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Howell S. Baum

Community initiatives are efforts to assemble coalitions to carry out multisectoral interventions to effect broad community changes. Often, diverse actors bring disparate interests, ambiguous goals, and fuzzy theories of change into loose alliances to design and implement interventions. As time goes on, actors, goals, and strategies change. Initiatives follow the logics of participation and action more than that of research. These conditions make evaluation problematic. At the same time, many community initiatives have few, if any, resources for formal evaluation. This article discusses these evaluation predicaments and outlines a practical approach that takes into account the logics of participation, action, and research. Case material from the Southeast (Baltimore) Education Task Force illustrates these challenges and this approach.

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Comprehensive community initiatives are efforts to effect broad, far-reaching changes in the communities and living conditions of the poor (Annie E. Casey Foundation, n.d., 1998; Aspen Institute, 1997; Connell et al., 1995; Fulbright-Anderson et al., 1998; Kubisch, 1996; OMG Center for Collaborative Learning, 1997; Rich et al., 1998). Although many of these initiatives are sponsored by private foundations, they resemble the federal Community Action and Model Cities Programs in their hopes and particulars (Frieden & Kaplan, 1975; Marris & Rein, 1982; Moynihan, 1970; Warren, 1971). The Casey Foundation's Rebuilding Communities Initiative, for example, is investing $18 million in 8 years in five community initiatives that already have other funding, and its Making Connections Initiative will spend $500 million on neighborhood transformation in 22 cities.

These are *community* initiatives in two respects. They take communities as their objects, seeking not just to change individuals but to alter the conditions in which they live. In addition, they assume that communities must be the instruments of their own change. Thus projects develop coalitions of community members, service providers, nonprofit organizations, businesses, elected officials, universities, and the like. These alliances not only bring together many potential resources, but in themselves create social capital and thus embody community development. The initiatives are *comprehensive* also in two respects. In taking communities as their targets, they aim to "transform" them—not just adding resources, but restructuring opportunities, institutions, culture, and practices. Strategically, they rely on a broad, multisectoral repertoire of interventions in such areas as housing, education, family support, employment, and health.

The ambitions and costs of community initiatives reinforce normal reasons for program evaluation: It is useful to know whether efforts come close to intended goals and, particularly if not, what influenced the course of events, so that subsequent efforts might come closer to those goals or ap-

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proach more reasonable alternatives. At the same time, the complexity and avowedly experimental character of these initiatives produce predicaments that add to normal conceptual and methodological difficulties in evaluation. It is impossible to know what would have occurred in the absence of an initiative's interventions, what exactly the interventions were, and what were their consequences. These conditions pose ever-present risks of misunderstanding. Nevertheless, it is important to find ways to determine what can be learned from initiatives.

This article begins by examining evaluation requirements. It then looks at how the complexity of community initiatives makes evaluation difficult. The article takes one initiative as a case example—the Southeast (Baltimore) Education Task Force. This project is modest in size and scope in comparison with comprehensive community initiatives, and it has far fewer resources for evaluation. In these respects, it is typical of many initiatives sponsored by community-based organizations. These initiatives may focus on a single set of issues but seek through them to affect significant community change, or they may be part of broad coalitions of efforts aimed at systemic community changes. They would do better if they could evaluate their activities with sophistication, and yet few have the resources to do so. The article describes a pragmatic, opportunistic approach to evaluation that fits such initiatives and can improve them.

Evaluation Purposes, Requirements, and Challenges

At its best, evaluation helps those with interests in programs—planners, implementors, funders, potential beneficiaries, or opponents, for example—understand what difference the programs have made (or could make) in the world: whether, to begin, they have made any difference; whether the difference is what was intended; whether any difference that resulted was desirable; why the programs did whatever they did; whether the intended result, accomplished or not, was reasonable; what, if anything, it would be reasonable for programs to aim at in the future; and what strategies and conditions would make attempts more likely successful than not.[1]

Weiss (1998) offers a succinct definition of evaluation:

> Evaluation is the *systematic assessment* of the *operation* and/or the *outcomes* of a program or policy, compared to a set of *explicit* or *implicit standards*, as a means of contributing to the *improvement* of the program or policy. (p. 4; italics in original)

At the least, evaluation depends on identifying specific, fixed standards for success and being able to track the outcomes of an intervention with full information and without ambiguity.

Community initiatives resist these requirements in two ways, as funders and implementors have noted (Annie E. Casey Foundation, n.d., 1998; Connell et al., 1995; Fulbright-Anderson et al., 1998). First, the goals of these initiatives—affecting significant changes in institutions and everyday lives—make them inherently complex and difficult to define. In addition, their strategy, which requires organizing broad alliances to plan interventions and sustaining coalitions to implement them, adds continuing complications.

