
PARTICIPATORY OUTCOMES-BASED EVALUATION: THE SUCCESS MEASURES PROCESS AND DATA SYSTEM

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“We do not know much about what we know.”

For more than 30 years, the community development field has brought together community-based social activism with foundations and government to revitalize our declining urban and rural places. Much anecdotal evidence describes successful outcomes, but as with other aspects of the community development field, documenting and measuring those outcomes has been elusive. Anglin and Herts (2003) note the inherent contradiction between community development as a social movement and community development as the realm of effective and enduring institutional agents of change. This tension plays out in evaluation: evaluation does not fit the identity of community development as “more art than science,” and the “science” of evaluation measurement seems at odds with social change and community empowerment agendas. At best, evaluation tends to be a donor-driven accounting of outputs, rather than a learning tool by, for, and with community development practitioners, residents, and other stakeholders.

What we do know is that community development and related social change movements lack information about the changes happening at the community level that can inform ongoing program strategies, speak to national trends, and justify further investment. We also know that the donor community is requiring increasing accountability, not only of resources spent and targets reached, but also of impacts achieved. The traditional method of counting the number of affordable housing units produced or the amount of square footage of commercial space developed describes “outputs” but does little to show the impact of community building, housing development, human services, and economic investment. Even when community development organizations (CDOs) get motivated to go further to demonstrate their success in terms of outcomes, their inherent values often conflict with the “outside expert” model of evaluation.

A recent study of program evaluation in community development (Moore et al. 2001) found that the lack of knowledge and expertise in evaluation and the high cost of hiring professional evaluators are critical barriers to conducting evaluations

that could demonstrate CDOs' impacts, inform decisions to improve programs, and ensure accountability to both funders and constituents. Moore et al. (2001) found that community development organizations that do evaluate use the results; they also believe those organizations would make greater and more meaningful use of evaluation if they developed the technical capacity of their own staffs and staff of peer organizations so they could conduct future evaluations with the benefit of their intimate knowledge of community development work. Study participants saw great potential to use impact data to organize their communities, educate the public, and influence policymakers about the value of their organization and its work. If the inherent values of community development conflict with the "outside expert" model of evaluation, and if the field also recognizes the value of evaluation, then we must develop an approach and tools for evaluation that build local competency *and* produce credible evaluation data.

This paper presents a case study outlining the implementation of an important approach and set of tools for the use of participatory outcome evaluation in community development. The Success Measures Data System (SMDS) is a national initiative of the McAuley Institute to define and measure impact in the community development field. Taken as a whole, SMDS' component parts offer a significant innovation for evaluation and community development practice in the United States. The important components are as follows:

- A participatory evaluation research process.
- A set of indicators and associated research tools developed with the participation of CDOs and other community-based organizations.
- An application service provider (ASP) on the Internet that makes the evaluation process, tools, and data tabulation accessible to community-based organizations.
- The possibility of collecting and analyzing community development outcome data at a national level.

In merging participatory methods and tools with the power of Web-based technology to analyze data across the nation, the Success Measures Data System creates a level of standardization that promotes "enduring institutions" without losing "community control and direction" (Anglin and Herts 2003, 4).

THE IMPORTANCE OF PARTICIPATORY EVALUATION

Participatory evaluation offers a method of measuring impact closely allied with the values of the community development field. Edward Jackson and Yusuf Kassam offer the following definition of participatory evaluation:

Participatory evaluation is a process of self-assessment, collective knowledge production, and cooperative action in which the stakeholders in a development intervention participate substantively in the identification of the evaluation issues, the design of the evaluation, the collection and analysis of the data, and the action taken as a result of the evaluation findings. By participating in the process, the stakeholders also build their own capacity and skills to undertake research and evaluation in other areas and to promote other forms of participatory development. Participatory evaluation seeks to give preferential treatment to the voices and decisions of the least powerful and most affected stakeholders—the local beneficiaries of the intervention. This approach to evaluation employs a wide range of data collection and analysis techniques, both qualitative and quantitative, involving fieldwork, workshops, and movement building (Jackson and Kassam 1998).

