families.
3. It provided them with *a deeper understanding of the institutional details* of the MTO program, which helped them to more confidently interpret later findings.
4. It *gave program participants a voice in shaping the researchers' questions*, supplying lessons with important implications for housing policy.

Taking the Next Steps: Future Research With MTO

While MTO's five-year evaluation is winding down, HUD is gearing up for a second wave of evaluations, and many important avenues remain open for exploration. A June 2002 conference on qualitative research in the MTO evaluation generated an exciting agenda of new issues and concerns. The day-long discussion amongst policymakers, evaluators, HUD funders, and researchers revealed several areas critical for further study:

• *Neighborhood institutions.* A variety of perspectives could shed light on this category. A *social integration perspective* would shift the focus from families to community institutions as the organizing unit of social life; researchers could analyze schools, churches, and other neighborhood institutions to understand how these institutions serve to integrate (or segregate) communities. A *service provision perspective* would give policymakers a clearer sense of neighborhood service availability.

• *Family interactions with (and in) neighborhoods.* Increased research focus on the interaction between families and the local police, for example, might clarify quantitative findings on crime, and focusing on family-neighborhood interactions might indicate where low-income families are going for social supports.

• *Economic opportunity.* Low-income families' moves to low-poverty neighborhoods provide a unique opportunity to further explore the relationship between geography and economic opportunity. For instance, qualitative research could explore the role of social relationships behind economic opportunity. Do low-poverty neighborhoods influence low-income

movers' social norms in such a way as to make them more likely to work or to work at higher paying jobs?

Mixed-methods research is invaluable not only for academics seeking to explain causal processes, but also for policymakers seeking to develop effective policy. Qualitative research provides a "story" to which policymakers can respond. As policy advocate Barbara Sard explains, "The most valuable aspect of the qualitative work from a policy perspective has been getting an understanding of the 'why' mechanisms. Fancy statistics are nice, but stories are better" (Briggs & Jacobs, 2002).

For more information on MTO and related research see www. mtoresearch.org.

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Community Collaboration 90806:
A Partnership to Increase School Readiness in Long Beach

Six community partners in Long Beach, California, are working to increase school readiness in one ZIP code area of the city. Marielle Bohan-Baker of HFRP describes their instructive and collaborative approach to planning and evaluation.[1]

Capitalizing on community assets and consensus about the need to intervene earlier in the lives of young children, six education and social service organizations are partnering to improve the literacy skills of over 2,000 preschool age children in Long Beach, California. This initiative, REACH (Readiness and Early Activities for Children from the Heart), seeks to address one of the most pervasive problems in early childhood education—staff turnover among underpaid providers.

With close to one-third of all its children living in poverty, a majority of its schools with standardized reading test scores below the 50th percentile, and significant gang activity, Long Beach can be a difficult learning environment for children. Within the city, the diverse 90806 ZIP code is among the neediest. REACH partners chose to focus in this ZIP code as they test strategies to combat staff turnover and improve early childhood professionals' understanding and application of literacy knowledge and skills with the ultimate goal of improving children's literacy skill development. Partners used the results of a questionnaire designed to pinpoint the needs of early childhood professionals within 90806 to fine-tune their strategies during a planning phase.

Approached with numerous proposals from the community, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation's Long Beach local advisory committee comprised of business and community leaders chose REACH in addition to some other smaller projects.[2] "We thought if we can make a difference in this one ZIP code where we have so much working against us, we could really have something that is transferable to other areas [of Long Beach]," says Jim Worsham, chairperson of the advisory committee.

A major factor influencing the choice of 90806 and the focus on school readiness was leaders' experience creating workforce development strategies in the aftermath of welfare reform. An analysis of the needs of workers and particularly those of low-income mothers revealed a critical gap between the need for quality child care services and availability. A 2002 Knight Foundation survey of Long Beach residents, which cited illiteracy and public education as areas of concern, reinforced the focus on early education.

California State University at Long Beach is spearheading the

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[1] Interviews were conducted with Avery Goldstein, California State University at Long Beach, Judy Seal, Long Beach Education Foundation, John Williams, Knight Foundation, and John Worsham, Long Beach Advisory Committee.