First, with respect to goals, defining reasonable outcomes is difficult for any intervention. An intervention affects only a small part of an individual's or community's life, because other influences facilitate or constrain its effects, so it is hard to demarcate an intervention's boundaries and to determine what it is realistic for it to accomplish and when it is reasonable to do that. When an intervention, such as a community initiative, aims at broad, multisectoral change, the contingencies that must fall into place for success are vastly multiplied (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973), and these problems are compounded. When interventions are combined for the purpose of simultaneously affecting several levels of social organization—from individuals to families to institutions—these problems grow immeasurably. All at once, interventions act on one another's environments, leaving little that is stable and muddying causal relationships and responsibility.[2] The interventions' boundaries and aims elude precise definition. On top of this, because any community is unique, it is impossible to identify a control group and construct a *counter-factual*—an account of what would have occurred absent intervention.

In addition, the process of developing community initiatives adds ambiguity to interventions and increases uncertainty about what and how to evaluate. Despite interests in change and rational planning, community initiatives develop incrementally, often disjointedly, even if thoughtfully. The best known of these projects, now part of Casey's Rebuilding Communities Initiative, is the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative (Medoff & Sklar, 1994). Its early leaders' vision and determination were crucial, but what became the initiative grew piecemeal and experimentally. Arguably, that was its strength.

The planning literature on decision making suggests this is to be expected. The first critiques of the rational planning model (e.g., Altshuler, 1965; Lindblom, 1959; Meyerson & Banfield, 1955) opened planning to empirical observation that found uncertainty, ambiguity, and messiness in place of comprehensive rationality.

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Whether chagrined (Flyvbjerg, 1998) or sanguine (Forester, 1989, 1999), observers note that individuals and institutions make decisions based on diverse criteria in the context of multivalent relationships. Not only is rationality bounded, but different actors follow different rationalities.

Cohen, March, and Olsen (1988) offered the metaphor of the "garbage can" to characterize common decision procedures. Planning processes, rather than moments when people engage in research and draw on findings to design strategic action, are often receptacles for problem definitions, programs or actions that might be solutions, and participants with interests and resources. Parties throw in things they want a decision to include—favorite programs, possible alliances, problems that ought to be solved—and then mix and match them in ways that offer not just the appearance of rationality, but also possibilities of power, status, and connection. Cohen, March, and Olsen could be speaking of potential participants in comprehensive community initiatives when they refer to "a collection of choices looking for problems, issues and feelings looking for decision situations in which they might be aired, solutions looking for issues to which they might be the answer, and decision-makers looking for work" (p. 296).

Three Logics

Marris and Rein (1982), endorsing Lindblom's (1965) description of public decision making as "partisan mutual adjustment," take Community Action, a prototypical comprehensive community initiative, as their focus and elaborate on why these projects develop in such a way. Comprehensive community initiatives, like much other public activity, develop syncretically through a succession of three different logics: participation, action, and research.

First comes participation, the logic of which dictates, simply, that anyone interested in something is entitled to take part in doing something about it. Its watchword is "Let the people decide." However, because "the people" do not constitute a formal entity, questions of legitimacy and representation bedevil identification of "the people," and differences of perception and interest complicate deciding. At least initially, emphasis on "the people" expansively includes many, but participants come and go as they assess their interests, time, and possibilities of getting a worthwhile return for taking part. As a turn toward deciding raises stakes, some "people" try to exclude others, and others drop out.

Action introduces a new logic, though one not altogether separate from participation. Participants must agree on a course of action and authorize someone to implement it. Action has both internal and external requirements. Internally, as an extension of the logic of participation, it must conform to participants' beliefs, satisfy their desires, and, crucially, offer them something. Thus action turns participation from involvement in general to commitment to something specific.

Externally, action should have a realistic strategic probability of influencing people and institutions. However, the need to agree on action may lead participants to choose an intervention because it maximizes internal support, even if it is not based on systematic strategic analysis. They may "smooth out" or ignore radical analyses and strategies in shaping an intervention that does not offend anyone. They may choose multiple, even inconsistent, programs to satisfy various constituencies, without determining what is most realistic or setting priorities. In order to believe success is likely, participants may minimize or overlook constraints, make simplistic assumptions about change, or exaggerate possible outcomes. However decisions to act are made, the logic of action is governed by the principle "Do something." The realism of action matters less than that people confronting serious social problems can take satisfaction in doing their best together to make things better.[3]

Research must compete with the other logics and likely comes last. In contrast with participation, research is concerned with reason before democracy. Research prescribes the systematic collection and analysis of information as a method for making decisions. Consistently, with regard to action, research is focused not on "doing something," but on "doing something reasonable," which may also include doing nothing for the moment—in short, planning. Although research may attend to the internal requirements for action, it often concentrates on external requirements, realistically setting goals, designing strategies leading to them, and identifying resources to implement strategies. Faced with tensions among the logics of participation, action, and research, participants may prefer to maintain a "garbage can."

