

Comprehensive Community Initiatives: the Promise of Realist Evaluation and Driving Community Change

Tamarack Institute Workshop on Evaluating Community Impact

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KEY ISSUES IN EVALUATING COMMUNITY OUT- COMES

The Tamarack Institute held a three day Learning Community series of workshops on Evaluating Community: Capturing and Making Sense of Community Outcomes. I was on the panel for the third (of ten) modules on evaluating the impact of community-based initiatives.

The focus of the module was:

Evaluating programs is different than capturing and making sense of community outcomes. This section explores three central themes in the challenge of capturing and making sense of outcomes. This section will explore issues related to evaluating place-based, comprehensive initiatives using a “realist” perspective. It will include a panel discussion from topic specific people and an opportunity to explore these themes in more detail in small break out groups.

This came down to several inter-related levels of complexity:

- the challenges of understanding, charting and assessing complex cross-sectoral and multi-level social, policy and organizational interventions and initiatives;
- these initiatives were seeking to change complex social problems in equally complex community settings and policy and political environments;
- the focus was not the usual evaluation of individual programs, but the overall impact of comprehensive and coordinated community initiatives on the

problems they were trying to solve.

I was asked to discuss:

- the experience of comprehensive community initiatives and their potential to address complex social problems such as deep-seated poverty and health inequalities;
- how to understand and evaluate the impact of such complex community initiatives;
- more specifically, to comment on a realist evaluation approach and how it could contribute;
- all of this to help develop the evaluation, learning and innovation necessary to guide and drive community impact.

The workshop took the form of on-stage interviews by Mark Cabaj of Tamarack with myself and Teresa Bellefontaine, of the federal government’s Policy Research Initiative, who spoke on evaluating place-based approaches; followed by general discussion.

The following are the questions posed in advance and my talking points in preparation.

COMPREHENSIVE COMMUNITY INITIATIVES

Question: What is a Comprehensive Community Initiative and how does it differ from a typical approach to community change?

There really are no typical approaches to community change – which is certainly part of the challenge we all face.

These initiatives usually involve wide ranges of service providers, residents, advocates, governments and other stakeholders collaborating to develop comprehensive and integrated multi-level service and policy responses within specific communities. I think they are a promising direction – and we'll be talking about what, how and how to understand and build on their potential.

Comprehensive community initiatives vary along several key dimensions:

- *Focus*: the nature of the problems they are trying to solve, from improving employment opportunities for racialized communities, through addressing local health inequities, to enhancing community safety.
- *Scale*: the size of these initiatives – and of their partner members and collaborators – can vary significantly. They can range from neighbourhood-based to city-wide; from unique projects to local adaptation of national projects.
- *Origins and Orientation*: some are more grass-roots – local residents or groups coming together to identify and address common problems – and others are more top-down – originating with major charities or foundations or as local implementation of government programs. This particularly varies by country of origin; for example, the very different policy frameworks and funding mixes often mean that far more comprehensive community initiatives are supported by foundations in the US than in European countries.
- *Purposes*: the goals of these initiatives can vary from more effectively delivering programs to specific communities, through empowering individuals and communities to change their conditions and opportunities, to broad policy and system changes to reduce poverty and other social problems. While not always explicit, initiatives can work across multiple goals simultaneously.
- *Style and Process*: how the initiatives collaborate and how they organize themselves can vary a great deal.

One reason this is important is that clarifying an initiative's fundamental rationale, assumptions, ambitions and focus – in other words, its theory of change – is crucial to building a common vision, sustaining solid collaborations, and planning and adapting effective

programs and interventions.

Nonetheless, a number of common defining features of comprehensive community initiatives can be identified:

- *Comprehensive in scale and approach, meaning*:
 - not focusing solely on single-issues, and not assuming there is one correct way to solve the problem;
 - paying attention to the relationship between different elements of the initiative, rather than just the component program or organizations in isolation.
- *Multi-sectoral*: not just in the programs being developed and delivered, but the partners and approach. This can mean bringing together a wide range of community organizations and individuals working across many sectors of community service provision and activity. It can also mean combinations of:
 - government, community and private sectors working together;
 - different levels of government and different departments and programs within governments coordinating.
- *Community-based*: Not just in the sense of being place-based, but fundamentally beginning from the interests and voices of particular communities, and having community empowerment and capacity building as a primary goal.
- *Asset not deficit-based*: Not simply seeing poverty and disadvantage, but building on the strengths and resources of even the poorest communities, and seeing building up individual and community assets as essential to progress in alleviating and reducing poverty.
- *Long horizon*: Recognizing that fundamental changes in complex issues like poverty take many years to show effect; and that building the solid relationships that underpin successful and sustainable collaborations also takes time.
- *Collaborative*: Not just many different organizations at planning tables, but developing new ways of working together on many fronts and over sustained periods and efforts.
 - This collaboration is actively and purposefully managed: from balancing the inevitable differences and conflicts within multi-sector and multi-

partner collaborations, through taking seriously the work of communications, and building and sustaining relationships, part of which is foregrounding power within these relationships;