[2] The Knight Foundation funds the REACH initiative as part of a funding strategy in Long Beach, California, one of 26 communities where it focuses. The Knight Foundation's Community Indicators Project, which provides research-based information to the foundation and its partners, tracks key indicators over time for the 26 communities. For more information see www.knightfdn.org/default.asp?story=indicators/index.html.

five-year initiative, which includes both public and private partners. Other partners include Long Beach Unified School District, Young Horizons, Long Beach City College, City of Long Beach, and Literacy Works.

Evaluation That Builds on Community Approaches

From the beginning of her involvement in the initiative, REACH evaluator Avery Goldstein, Ph.D., of California State University at Long Beach, has emphasized the importance of respecting community organizations' approaches to evaluation. In addition to designing the research portion of the grant proposal with all of the REACH partners, Goldstein has worked with the organizations to hone their evaluation questions, as she came into the process once the initiative was already underway.

Goldstein has also built on the developmental assessments that the organizations were already using to measure children's progress rather than revamp each approach. She says, "Certainly from a research perspective, it is ideal to have everyone using the same measures. However, given the amount of assessment already going on, I knew once we made sure the tools being used were reliable that we had to build on these and make the assessment process as user-friendly and as *useful* as possible. It takes more work from the evaluator's perspective, but I think that is important when doing community work."

Goldstein and her colleagues established a five-year, longitudinal evaluation design integrating quantitative and qualitative benchmarks. The evaluation team is currently compiling and analyzing baseline data on children's literacy development, the results of which will be available early next year. Data on teacher retention will be available in fall 2004. Use of data over the course of the evaluation will inform the interventions. For example, individual profiles detailing the qualifications of all early childhood professionals in participating REACH child care centers have been developed from which personal goals for each will be established and their progress in advancing on a "career ladder" tracked. Child care centers and university partners will be able to assess the impact that participation in training courses on early literacy and stipends have on the professionals' advancement, as well as whether strategies are translating into better classroom practices and ultimately to children's achievement. As partners meet monthly with Goldstein to discuss progress, cumulative knowledge of how strategies are working will be developed and applied.

The emphasis on evaluation is helping create a common language between the Knight advisory committee and the REACH partners. "Evaluation is helping us tailor our expectations to measurable outcomes and makes us clearer about the questions that need to be asked," says Jim Worsham.

REACH and Seamless Education

As REACH moves forward, leaders aim to formalize the link between REACH and the Long Beach Unified School District's

Xavier de Souza Briggs on Community Building

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How can evaluation improve community building?

Evaluation can meet some critical knowledge needs—but there are limits. First and foremost, those who design, support, and carry out initiatives identified as "community building" perennially need help reflecting on what they really *want* to accomplish. Community building runs the risk of trying to be all things to all people. The phrase is *so* elastic that people tend to have vastly different assumptions and philosophies when they approach these efforts.

What lessons does this suggest for evaluation or evaluators?

When there are different or competing rationales and objectives in community-building work, evaluation can examine those rationales and specify the common threads among them. Community development needs people who can think critically and counter the pressure to focus only on building confidence. Both are crucial, of course, particularly where people mistrust collective work or feel too busy to get involved. But at the extremes, you have the problem of boosterism, wherein those who most need to think more critically about their work proceed from a set of strong but mostly unexamined assumptions. Boosters "spin" themselves on the value and promise of their work, too often with disappointing results.

Isn't this where theories of change or logic models come into play, outlining expectations about causes and effects?

Exactly. One of the strengths of the theory of change approach is that it can help formalize parts of that process and give people *conceptual footholds* that are critical to a common, evidence-backed understanding of their community-building efforts.

The jargon associated with such approaches can still be off-putting. We have yet to fully translate it for use in community settings, though accessible theory of change work products by the Aspen Institute, Kellogg Foundation, and the Bridgespan Group, among others, really help.

With any new social technology, or set of ideas and ways of implementing them, we need at least as many technologists—people that are comfortable with the new ideas, recognize their limits, bring key ideas into common use, demystify it all—as we do manuals and formal justifications. I think the process of

translation and diffusion will come in time, and evaluators can play a role in that.

Finally, outlining a theory of change is one thing; being able to align one's operational systems to implement it is quite another. Where implementation must be coordinated across organizations or across parts of an organization, things only get more challenging.

Does evaluation have a role beyond revealing and testing assumptions about cause and effect?