Thus those who join a community initiative bring disparate, if overlapping, agendas and have different interests in intervention. Moreover, though any intervention of significance must be considered an experiment, few participants in community coalitions have the knowledge, or at least the time, for elaborating theories of change to link intended outcomes to actions that would be likely to cause them to come about. Consequently, partners make different assumptions about why they are supporting an intervention, and many hold fragmentary causal theories in which wishful thinking bridges empirical gaps. Planners and implementors, for example, may conceptualize the same initiative differently. In addition, coalition members change over time.

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Individuals come and go. Those who stay change their minds. They may learn from experience, respond to changing conditions, reframe issues, or just move from one idea to another. These conditions alter the intellectual and political terms for coalitions and require renegotiating interventions, or at least their justifications. Hence if a community initiative continues for more than a few years, it may bear little resemblance to its origins.

These conditions make evaluation precarious. In order to understand them in depth and to consider evaluation approaches that may fit, we look next at the Southeast Education Task Force.

The Complexities of Intervention: A Case Example

Background

Southeast Baltimore was the area of first settlement for the city's European immigrants and the center of industrial development. It became home to working-class White ethnic communities, flourishing through the mid 20th century. However, beginning in the 1970s, manufacturing firms left, families moved to the suburbs, schools declined, and ethnicity lost organizing force. Lower-income families, many of them Black, began replacing blue-collar families. In 1990, 16 of the 26 census tracts, in which 78,000 people lived, had median household incomes below the city median of $24,045; 7 had household incomes under $20,000. Forty-four percent of households rented, up from 42% in 1980. Racially, 72% of residents were White, 25% Black, and the rest Native American, Asian, or Hispanic (Baltimore City Department of Planning, 1992). Unemployment, housing vacancies, and school dropouts were increasing.

In 1992, activists created the Southeast Planning Council, a coalition of individuals and organizations, to plan for the community's future. Over 18 months, 300 people produced the *Southeast Community Plan* (Baum, 1997; Southeast Planning Council, 1993). One recommendation, reflecting the belief that good schools are central to community development, urged the formation of a group to study and improve the schools. Eleven thousand students attended 16 neighborhood schools.

In the fall of 1994, Planning Council leaders formed a partnership with the University of Maryland's Urban Studies and Planning Program to implement that recommendation by creating the Southeast Education Task Force (the Task Force). From 1994 through 1998, a U.S. Department of Education Urban Community Service Program grant supported university participants[4] and Task Force expenses. National and local foundations have funded staff, including subsequent university participation, and programs. Direct support to the Task Force has been about $700,000. The university contributes a graduate student. Local nonprofit organizations have donated considerable staff time and some money to the Task Force, in addition to getting funding for programs they have implemented in its name or coordinated with it. More than 800 people have contributed thousands of hours of work. The Task Force has three full-time and three part-time staff. A core group of 25 members sets directions and monitors activities (Baum, 2000).

As an example of a community initiative, the Task Force is not comprehensive, with its focus on education. However, its concerns extend beyond schools to families and community conditions, and it works with organizations involved in housing, economic development, recreation, health care, and workforce development. Modest in comparison with comprehensive community initiatives, it is typical of many community initiatives, promoted under various labels, that seek to improve local conditions.

The Task Force faces evaluation questions common to community initiatives. Some of its programs have evaluation components, but unlike comprehensive community initiatives and some other community initiatives, it lacks funding for overall evaluation.

Getting and Sustaining Participation: Organizing the Task Force

Two community activists and a faculty member developed a plan for the Task Force, with three goals: (1) establish an organization to articulate an active community role in education; (2) prepare a community plan for educational improvement; and (3) implement interventions consistent with the plan. They assembled a core group to recruit members and identify issues for its agenda. The group interviewed principals and samples of teachers, parents, and students; analyzed student data; and in November 1995 presented findings to a meeting of 100 community members and educators. Participants endorsed a four-issue agenda: (1) improving school programs, (2) making schools safer, (3) building relations between schools and parents and community members, and (4) increasing resources.

About 30 people volunteered to work on these issues. Young teachers wanted to improve their schools. Parent liaisons working with low-income families wanted better programs for poor children. Neighborhood activists saw school reform as an added strategy for revitalizing communities. Staff from agencies working with youth or in education-related fields wanted to extend their efforts by working with schools. Businessmen wanted to be good citizens by helping the schools.

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Parents wanted better education for their children. Activists in citywide education reform saw Southeast Baltimore as a place to form new alliances and expand work.

In a sense, their signing up for work groups accomplished the first goal—establishing an entity that would articulate a community position on schools. Yet the Task Force was not very articulate. Few knew much about schools. Some had pet solutions to problems, but most found schools intellectually and politically overwhelming. They had little inclination or confidence to develop a plan, though most were interested in learning more. Despite considerable professional and community experience, most felt immobilized by the immensity of school problems and uncertain what a few dozen community members might do about them.

