THE 3 LEVELS OF OUTCOMES:

A FRAMEWORK FOR EVALUATING MULTIDIMENSIONAL CED

by Eric Leviten

Community economic development is a complex process. It brings together people from diverse backgrounds. It pursues a wide range of distinct but interdependent objectives. It simultaneously advances both near-term and long-term initiatives. People deliberately set out to achieve certain goals, but it is also a learning process in which the most valuable outcomes are often the insights which emerge in the course of the work.

One of the major challenges for evaluating CED initiatives is to construct a framework which takes account of this complicated range of factors. A sound evaluation framework can support the development process itself by helping participants to think clearly about their work. Such a framework can help reconcile relationships among key participants, place specific components in a broader context, and focus attention on the experiential learning that moves the process forward.

The following article presents a general framework for evaluating CED and discusses the rationale behind it. Although developed in connection with a particular CED venture, the framework has broad relevance to the sector as a whole.

EVALUATING MULTIDIMENSIONAL CED INITIATIVES

Opportunities 2000 provides a particularly intense example of the sorts of challenges involved in evaluating CED activities. OP2000 is a community-based poverty reduction project underway in Waterloo Region, Ontario. It is a multifaceted project which brings people together from four key sectors of the local community: business, government, nonprofit organizations, and people living on low incomes. Its original goal was to help 2000 households exit poverty and to build the community’s capacity to combat poverty on an on-going basis. To this end, it has fostered a wide range of specific projects conducted in collaboration with an impressive network of local partners.

The interim evaluation conducted for OP2000 identified that many participants were uncomfortable with the key indicator of success the project had adopted: moving 2000 households above the poverty line by the end of the year 2000. Many felt that it failed to capture many important aspects of the project’s work.

OP2000 consequently modified its original goal to explicitly include a broader range of outcomes. In response, the evaluation team reconsidered its evaluation plan. Its main concern was how to track the diverse aspects of the OP2000 story that participants felt were important. In revising its evaluation framework, the evaluation team identified five design principles of general relevance to evaluating CED initiatives.
Keep the framework simple enough to be accessible but complex enough to do justice to people’s experience.

An evaluation framework can serve as an aid to project participants by helping them to conceptualize the work they are undertaking. To do this effectively, the framework needs to be an accurate reflection of participants’ experience. If too much of the reality which participants are encountering is left out, then the framework will fail to hold their attention.

On the other hand, in order to be effective, the framework also needs to help participants to focus. OP2000’s original target provided a strong focus for the project at its outset. However, as the project evolved many participants concluded that it left out too many of the other desirable changes the project was fostering. In many cases, only a balanced attention to a wide range of indicators can accurately reflect the reality of a project.

Use different types of data, research methods, and reporting styles in order to respect the different ways in which stakeholders make sense of their experience.

In projects involving people with very different life experiences, educational backgrounds, and vocations, it is not surprising that there is a demand for different kinds of feedback about the project’s progress. For instance, community workers and business people may differ in their preferences for qualitative versus quantitative means of feedback. Some project participants may prefer numerical indicators of project progress; others may prefer stories illustrating the kinds of changes being achieved; still others may prefer analytic reports assessing the nature and extent of change.

Similarly, different project stakeholders may prefer to receive feedback in different forms, including written reports, oral presentations, dialogue with project participants, or first-hand visits to project sites. Each type of data and report format casts a somewhat different light on the project. A combination of approaches not only has the value of responding to the sensibilities of different participants but also stretches each participant’s understanding of the project.

There are three levels of impact on which a community group may choose to focus its evaluation: individuals, groups, & families; organizations; & community. Each level offers particular benefits.

POSSIBLE BENEFITS
- Self-esteem
- Feeling of belonging
- Income, Assets, Employment
- Publicity
- New mission/priorities
- Innovation in services/policies
- Improved collaboration
- Willingness to tackle social problems

In complex activities such as CED, it is important to avoid reducing the indicators of success to one or two factors at the expense of the many other developments the project is nurturing. CED tends to be an intervention into a set of interdependent processes. Changes occurring on one dimension (e.g., engagement of low-income households) can be reinforced or blocked by changes happening or not happening on other dimensions (e.g., public policy).

Often it is the combination of changes in more than one location that has the greatest and most enduring impact on community vitality. In OP2000, for instance, some of the important impacts being achieved relate to simultaneous changes occurring in the voluntary sector and the business sector.

The goal of this evaluation framework is not to “grade” the CED initiative against some ideal standard .... Rather, the aim is to document the project experience in a relatively comprehensive manner & mine it for insights that can inform future initiatives.
Make use of stories to synthesize the different aspects of the project and bring its work to life. While the evaluation process needs to isolate and document discrete changes achieved through the project, it is often only when the interaction among these changes is presented that they become fully meaningful to people. Stories depicting the interplay among the different facets of the project’s work restore a sense of what it means for “real people, in real life.”

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This may be especially true for project stakeholders such as funders or board members who are somewhat removed from the day-to-day experience of the project. In OP2000, brief accounts of changes experienced by specific low-income families proved highly effective in giving board members a tangible sense of how the work of the project translates itself into meaningful outcomes. The same is true for the changes experienced by organizations and by the community as a whole.

Recognize that CED initiatives are dynamic and evolutionary processes in which strategies change as conditions change and learning occurs.

The evaluation of CED initiatives such as OP2000 is best seen as an effort to chronicle the project’s experience. The overall aim is to appreciate the circumstances encountered as the project unfolds and the ways in which these developments generate new definitions and strategies. It is important that the evaluation not only tracks progress toward initial targets, but also captures insights that might significantly alter the targets or the means of achieving them.

THE EVALUATION FRAMEWORK

With these considerations in mind, an overall framework was formulated for reflecting on CED ventures such as OP2000.