Absolutely. There is an ongoing need to be clearer about *who* plays *what* role in a community-building effort. What are the unique capacities that each party involved in the initiative brings? What are their limits and learning needs? Evaluators can clarify the question of role and the coordination of roles. They can help examine the capacity of players to contribute to an initiative. Here though, the lines blur between most traditional program evaluation and the kinds of management assessments that consultants practice—real-time, improvement-focused data gathering and analysis. The earliest commentaries on community building, those by the Chapin Hall Center for example, discussed those distinct evaluator roles—helping improve practice versus rating effectiveness on behalf of the funders or regulators.

Shouldn't evaluation focus on the objectives of core stakeholders?

Sure, but again, the implementing stakeholders, some of them potential beneficiaries or community clients, may hold a variety of assumptions that need to be clarified as well as tested. Funders as well as regulators—if we include in the mix government's important function of protecting against waste, fraud, abuse of rights, etc.—are stakeholders too. Community building on the civic side emerged from the realization that grassroots stakeholders can bring important knowledge and capacity to the solution of social problems. More specifically, community building also emerged as a response to top-down, technocratic public policy, with its love of professional credentials, standardization, and government-defined routines and rules. The idea that funders and regulators have no right to make claims of these initiatives, however, is a recipe for parochialism, spotty performance, and even corruption.

You wrote in *The Will and the Way*[1] that we need better ways to engage both the grassroots and the "grasstops" in the aims and means of community building.

Yes. The changes we want to create *do* depend on mobilizing at the grassroots level, because it's the smart thing to do, outcome-wise, and the politically just thing to do. Recall those two agendas. But community-change work, particularly if we want to see scale and sustained impact, also requires mobilizing the

[1] Briggs, X. de S. (2001). *The will and the way: Local partnerships, political strategy, and the well-being of America's children and youth.* Cambridge, MA: John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University.

grasstops—the influentials, those with the formal authority and money and other resources—in a local community.

We ought to frame the process of community change as targeted to areas of deep need, where appropriate, but at the same time be fairly universalist in our values and offer the opportunity for everyone to get involved. We should appeal, where possible, to the enlightened self-interest of employers, hospitals, universities and other anchor institutions. Community problem solving is more and more about working out collective action and leveraging capacity across the public, nonprofit, *and* private sectors.

How can evaluation add value when so many agendas and levels are in play?

Community building can benefit from the learning and accountability purposes of evaluation. Evaluation can help the "doers" learn and hone their strategies, either through peer learning or by creating what has been called "a community of practice." A recent book, *Cultivating Communities of Practice*,[2] discusses this concept, which grew out of the work done on knowledge management and social networks in the business world. The concept originated from a competitive need to be on the forefront of innovation. Communities of practice promote the removal of a rigid hierarchy where information is transmitted on a "need-to-know" basis, in favor of a flatter, more fluid learning and knowledge network.

Communities of practice differ importantly from teams that have a specific task to fulfill or an operational partnership across organizations. A community of practice may interface with a host of project teams, and it may lead to partnerships and alliances, but the community's identity is defined by knowing and learning less than by doing in the sense of being driven by a deadline. Evaluators can offer a community of practice dimension to community-based initiatives, serving as knowledge sources in larger networks, so that information flows to help improve practice.

But evaluation's second major role, that of external accountability, is becoming ever more important as well. The question "did we get a return on investment?" still turns some people off. However, it reflects the fact that those who invest resources confront demands for resources that outstrip supply and, as a result, have to make tough choices.

How do you reconcile this role with the "community-based" principles of community building?

Those that favor locally oriented, flexible work grounded in community-based organizations closest to the grassroots constituencies, or even in informally organized community groups that are not incorporated organizations, must present a credible response to accountability demands—welcoming the chance to improve work—while maintaining the right to push back. The latter may include pointing out that classic problems in measuring and performance do exist, such as *measuring the wrong thing well* and *imagining that everything valuable can be*

[2] Wenger, E., McDermott, R., & Snyder, W. M. (2002). *Cultivating communities of practice*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

counted. Some funders think measures and "metrics" always mean numbers. More useful are balanced performance dimensions, concepts leading to concrete measures followed by targets for those measures.

Continuing the evolution of the purely summative evaluation into a more grounded approach is critical. So is blurring the line between evaluation and management improvement or capacity building in general. This does not mean turning evaluators into mere cheerleaders for whatever those "closest to the ground" want to do.