At least partly for this reason, membership was fluid. Some left as they found that improving schools took much more knowledge and time than they had anticipated, and some groups dissolved as a result. Others came in as people who knew them recruited them or as activities caught their interest. For example, when a work group decided to develop partnerships between churches and schools, they attracted pastors, who brought an interest in finding new congregants along with their desire to help schools.

Much activity at this time was self-educational: getting to know schools and exploring issues. Although members considered academic performance primary, most, because they were not educators, found school safety and school/family/community relations easiest to understand. Slowly they began to think of the Task Force as working "the outside"—improving family and community conditions influencing education—in partnership with educators inside schools.

Participant Experimentation with Action: Initiating Projects

In mid 1996 the Task Force started some projects with schools. In terms of the initial design, these efforts represented implementation without planning. They did not emerge from research. Still, one might interpret them as implementation of a tacit plan evolving from observations and learning of 18 months. They can also be seen as implementation in the service of planning: experimental intervention to learn about education and community/school collaboration, or action research.

Although activities were consistent with an emerging point of view, projects typically developed from members' interests, opportunities, and initiatives. For example, an elementary school teacher asked the Task Force for help setting up a tutoring program, and a member arranged for high school students to work with her fifth graders. The program lasted through the end of the school year, after which no one made the effort to continue the arrangement.

The university faculty member involved in the Task Force recruited an education professor to consult with an elementary school on student discipline. The project's overt goal was to improve student behavior so that students would do better academically. Along the way, it aimed to persuade school staff to use data in assessing students' behavior. The consultation had a tacit long-run goal of reshaping the school culture so that staff would support one another and work together with students. The general theory of change was to facilitate self-reflection through which staff might better understand the effects of their actions on children. The principal never fully understood or invested in such a change process, and in the middle of the consultation an assistant principal introduced a program that diverged from the eventual recommendations. Still, several faculty members and doctoral students helped to assess conditions, implement the selected program, and make data-based decisions about student behavior.

In addition to formally sponsoring projects, the Task Force operated as an umbrella for education activities, assisting individuals and institutions in initiating projects, sometimes implementing the projects, usually coordinating the efforts. As sponsor or umbrella, the Task Force became involved in tutoring, mentoring, GED training, parenting classes, student health assessment, and school-to-career programs, as well as study of the possibility of creating K-8 schools. Particularly because some projects began opportunistically, the Task Force had multiple goals. Projects had diverse foci, from the classroom to families to community institutions, and they had various time perspectives. Some began with explicit theories of change, but others rested on untested, even if conventional, assumptions. Activities did not reflect overarching goals so much as they contributed incrementally to a developing perspective.

A few projects faltered. Some rested on faulty assumptions about change and were not succeeding. Others seemed on the right track but ran out of resources: specifically, time or money. Still others stopped because their implementation depended on complicated coordination among many actors. In these latter cases, either the Task Force lacked the resources to get and hold everyone together, or else some parties halted their efforts or changed directions.

Participation as Action: Developing Working Relationships

The Task Force considered building relationships a means to implementing projects and an end in itself, in

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creating social capital. It began parent organizing to develop relations among parents and between parents and school staff. These efforts had to work against parents' insecurity about approaching schools, their busy schedules, and constant movement of children among schools. Parent organizing progressed best when principals were secure, but principals, too, moved often, and many were first-time principals. Nevertheless, organizers helped with projects such as getting an addition built for a seriously overcrowded school; arranging interpretation, translation, and English classes for Hispanic parents; collecting books for a school without a library; and campaigning for improved school facilities.

The Task Force developed relations with schools in the process of implementing projects. In addition, it tried to establish relations with the system's central administration. Doing so meant working against professional and bureaucratic resistance to parent and community involvement. At the same time, federal monitoring of compliance with a special education court order, State threats to take over schools, and suits and countersuits over funding and management distracted the system's attention from community initiatives. A City/State agreement in 1997 restructured the system and replaced the superintendency with a CEO position. The system now has the fourth chief executive since 1995.

Students, parents, teachers, principals, and system administrators move frequently, and Task Force members have changed. Hence it is difficult to establish and sustain relationships. These conditions require continual effort to recreate and maintain participation and connections. Transitions among participants have led to dissolution of some partnerships and changes in the purposes or terms of others. Such fluidity limits the capacity to plan and, particularly, to sustain a project long enough to implement it.

Conducting Research and Planning: The Southeast Community Plan on Education

The impending December 1998 end of federal support for university participation in the Task Force motivated participants to start writing a plan in the spring. At that point, members easily drafted a mission statement that identified five roles for the Task Force: (1) helping schools conduct research and plan to improve programs, (2) promoting parental involvement, (3) creating partnerships between community institutions and schools, (4) getting resources for schools, and (5) advocating with schools for solutions to problems. Members readily prepared 18 recommendations. The plan described each proposal with intended effects on students, schools, and/or the community; actors and actions that would contribute to these benefits; and more or less explicit assumptions linking the actions to outcomes (Southeast Education Task Force, 1999).