- explicitly recognizing and managing power relationships within the collaborations – which typically are a mix of large established organizations and smaller more grass-roots organizations who may not be so comfortable within professional discourses;
- some CCIs see themselves as being about transforming power – putting control and leadership in the hands of people and communities themselves, rather than in service providers, professionals and governments.
- *Adaptive*: in leadership, management style and organizational practice:
 - to take into account and adjust to complex and rapidly changing circumstances and opportunities;
 - this generally involves both basic principles such as allowing patterns to emerge, rather than imposing fixed solutions, and responding purposefully when circumstances change; and practical planning and engagement techniques and approaches.
- *Innovative*: not just in service design and delivery, but also in strategy and forms of collaboration and action.
- *Analytical and intentional*: meaning a serious attempt to clarify the guiding assumptions that underpin the initiative – many practitioners see this as a “theory of change” approach that explicitly sets out how building CCIs can contribute to reducing poverty:
 - e.g. theory or guiding assumptions could be that community empowerment enables individuals and communities to increase their employability, security or other assets which can reduce their risk of poverty.

This individual and community capacity building can also support mobilization to pressure policy makers to influence policy changes that will address the roots of poverty and inequality.

These key features really are the main differences with most approaches – and crucially, with the standard assumptions of many government funded and led programs.

INTO PRACTICE

Question: Can you provide some examples of community change initiatives whose members or participants intentionally embraced a CCI approach?

There is no better example than the various anti-poverty roundtables, community development and other efforts that have been part of the Vibrant Communities initiative.

From the perspective of community change activists, it will be critical to learn more of their successes, challenges and potential as we move forward. The Strategic Review that Tamarack convened last year is great example of trying to systematically and critically learn from experience and build on these learnings moving forward.

From a policy level perspective, one initiative to watch is the New Brunswick poverty reduction strategy. It has been explicitly established as comprehensive, connected, community-based and collaborative. These are not the usual ways governments operate or relate to their partners. If successful — and early indications are promising — it could potentially have a significant transformative impact on how governments address complex issues.

LOOK WIDELY FOR INSIGHT

An interesting comparison would be change projects or initiatives where people may not have used the term Comprehensive Community Initiative (or even know about the concept), but still were doing comprehensive connected work. There may also be much to be learnt from initiatives that are trying their best to be comprehensive, community-driven and collaborative, but whose resources may limit what they are actually able to do. So, working across sectors, paying attention to the structural and social roots of the problems you are addressing, and trying to be solidly grounded in your community can operate at different levels.

We don't always want to set too high a bar for the category of comprehensive community initiatives. To me, this is about fundamental principles and overall approach; we shouldn't worry too much if an initiative doesn't have the resources to be comprehensive enough. In a basic sense, it's about community building – about how we do this and who needs to be involved.

In comparative policy terms, policies addressing different kinds of complex social problems in different contexts may be relevant. For example, many European countries have focused on neighbourhood renewal and local investment and intervention to address concentrated poverty and disadvantage. Similarly, there is a common feature across the leading countries that have developed comprehensive national strategies to reduce health inequalities. All these strategies focus on macro policy issues such as precarious labour markets, education, childcare, social inclusion – all designed to reduce the social and economic inequalities that underlie health inequalities. But the strategies also all combine these broad national policy targets with local priority-setting and implementation, and cross-sectoral community partnerships and collaborative action. For example, Britain’s Health Action Zones concentrated local investment and programming in disadvantaged areas, not just to enhance access to healthcare but to support employment, education and other community capacity building efforts. Community-development and anti-poverty initiatives can learn a great deal from these community-level interventions around health inequities.

A little closer to where we are, the work of Waterloo Region Public Health in building community efforts and coalitions to address the roots and very inequitable impacts of food insecurity. They and a number of other public health units have been driving community-based and cross-sectoral collaborations for years. They are addressing the social determinants of health on the ground.

We can often learn a great deal from initiatives just outside our usual frame of reference that are similar enough to be relevant, but different enough in focus or context to give a different angle or perspective.

EMERGING IDEAS ON EVALUATING COMPLEX COMMUNITY INITIATIVES

Question: The Aspen Institute has done a lot about the challenges of evaluating CCIs. They actually recommend turning evaluation “upside down,” from conventional program evaluation approaches, rooted in traditional social science, to a learning approach, which embraces the breadth and complexity of community change. What are the key recommendations they make?

I think Aspen have been very strong leaders in this

field and there is a great deal to be learnt from their work. There is much to be learnt from others as well – especially some British foundations or think tanks such as the Kings Fund or the Young Foundation; and slightly off to the side of CCIs formally defined; comprehensive strategies to address regional health inequalities in Scotland and Wales have prioritized local community focus and evaluation.

Aspen has called for a new paradigm for learning about community change and for strengthening a cycle of building learning and knowledge into practice and policy change. They emphasize:

- developing new and systematic ways to build evaluation into planning community interventions from the start, not tacked on at the end;
- supporting ways to share information and results widely – this is about creating learning cultures and opportunities;
- strengthening the role of practitioners in identifying knowledge development needs and priorities – which then get built into evaluation and learning strategies;
- casting a wide net to expand our knowledge and research base;
- blending practice knowledge and social science research methods.