Beyond evaluation per se, a huge need exists for grounded, reflective, practice-oriented *professional development* for those seeking to assist community builders—training the trainers and coaches, so to speak. Local practitioners are being compelled to ask tough questions: How do we create a meaningful, ongoing, balanced, and honest conversation about success on the issues we care about? How do we reconcile internal and external demands? How do we make use of the burgeoning toolbox—theory of change, community capacity, negotiation and consensus building techniques, one organizing philosophy or another—so that we have the right tools for the right job?

The strategy tools and other resources at www.community-problem-solving.net were created with these needs in mind. It's not an age of information anymore, but information *overload*. People need help sorting out what counts.

An expanded version is available on our website at www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/eval/issue23/expertfull.html

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Storytelling and Statistics

In designing the evaluation, I followed the literature and mapped out a path I thought reasonable. On reflection however, individual outcomes probably were not the most appropriate level of analysis. A better yardstick may have been a social network study asking questions such as: how did family conversations change after children joined the Club and how were internal and external family dynamics influenced?

Unlike linear indicators such as academic improvement, stories are a dance. They bob, weave, and move up and down. For most of the families interviewed, the stories had dramatic, unpredictable endings, especially given the poverty of their circumstances. But they indicate that even apparently ineffectual programs can have powerful impacts. You just have to know where to look.

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In this section HFRP offers new and noteworthy resources on the evaluation and development of community-based initiatives.

Publications

Freedman, P. (2003). *What makes a solution? Lessons and findings from Solutions for America*. Charlottesville, VA: University of Richmond. This report summarizes the themes and lessons from Solutions for America, an initiative of the Pew Partnership for Civic Change. www.pew-partnership.org/pdf/Freedman_Report.pdf (Acrobat file)

Govinda, R., & Diwan, R. (Eds.). (2003). *Community participation and empowerment in primary education*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. This volume presents case studies of initiatives launched in five states in India. www.sagepub.com/book.aspx?pid=9604

Howard, C., & Molina, F. (2003). *Final report on the Neighborhood Jobs Initiative: Lessons and implications for future community employment initiatives*. New York: Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation. The Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation has published this third and final report on the Neighborhood Jobs Initiative, an effort to raise employment levels in poor communities to match those of the broader metropolitan region to which they belong. www.mdrc.org/publications/341/full.pdf (Acrobat file)

Huston, A. C., Miller, C., Richburg-Hayes, L., Duncan, G. J., Eldred, C. A., Weisner, T. S., et al. (2003). *New Hope for families and children: Five-year results of a program to reduce poverty and reform welfare*. New York: Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation. This is a summary report on a demonstration program in Milwaukee designed to raise employment and income levels in low-income neighborhoods. www.mdrc.org/Reports2003/345/full.pdf (Acrobat file)

Lasker, R. D., & Weiss, E. S. (2003). **Broadening participation in community problem solving: A multidisciplinary model to promote collaborative practice and research**. *Journal of Urban Health: Bulletin of the New York Academy of Medicine, 80*(1), 14–60. The authors present a model for integrating the research and experience of colleagues working across various fields of study. www.nyam.org/publications/urbanhealth/pdf/broadeningparticipation.pdf (Acrobat file)

Sabo, K. (Ed.). (2003). *Youth participatory evaluation: A field in the making*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley. This volume discusses the numerous ways of improving evaluation by incorporating youth as researchers and evaluators. www.wiley.com/WileyCDA/WileyTitle/product Cd-0787970743.html

White, S. A. (Ed.). (2003). *Participatory video: Images that transform and empower*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. This book examines the role that participatory video can play in community development. www.sagepub.com/book.aspx?pid=9603

Organizations, Initiatives, and Useful Resources

The **Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now** supports and builds community organizations serving the interests of low- and moderate-income families. www.acorn.org

The Annie E. Casey Foundation's **Place-Based Philanthropy Initiative** focuses on improving the lives of disadvantaged children and their families by concentrating on the specific needs of specific communities. Through its free *Place Matters* newsletter, stakeholders can broker ideas and read about place-based efforts around the country. To learn more about the initiative and to subscribe to *Place Matters*, visit www.aecf.org/initiatives/pbp.