Recommendations were not based on systematic study of schools, families, or programs, but many drew on research or experts offering evidence that certain types of interventions could contribute to certain desired ends. Details would remain to be determined in implementation. Most proposals lay within the domain of current reform ideas, with a bias toward parent and community activism. Consultation with experts and published research reinforced Task Force members' personal observations or professional experience and supported recommendations, for example, for parent involvement in schools, social skills training for students, after-school programs, and creation of full-service community schools (with health and social services linked to academic programs). Observations of conditions and discussions with school staff, parents, and students led to recommendations, for example, to make school buildings safer and healthier, recruit tutors and mentors, develop school-to-career programs, and promote attendance. Interest in reconfiguring schools as K-8 schools became the subject of considerable, but inconclusive, research; the plan recommended further research. A recommendation to promote art and music in schools was simply the product of one member's strong advocacy.

Proposals varied in focus from student outcomes to programs to resources needed for programs. A few proposals referred directly to outcomes (such as academic achievement, appreciation of art and music, attendance, and discipline), but many focused on establishing or increasing programs that could influence those outcomes (such as tutoring and mentoring, social skills training, K-8 schools, safe buildings, and full-service community schools), and still others were concerned with getting resources for programs (through business and church partnerships, advocacy of public funding, and community fundraising). In addition, recommendations varied in requirements for implementation. Some needed funding. Others entailed changes in school system practices. Still others rested on the development of new relationships. The fate of recommendations would depend on what Task Force members had time to initiate and see through, what funders would support, what community members wanted to work on, what school staffs were interested in, and how students and parents responded.

Because the Task Force had not organized a formal planning process, recommendations did not grow from systematic community participation or deliberation. Those who formulated the plan reflected on the 1995 interviews, discussions at community meetings, observations of projects, and conversations with school staff, students, parents, community members, education ac-

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tivists, and parents. To test the proposals, the Task Force interviewed principals and teachers once more and convened a community meeting in November 1998. A hundred racially and economically diverse participants, including educators and community members, agreed on directions. More than 600 people participated in activities leading to the plan.

Publication of the plan could be considered an end in itself. Community members had developed confidence they had something to say about education and reached agreement on goals. Even so, it was more a compilation of proposals than a systematic elaboration of explicit assumptions about educational ends and strategies. Although many proposals were based on research and although most planning participants would endorse all recommendations, they were not prioritized, and implementation would depend on participants' interests in specific initiatives.

A Practical Approach to Evaluation

Weiss (1998) calls attention to conditions unfavorable for evaluation. Two conditions apply particularly to community initiatives such as this one. These are:

- "*When the program has few routines and little stability*" and
- "*When people involved in the program cannot agree on what the program is trying to achieve*" (p. 24; italics in original).

In the extremes, both are characteristics of bad projects, which ought to be terminated. But they also describe conditions which are inevitably part of community initiatives.

In the Task Force, for example, a large, fluid group of actors bring, variously, self-interests and altruism to a common enterprise. Few have given systematic thought to whether their goals in this effort reasonably address the problems that concern them or serve their interests or whether the interventions they favor realistically lead toward those goals. Although the initiative is commonly described as a coalition or partnership, for most members it takes secondary importance to responsibilities in a home organization or, literally, at home. It is a loosely coupled endeavor in which most participants act together only on extraordinary occasions. Different members of the initiative would describe its goals, actions, theories of change, and expectations differently, as would the same members at different times.

As a result, there is no complete set of unambiguous, well-bounded definitions of the interventions making up the initiative: what they are supposed to accomplish and how they should do it. Hence it is impossible to differentiate interventions from the environment clearly—to determine what the initiative should be considered responsible for influencing and what is outside its domain. Moreover, because the initiative consists of multiple interventions, what is external to one series of planned interventions is often intrinsic to another. On top of this, changing participation and changing thinking cause many definitions and assumptions to change. Thus, not only is it difficult to conceptualize the interventions in order to evaluate them, but it is also difficult to establish standards for success based on reasonable assumptions about what the intervention should accomplish.

In addition to such conceptual problems, Weiss (1998) identifies a practical condition working against evaluation: "*When there is not enough money or no staff sufficiently qualified to conduct the evaluation*" (p. 24; italics in original). As noted, the Task Force, like many modest community initiatives, has no formal evaluation component, though some programs it has started do, and staff informally watch other projects. Part of the explanation is that participants have assumed from experience and "common sense" that their projects would have the desired effects and would not require formal evaluation. Part, more simply, is that the Task Force does not have funding for evaluation. In any case, there is a risk, as Weiss (1998) warns, that the sort of evaluation possible under these conditions "may produce information that is more misleading than informative" (p. 24). Still, for all the effort expended on community initiatives in the service of important goals, it is better to know something than nothing about the results.