In traditional evaluation research, outside experts control the decision processes around evaluation goals, methods, tools, analyses, and recommendations. In contrast, a participatory method emphasizes grassroots participation in designing, implementing, and analyzing information. A diverse group of CDO stakeholders, including community development beneficiaries, participate in an evaluation process in which they contribute to deciding which program outcome goals are important and assess how well these goals are achieved. The evaluation process itself contributes to organizational and community competency: “Through this approach, the capacity of residents is strengthened, leadership skills are developed, networks are expanded and a process of continuous community improvement actualized” (Jackson and Kassam 1998).

THE SUCCESS MEASURES DATA SYSTEM

Over the past decade, the strategic advantages of participatory evaluation have been widely recognized, especially in the international-development context in which participatory evaluation is acknowledged as producing superior outcome information and is used effectively by grassroots organizations to redirect

resources, increase accountability to donors, improve program management, and gain broad stakeholder involvement in program design.

The original Success Measures method for participatory evaluation grew out of concerns among grassroots community development groups concerned that they were not adequately documenting the most important impacts of their work. Initiated by the Development Leadership Network (DLN) and community-based organizations, Success Measures, including the method, indicators, and tools, were developed in partnership with the McAuley Institute. From its inception, the design of Success Measures demystified and democratized evaluation by engaging community-based development practitioners, residents, funders, and policymakers to achieve the following goals:

- Build local capacity to analyze impact.
- Empower community residents and organizations to determine priorities and how they are measured.
- Generate new and better information that contributes to more effective community development programs.
- Demonstrate the value and impact of community development to effect systems change.

In the first step of the Success Measures method, community stakeholders articulate a “benefits picture” that describes the impacts they hope to achieve, encourages them to think holistically, and enables them to articulate the entire range of interconnected benefits that can result from programs, beginning with the end in mind. Next, they identify the indicators of a community’s economic and social health by which the organization will measure its success. Success Measures’ current indicators measure benefits to individuals, the neighborhood, and the community that result from housing, economic development, and community building activities. After selecting indicators, the participants choose from qualitative and quantitative data collection tools. Put in the context of a 1-year evaluation, Success Measures steps are as follows:

1. Identifying stakeholders—1st month.
2. Articulating a benefits picture—2nd month.
3. Choosing and/or creating new indicators to measure progress—3rd and 4th months.
4. Choosing and/or creating data collection tools—4th and 5th months.

5. Collecting information (data)—6th through 8th months.
6. Analyzing results—9th and 10th months.
7. Reporting and using knowledge gained—11th and 12th months.

In designing their own evaluation, local organizations first must decide on the context for the process: some choose the “working group” approach to evaluation, taking care to ensure that all relevant stakeholder groups are represented and the voices of community residents clearly and respectfully heard. Other organizations have a small team of staff and volunteers and hold community meetings to involve other stakeholders in decision processes for the evaluation. Whatever the approach, the model is flexible for the circumstances and local context of the evaluation.

From 1999 to 2003, through the collective efforts of hundreds of practitioners, 44 indicators and associated data-collection tools were developed and field tested. The indicators measure benefits such as wealth creation, personal effectiveness and self-sufficiency, neighborhood security, housing quality, employment and income from job training, residents’ sense of social cohesion, local economic impact, social networks, and participation in community life.

Many groups have received targeted technical assistance and training on how to conduct their own participatory evaluations by engaging stakeholders, customizing the indicators to their local environment, gathering baseline data, measuring their success against the baseline data, and demonstrating their impact on communities. For example, the impact of housing development can be measured using the indicators of affordability, quality, self-sufficiency, community diversity, and local economic impact. Community building efforts can be measured through indicators such as evidence of community power, residents’ sense of social cohesion, external perception of neighborhood, and leadership in neighborhood organizations. The indicators, as well as a step-by-step guide to conducting participatory evaluation, are described in Success Measures’ initial information resource, the *Success Measures Guide Book*.

Development and field-testing of the approach over the past 5 years have demonstrated its validity and usefulness while underscoring the need for further lowering the barriers that organizations face in measuring impact. Basing new efforts on what it has learned in the test phase, the McAuley Institute is building new tools for current indicators and developing new indicators and tools to address other kinds of social-change outcomes. McAuley’s most significant step forward, however, is the development of the SMDS, which became available nationally in March 2004.