Living Cities: The National Community Development Initiative began its second 10-year phase in 2002. The second phase devotes more attention to the 23 participating cities, provides greater support to CDC intermediaries **LISC** (the Local Initiatives Support Corporation) and the **Enterprise Foundation**, and contributes further to national urban policy. For more information on the initiative's development and agenda, see www.livingcities.org.

The **Urban Institute's National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership** (NNIP) teams with local partners to develop neighborhood-level information systems for use in influencing policy. Learn more about NNIP and view a list of recent publications at www.urban.org/nnip.

The **Rebuilding Communities Initiative (RCI) Toolbox**, available from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, highlights the challenges and lessons gleaned from this seven-year, five-city initiative. www.aecf.org/publications/data/overview_doc.pdf (Acrobat file). For a re-

New Resources From HFRP

The first two publications in our new series, *Out-of-School Time Evaluation Snapshots*, are now available:

- Snapshot 1, entitled *A Review of Out-of-School Time Program Quasi-Experimental and Experimental Evaluation Results*, looks at what quasi-experimental and experimental evaluations reveal about the impact of out-of-school time programs on an array of outcomes.
- Snapshot 2, entitled *A Review of Activity Implementation in Out-of-School Time Programs*, examines the range and scope of current out-of-school time activities in the context of trying to uncover the links between program activities and positive outcomes for youth.

The *Snapshots* are available for reading or downloading online or a hard copy can be ordered. www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/afterschool/resources/index.html#snapshot

We have added **two new evaluation reports** to our website.

- *Lessons in Evaluating Communication Campaigns: Five Case Studies* examines how communication campaigns with different purposes have been evaluated. It offers a discussion of theories of change that can guide evaluation planning, along with five case studies of completed campaign evaluations. www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/pubs/onlinepubs/lessons/index.html
- *Evaluation's Role in Supporting Initiative Sustainability* offers ideas for how evaluation can help ensure that a discussion about sustainability begins early and is maintained throughout an initiative. The ideas in this paper are based on our broad spectrum of experience in the past two decades with large-scale initiatives. www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/pubs/onlinepubs/sustainability/index.html

The Family Involvement Network of Educators (FINE) has published a new **bibliography of family involvement research,** which includes journal articles, books, and dissertations published from January to August 2003. www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/fine/resources/bibliography/family-involvement-2003.html

port on the evolution of organizational development within RCI, see www.aecf.org/publications/data/od_paper_final.pdf (Acrobat file).

Southern Echo is a grassroots community-leadership organization that relies on the talents of both youth and adults to build and support leadership in low-income and African-American communities. www.southernecho.org

The National Community Building Network serves as a locus of information and support for locally driven community-building efforts nationwide. www.ncbn.org

The Aspen Institute's **Roundtable on Comprehensive Community Initiatives for Children and Families** is a forum for those involved in community building to discuss and disseminate information. www.aspeninstitute.org/Programt3.asp?bid=1220. The Roundtable offers a variety of community building resources including:

• The **Community Building Resource Exchange**, an outgrowth of the Roundtable that lists numerous publications and provides information on a wide range of community-building-related topics. www.commbuild.org
• **Measures for Community Research**, a database housing a collection of measures and descriptions of primary data collection instruments. www.aspenmeasures.org
• An **online bookstore** offering definitive publications on the development, implementation, and evaluation of community initiatives. www.aspeninstitute.org/bookstore.asp?i=83

An expanded version of New & Noteworthy is available at www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/eval/issue23.newfull.html

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Community Collaboration 90806

(LBUSD) Seamless Education Initiative, which is an effort to align exit and entry expectations and teacher preparation and professional development from one grade level to the next, from the pre-kindergarten level through college. LBUSD has agreements with Long Beach City College and California State University at Long Beach that enable LBUSD graduating students to be accepted first among their applicants.

Efforts to connect pre-kindergarten and child care to the Seamless Education Initiative have been fostered through REACH's consultation with LBUSD about school readiness issues. Judy Seal, director of the Seamless Education Initiative, believes LBUSD is preparing the ground for a more formal partnership with REACH. "When the superintendent appointed two excellent elementary school principals to the pre-k level, one to head the district's child development centers and the other to lead Head Start, we knew this challenge was being taken seriously." These former principals are now key leaders in REACH.

Readers can learn more about REACH at the upcoming National Association for the Education of Young Children annual conference in Chicago, where initiative representatives will be presenting. See www.naeyc.org/conferences/default.asp for more information.

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