The following discussion emphasizes what is practical for modest initiatives, but it applies as well to initiatives with significant evaluation funding, which can do extensive assessment. At a minimum, evaluation requires someone who can take responsibility for it, periodically focus the attention of participants on evaluation questions, and collect relevant data, either through normal operations or as part of special inquiries. Three principles should guide evaluation: (1) Do evaluation only if the knowledge gained justifies the effort and other resources spent. (2) Don't even try to evaluate everything; set priorities. (3) Focus on learning new things—about either the particular initiative or about community initiatives generally. A practical approach has three components, adapted, respectively, to the logics of participation, action, and research.

The Logic of Participation: Define Interventions Pragmatically

There is no single correct definition of the interventions of a community initiative. Two practical considerations argue for conceptualizing an initiative's goals and

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strategies in terms of current participants' views and needs. First, simply, doing so reduces required attention by neglecting aims and interventions that have come and gone. Second, present participants care the most about an initiative and can influence its course. They can use evaluation and, in doing so, can test its validity. This is the familiar argument for formative evaluation: Reflection on an intervention in process helps those with responsibility for it to measure progress and, where appropriate, revise their course. In contrast, summative evaluation, at the end of a project, begins as an historical account only potentially useful in the future (Scriven, 1967, 1991). Formative evaluation can be particularly valuable for a community initiative because of its duration and complexity. Although such an approach risks missing lessons that could be learned from changes over time, periodic reflections on an initiative that include participants who have been present from the start or for a long time minimize this danger.

Such considerations led Weiss (1995, 1998) to formulate a program theory, or theory of change, approach to evaluation, endorsed by many who work with comprehensive community initiatives (Brown, 1998; Connell & Kubisch, 1998; Hebert & Anderson, 1998; Kagan, 1998; Milligan et al., 1998; Philliber, 1998). Evaluators ask participants to imagine that they (or their predecessors) set out with at least tacit plans based on assumptions about cause-and-effect relationships and that the present state of things represents efforts to implement them. Evaluators ask participants to make the underlying theories explicit and then collect data that can test their validity. In examining the data, evaluators and participants decide whether initial theories were realistic, an alternative theory fits conditions better, and/or interventions should be changed on the basis of new theoretical assumptions.

This exercise can be viewed as retrospective planning: urging people to imagine what they would have had in mind if they had planned the project in which they are participating, assess conditions in terms of that plan, and in this light reaffirm or revise their plan.[5] Participants and evaluators emerge from the exercise with a plan based on a theory of change. With this working definition of the intervention and designated outcomes, they can identify data to be collected, appropriate measures of program activity, and standards for success. The value of the effort is not in arriving at a single, coherent definition of an initiative, but in taking time to reflect on the initiative's complexity and to try to manage it more thoughtfully.

This pragmatic approach will produce plural definitions of a community initiative. Evaluation should examine an initiative in terms of as many of these definitions as possible. A search for a single theory of change may be misguided—not just because social conditions and interventions are complex, but because the essence of effective action is reflection and adaptation. Participants who observe their actions may learn that their original aims and theory, which might have been reasonable, no longer fit. They may reconceptualize what they are doing and revise their plans. And they may anticipate doing so several times more. Thus one might suspect that any intervention that succeeds in satisfying its initial goals should be considered a failure. At the least, any intervention that succeeds in terms of a single theory of change might end up being only a limited success.

In fact, experience with the theory-of-change approach to evaluation affirms such caveats. Evaluators have found that participants often syncretistically draw on several theories of change, referring to different aspects of an intervention and couched at different levels of abstraction, with no clear way to distill it all into a single, complete theory. Evaluators have had difficulty articulating participants' words into easily understandable theoretical formulations, and participants often find the enunciated theories too complex to guide their actions (Kagan, 1998; Milligan et al., 1998).

Participants' definitions of their interventions will not necessarily correspond to the broad ambitions of community initiatives described earlier. Some participants are concerned about narrow problems or populations, and others simply act opportunistically, rather than as a result of explicit theorizing about society and change. Even so, evaluators should help them define and articulate the initiative in terms of goals for a community and strategies to influence it.

The Logic of Action: Focus on Distinctive Issues

Consistently, evaluation should examine interventions in terms of what is distinctive about community initiatives. Four characteristics merit attention.

First, because community initiatives combine multiple interventions, interventions are not discrete, and the operation and effects of one depend on others. Hence, rather than try to examine and track single interventions, evaluation should look at how the interventions interact, with particular attention to how they enhance or constrain one another.

Second, because community initiatives aim to change a community, interventions should be evaluated in terms of their influence on community structures, cultures, policies, and practices. To be sure, communities consist of individuals, and programs that improve individual or family well-being make a community better. However, the ambitions of community initiatives call for

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conceptualizing and examining interventions in terms of community effects.