GETTING TO IMPACT THROUGH TECHNOLOGY

In contrast to many large-scale, externally led evaluations that primarily involve neighborhood residents and program participants only as sources of information, Success Measures builds the competency of local organizations, community stakeholders, and program participants to engage in a process of reflection, analysis, and dialogue to measure program impacts. This can be accomplished through any good, fully developed participatory evaluation method. What has been missing in participatory evaluation are the tools and technology to conduct evaluation efficiently, to track change over time, and to aggregate results of local change for the field.

The new SMDS takes the Success Measures method to the Internet in an interactive format and adds a customized data collection and management function, as well as peer learning and online tutorials. With the capacity to serve many thousands of registered users conducting annual evaluations, the Data System will increase the number of organizations conducting participatory evaluations and further reduce the time, cost, and in-house technical, research, and database skills needed by organizations using the Success Measures method. SMDS also offers intermediaries and funders an opportunity to provide their grantees with an evaluation tool that can be customized and, at the same time, provide them with a picture of outcomes across grantee sites.

The Data System enables practitioners to plan and manage their entire participatory evaluation process on line in their own secure area of the project's national database. Community-based organizations can select indicators, download corresponding data collection tools such as survey questionnaires and focus group formats, input their data directly into forms on the Web page, and receive basic tabulation reports produced by the system. Users may also export data for further quantitative or qualitative analysis and store and manage data over time in their own secure area of the site. Project sponsors and others with interest in aggregate data can draw on the data entered from participating organizations opting to share their data to analyze and report on community development impacts and trends across the country.

USING THE SMDS

The SMDS's key features are best understood through the actions of a typical user. For example, an executive director of a CDO may participate in a workshop at a state community development corporation (CDC) association conference on the

Success Measures method and view a guided tour of the Data System. On returning home and sharing information with her board of directors, she can go to the website, register, and follow a guided tutorial of the system that provides both an introduction to the Success Measures participatory-evaluation process and the Data System's features. Another option is for the CDO to be sponsored by an intermediary and have an opportunity to participate in a series of three workshops that provide group technical assistance during the first year of evaluation.

When the CDO is registered, the CDO staff identifies community stakeholders to participate in a working group for the evaluation. In a first meeting or workshop, stakeholders articulate their benefits picture that describes, in practical terms, the impacts they hope to achieve, beginning with the end in mind. As a part of this process, stakeholders also identify the indicators of their community's economic and social health by which the organization will measure its success.

Returning to the SMDS, the executive director then enters the benefits picture of desired program outcomes and the indicators her community chose for measuring them. She would then use a "wizard" to create an evaluation on line in an area secured just for her organization. She would select data-collection tools (such as surveys, questions for focus groups, and formulas for analyzing program administrative data) tied to the indicators she chooses. Her community respondents or program participants may complete the survey in writing or on the Web.

After the organization has collected and entered data, the system will tabulate data and generate evaluation reports. Data storage and graphic capacities will enable the organization to visually demonstrate changes. Further, the data is stored securely, so if the organization collects the data annually, it can track changes electronically and create maps, graphs, and charts to visually demonstrate the changes over time. The organization can use the evaluation information for a wide range of purposes, such as guiding program development, reporting to constituents and funders, marketing its services, and informing policy.

As a registered user, the executive director can view information posted by other organizations or share information to be included in the national database to inform policy. At any point in the process, she also can contact a help desk for technical assistance.

THE SMDS AND SYSTEMS CHANGE

From its inception, the Success Measures philosophy, methodologies, and trainings have focused on systems change. With the deployment of the SMDS, the McAuley Institute enhances opportunities for systems change by linking outcome data, generated in a process controlled at the local level, in a *system*. Creating a centralized database aggregating thousands of users' information, as opposed to disconnected databases, creates sharing and learning opportunities across organizational boundaries and allows for analysis of national impacts and trends in community development.

The SMDS also benefits people at the grassroots level while informing policy and advocating for systems change with significant implications for all community development stakeholders. It creates an environment for dialogue among grassroots organizations and public and private supporters around issues of impact as defined by community stakeholders. It also provides the catalyst needed to bring together grantees and grantors on the subject of program evaluation.

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