The overall goal of this evaluation framework is not so much to “grade” the CED initiative against some ideal standard. Such grading is not appropriate to CED initiatives, not least of all because no two CED initiatives begin with quite the same resources or face quite the same circumstances.

Rather, the aim of this evaluation process is to document the project experience in a relatively comprehensive manner and mine it for insights that can inform future initiatives. What effects were generated by the project? Which measures proved effective and which did not? What lessons were learned along the way? In this view, the basic purpose of evaluation is not “grading” but “learning.”

The framework focusses attention on three levels of action common to most CED initiatives:
1. Individual
2. Organizational
3. Community-wide

It seeks to identify the changes the project fosters at each of these levels. Within each level, a variety of research tools are used to address questions of process and outcome, to assemble quantitative and qualitative data, and to track the insights gained by participants as the project develops.

1. INDIVIDUAL

Individual participants in CED initiatives may realize benefits in terms of a variety of life changes. Some of these changes can be measured and tracked in quantitative terms. Research tools such as entry and exit surveys can be designed to document such changes.

In the case of OP2000, a household survey was developed as the primary tool for collecting demographic data about low-income participants and for tracking key indicators of project success. Given its focus on poverty reduction, the indicators used by OP2000 included improvements in the levels of personal and household incomes and shifts in the composition of income from various kinds of social assistance toward employment income.

Such quantitative indicators respond to the desire of some stakeholders to formulate outcomes in measurable terms. They instill a certain rigour into projects and provide a starting point for assessing the effectiveness of project activities.

On the other hand, such indicators cannot in themselves adequately summarize the impacts a project is making in the lives of people it is seeking to assist. Other sorts of valuable changes require more narrative accounts of personal experience.

In OP2000, a second set of data has been sought in the form of brief profiles depicting the experiences of project participants. Such profiles aim to document more qualitative changes in people’s lives, including:
- an enhanced sense of belonging.
- self-confidence and hope.
- strengthened networks for personal support.
- improved access to such services as transportation, childcare, health care, training, and education.

Changes such as these are critical steps en route to improved self-sufficiency and need to be documented as vital ingredients in the work of CED projects.

A final area of attention at the individual level pertains to peoples’ reflections on the strengths and weaknesses of the projects in which they took part. This dimension of the evaluation process is in keeping with the basic notion that people experiencing a problem are best positioned to determine how to solve it.

In OP2000 three tools have been used to obtain feedback of this kind. Brief participant profiles have been used not only to document “success stories,” but also to identify circumstances in which the CED initiative breaks down, whether due to qualities of the project itself, or due to barriers originating beyond the scope of the project.
More in-depth profiles of participants can also be used to consider longer-term, underlying factors that may contribute to the sustained effectiveness of projects. With poverty reduction, for instance, a particular project may only address one of the barriers to self-sufficiency faced by a particular participant. Follow-up services may be needed to ensure that other factors do not undermine the gains made from the initial project.

A third tool employed is the focus group. It enables participants to formulate their observations about a project in dialogue with their peers.

2. ORGANIZATIONAL

Organizational capacity-building is always a dimension of CED work. In some cases, this may mean strengthening the ability of an organization or institution to carry out its long-held mandate. In other cases, it may involve a shift in the way the organization defines the challenge it faces and the work that it does.

In either case, a specific CED project can be understood as an opportunity for organizational learning. Learning can occur both in the process of designing the CED project and in the process of implementation.

One tool for documenting the entire organizational experience is a project diary. A diary can record the thinking of the organization at various stages in the project’s formation and development. It can then serve as a basis for pinpointing key lessons when the project is complete. In OP2000, end-of-project interviews are being used to reflect on the experience outlined in project diaries.

Many specific issues warrant attention when considering the kinds of changes that organizations undergo in the course of conducting CED initiatives. Among these factors are:

- appreciation of the prevailing social context
- assessment of organizational strengths and weaknesses
- adjustments in mission and mandate
- modifications in structures or policies
- acquisition of resources and capacities
- formation of partnerships and alliances
- effectiveness of chosen techniques and strategies
- capacity to sustain the initiative

3. COMMUNITY-WIDE

At its broadest level, CED initiatives seek changes to the community system. Individuals and organizations engaged in CED activities are enabled or constrained by the character of the wider system in which they live. Shifts in the nature of that system can greatly enhance our ability to accomplish our goals.

The evaluation framework used in OP2000 identifies a number of specific dimensions for evaluating changes at the community level. Public awareness of the issues being addressed by CED, such as poverty, unemployment, and homelessness, is one factor bearing on broad community support for the work being done.

Such awareness also provides the basis for achieving a second important community level outcome, namely, a shared vision and long-term strategy.

A third aspect of community-level change involves the relationships among key stakeholders needed to implement a substantial plan of action. Collaboration among key actors in different sectors is needed to take effective action on the complex issues addressed by CED.

In part, such broad-reaching collaboration is also needed to mobilize the human and material resources required for a sustained effort to address difficult social and economic challenges.

Finally, in order for such community support to function effectively on an ongoing basis, some new institutional arrangements are likely required. New institutional arrangements might include mechanisms for community decision-making or for financing CED initiatives. They might also involve improved ways for communities to influence public policy, itself a crucial element of the social system shaping the capacity of communities to meet their needs on a sustained basis.

In the case of OP2000, interviews with key informants are being used as the primary tool to assess whether or not these sorts of community-level changes have been achieved.

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CONCLUSION

Undoubtedly, the set of indicators and research tools will vary from one CED project to another. This overall framework, however, illustrates the way that the various dimensions of CED work can be tracked simultaneously so that a relatively complex appreciation can be gained of the work being undertaken in these initiatives. From such an appreciation we can derive the lessons that guide future initiatives in the host community and elsewhere.

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