Third, community initiatives aim for transformative community development. Changes in individual, family, or community behavior may be produced in the short term. But much more time will be required to change basic ways of thinking, patterns of acting, or social structures. Hence evaluation must wait for and recognize long-term outcomes, not just short-term effects. Formative evaluation should frame current conditions in terms of progress toward long-term goals.

Fourth, community initiatives are experiments. They will be partially successful at best. However, even—or particularly—where they fail, they will offer lessons about how communities act, how institutions (such as school systems, labor markets, or housing markets) operate and react to efforts at influence, what is easy and difficult about organizing community initiatives, and how to plan and implement them with some possibility of success. Thus it is important to document and analyze planning and implementation processes, in addition to outcomes.

Ideally, evaluation should do all this. In practice, few modest community initiatives do any of this. Insofar as it is possible to direct participants' attention to an initiative and to collect information about it, focusing on any of these issues will contribute new intelligence and practical guidance. This orientation does not preclude evaluating single programs in terms of outcomes for individual clients or "targets"; rather, it delineates a broader framework for assessing them.

Implications for Research: Collect and Analyze Data Opportunistically

The pragmatic approach to defining interventions identifies a research agenda for evaluation. Practical constraints limit what can be studied. Even if participants were certain about what interventions should accomplish and how they should produce specific effects, it would be impossible to observe everything that should bear on evaluating an initiative. Finite budgets limit observations to short time periods and narrow physical and social spaces. Long-term outcomes are difficult to identify because they require that evaluators stay in the field a long time and observe an ever-widening array of influences on the objects of the initiative. Many real effects of interventions elude researchers because they are small in magnitude; come and go between observation points; take place in domains not easily accessible to outside observation (such as homes); are not easy for even those who experience them to recognize, attribute to a planned intervention, and report on (for example, changes in self-confidence); are characteristic of communities, which, in contrast with individuals, cannot be interviewed or easily observed; or are intangible (such as a change in the climate of relations between community members and schools).

For better or for worse, observation, while careful, must be opportunistic. It should aim for what matters and focus on what is accessible. Inevitably, what can be seen has to substitute for what cannot. Methodological creativity is crucial. "Proxy variables" are important. Field research methods—taking knowledge from participation in and observation of the initiative in the community—are essential. Participants have rich knowledge of the details of their interventions that can be used to evaluate initiatives.

In the end, sophisticated evaluation depends less on specific methods than on a particular attitude toward research design, observation, and analysis. Tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty is crucial. Even though few variables can be neatly defined and bounded, evaluators must push on in analyzing relationships between actors and interventions, on the one hand, and community members and communities, on the other. In this investigation, common sense, trying to get the best meaning from available information, is important. Elegant theory is a poor substitute for mundane explanations for why interventions do or do not have intended effects and what, after all, has happened in the community of concern. Finally, humility helps. Evaluators must settle for imperfect understanding, probable but not definite explanations, and hunches about causes, effects, and future possibilities.

Illustrating the Approach

Examples from the Southeast Education Task Force illustrate this approach.

Defining Interventions Pragmatically

If Task Force participants were convened to articulate the aims and theory that underlie the initiative's various interventions, they would probably describe three general efforts. These can be considered complementary, but while everyone would endorse the first, fewer would mention the second, and fewer yet the third.

1. **Educating children at school.** The Task Force tries to improve the ability of schools to educate children by contributing money, effort, expertise, and other resources to schools and by helping schools get resources elsewhere. The general assumption is that professional educators could teach students better, and students would learn more, if schools had additional resources.

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2. **Raising and educating children at home.** The Task Force tries to strengthen families' abilities to raise children, educate them in appropriate ways, and prepare them for school by providing families with information, training, and social support. The guiding assumptions are that parent involvement in children's education at home and school contributes to academic achievement, that most parents want to care for their children, and that more parents will care appropriately if they have better knowledge, skills, and support.

3. **Community support for education.** The Task Force tries to develop community supports for families and children and to create the capacity for community members to act in education by organizing and training parents and other community members. The basic assumptions are that parents and some other community members want to influence school policies and practices, that parent and community involvement in schools contributes to children's learning, that more community members would work with schools if they had additional training and guidance, that school staffs will cooperate with knowledgeable, organized parents and community members, and that such collaborations will lead to academic improvements.

These program theories could be elaborated further, but they indicate participants' thinking. In turn, they point to areas for research. With the example of parent organizing, an evaluator would look at parent organizing and training activities, any subsequent activities of parents undergoing those activities, any consequences of those activities in terms of school practices and policies, and any effects of those practices and polices in terms of student learning.

Focusing on Distinctive Issues

Evaluation of parent organizing might consider the following questions, related to the distinctive characteristics of community initiatives:

- **Interaction of interventions.** How are parents' interest and participation in school-related organizations affected by their participation in any other parenting or training programs? How are parents' organizational interest and participation affected by their children's participation in any tutoring programs, the nature of their children's curriculum, and/or any other organizing activities in the community?
- **Impacts on overall community.** Is the community agenda different, particularly with regard to education, as a result of parent organizing activities? Do principals, teachers, school system administrators, elected officials, or other community leaders regard parents' roles in the schools differently as a result of parent organizing activities?
- **Long-term effects.** What short-term changes in parents' thinking and participation in organizations, accompanied by what school responses, would lead toward durable longer-term institutionalization of parent involvement in school decision making or significant longer-term improvements in students' academic performance?
- **Learning from process.** What is difficult about parent organizing, and what do these difficulties suggest about what organizers should do differently? What additional support do they need, how should they work in conjunction with other programs, which schools or parents should they focus on, or anything else?

Collecting and Analyzing Data Opportunistically

Ideally, evaluators of parent organizing should have access to all encounters between organizers and parents; all meetings among parents and between parents and any school system staff; the thoughts of all these actors during, regarding, and resulting from these encounters; the streams of decisions and actions in any way influenced by these events; and the overt or subliminal effects of any of those decisions or actions on children's learning. This is unrealistic.

Instead, an evaluator could have parent organizers keep notes regarding their plans, actions, and results. They could meet periodically to reflect on their activities. The evaluator could interview staff at schools where the organizers work and an opportunistic sample of parents who had been contacted by the organizers. Questions would concern participants' interests, activities together, reactions to the activities and other persons, apparent effects of the activities, and evaluation of organizing and related efforts. Questions would concern, as well, participants' assumptions about schools, parents' roles, school/community relations, and influences on parents' roles and relations with schools.

The resulting data would fall short of definitive evidence regarding the outcomes of parent organizing, but they would reveal a great deal about general tendencies, influences on them, and their effects.

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Conclusion

Most comprehensive community initiatives have coherence, funding, and evaluative attention for only a few years. During that time, some aspects of the initiative will be visible. Some interventions will have relatively clear effects, intended or otherwise. Evaluators can study relations between interventions and outcomes. However, many community initiatives have little, if any, funding specifically for evaluation, much less separate evaluators. Evaluation, when it occurs, is more likely to be occasional reflection than systematic observation and analysis.

One can lament these conditions, noting what will elude attention. And yet even well funded evaluations of comprehensive community initiatives have not overcome the predicaments described here. Any long-term effects of interventions will probably avoid notice or, at least, measurement and, most likely, explanation. It is hard to find rigorously constructed tests of multiple interventions to affect broad community conditions. Indeed, it may be difficult to identify carefully designed single interventions. Participants disagree about intervention goals and strategies, it is hard to isolate the influences of interventions, and crucial data are inaccessible. This said, it is important to recognize that these problems are intrinsic to evaluating social action, not peculiar to comprehensive community initiatives.

Alternatively, one can emphasize what, nevertheless, even with limited attention, can be learned from evaluation of these initiatives. They may be uncertain and ambiguous, but it is possible to form reasonable judgments about the operations and effects of some interventions. More generally, it is possible to learn about how planned interventions, other actions they set in motion, and autonomous activities influence individuals, families, and communities. This knowledge will help make imperfect assessments of specific interventions. In addition, in shedding light on effective practices and mistakes, it will help in the future to organize initiatives, plan interventions, and carry out strategies.

More money for evaluation and sophisticated thinking about evaluation will increase likely findings, but as this discussion has emphasized, evaluation confronts two limits. One is that good evaluation costs a great deal of money; few initiatives have access to sufficient funding, and few could justify such an investment in terms of likely returns. The other is that the social world is perversely complex and ultimately impenetrable to even the most careful examination. The aim of evaluation with community initiatives, as with any programs, is to identify the most fruitful questions and, within these constraints, seek the answers as best they can be found.

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NOTES

1. Weiss (1998) discusses a range of overt and covert, rational and nonrational purposes for evaluation.
2. These are the characteristics of what Emery and Trist (1965) call a turbulent environment. When several large entities are acting in the same field, each represents a significant part of the environment of the others. Hence each time one organization acts, it destabilizes others' environments. Consequently, no organization can manage the field on its own, and coordination is essential. The degree to which multiple interventions in a comprehensive community initiative upset one another depends on the reach and efficacy of the interventions. However, Emery and Trist's prescription applies here: Planful coordination is essential for the success of any, and all, interventions.
3. Baum (1997) describes two community organizations whose internal interests in enforcing traditions and forming coalitions took priority over strategic realism in deciding on action.
4. I am the participating faculty member.
5. Weick (1979) observes that most planning is retrospective, that what Weiss urges would just make this activity explicit: "Organizations formulate strategy *after* they implement it, not before. Having implemented something—anything—people can then look back over it and conclude that what they have implemented is a strategy" (p. 188, italics in original). Baum (1999) discusses the value of forgetting the past in planning.

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