To me, the key implications of Aspen’s analyses over the years has been a tremendous emphasis on alignment:

- on creating a powerful vision of success;
- then weaving together programs and partnerships that advance towards that vision in a coordinated and coherent way;
- being very intentional and systematic in planning what we hope to accomplish;
- while, at the same time, being flexible in adjusting to changing circumstances and emerging challenges; paying attention to building community capacity; and
- building the means of continually and systematically learning from experience and adapting as we go – which is why evaluation is so crucial.

They have also usefully distinguished some of the

vital challenges or barriers to success that CCIs have faced. They term some of these ‘theory failure’. In effect, they are asking how relatively modest expenditures, over fairly tight time periods, devoted to address deep-seated poverty in some of the most disadvantaged communities could ever be expected to drive the complex series of inter-related social and policy changes needed to reduce poverty. They are cautioning us not to over-freight these initiatives with unrealizable hopes and expectations against which CCIs are doomed to failure. The challenge is to have a broad attractive vision of poverty-free communities and societies, plus ambitious goals for action that can galvanize and inspire, but combine these long-term goals with realistic strategies and plans that can drive the concrete series of actions and complex coalitions that will build community capacities and improve poor people’s lives and opportunities.

Aspen contrasts these challenges to “implementation failure.” Key elements of what doesn’t work at an implementation level include:

- weak planning, management and organizational capacity within initiatives and their constituent partners. This may not be just that partner organizations do not have capacities; it can also be that they have the strengths and resources, but don’t devote them to the initiative – in other words, that they don’t prioritize sufficiently the work necessary to build and sustain collaborations;
- long-term public under-investment in certain geographic or policy areas – and even when funding is provided, it can be inconsistent and short-term;
- collaborations not being able to balance process with outcomes and delivery, or manage many, often simultaneous, inter-related lines of activity.

There is clear consensus that “one size” programming most definitely does not fit all. Context is crucial; and while there are general principles of successful CCIs, the principles always have to be adapted to specific circumstances and histories.

Evaluation cannot be an after-thought, tacked on at the end of the project to satisfy funding requirements, but must be an essential component of adaptability and effective implementation. This means devoting resources, management and energy to developing an appropriate evaluations strategy from the outset.

Evaluation must also be seen as a tool for learning,

and therefore as essential to the points above on flexibility, adaptability and learn-by-doing.

- as part of a cycle in which evaluation assesses success and progress against defined goals;
- then builds conclusions back into adapting programs and services;
- and builds these lessons learned into ongoing organizational and community-wide capacity building;
- and all of this needs to be part of creating and sustaining organizational and sector-wide learning cultures.

MOVING FORWARD ON EVALUATION FOR COMMUNITY IMPACT

Question: What are your top five recommendations to community change groups wanting to evaluate a “comprehensive” approach to community change?

1. There’s nothing as practical as a good theory:
 - this is often termed our “theory of change;”
 - about clarifying assumptions, ambitions, hoped for outcomes, pathways of influence and change – the starting points for how we think our activities are going to work and have an impact;
 - we may prove to be wrong and these theories almost always have to be adapted;
 - but it is in that continual testing and adaptation that we get more and more solidly grounded in finding solutions that work.
2. What we really need to identify is the lynch-pin enablers and drivers of change:
 - a particular community may have enough services, but they haven’t been coordinated or working together as effectively as they could. So the key enabler here may be effective coordinating and collaboration forums;
 - a common enabler is government and funder flexibility that allows and supports longer term and more collaborative efforts, as opposed to narrowly defined time-limited projects;
 - many urban communities have a vast and growing diversity among their populations – especially among the most vulnerable and excluded. Figuring out how to build on the potential resilience and strengths of diverse communities is a vital enabler for effectively CCIs;

- this also means drilling down into basic principles such as collaboration. For example, in making a particular collaboration work effectively the key thing may be getting the right partners doing the right kinds of thing and working together in the right kinds of ways. The breadth of the collaboration may be less important.
3. Don't be hamstrung by a lack of resources:
 - while we always want to 'think big' and ambitiously about the potential of evaluation to improve our work, we may have to be modest about the scale of evaluations we are actually able to do;
 - still, whatever the scale, we can always try to follow these basic principles;
 - can still be very systematic about analyzing the 'theory of change' of the initiative;
 - can still build in reflections and lessons learned from front-line experience
 - can pick parts of the initiative or key case studies to investigate in detail if that is all that is possible.
 4. It's all about learning:
 - not just in the simple sense of indentifying what works and how, but continually testing, elaborating and adapting our directions and priorities – our theory of change;
 - also helping the initiatives to navigate their way through uncertain challenges and shifting social and policy environments.
 5. And, of course, it's all about community:
 - we're not doing evaluation to expand our knowledge base in some kind of abstract or academic way;
 - we're doing evaluation to learn how to make community initiatives work better – to more effectively drive change that will solve real problems;
 - it also often means that we involve community members far more than other types of evaluation – participatory approaches have shown important promise.

I'd also highlight two things *not* to conclude from the complexity of these challenges:

- Deciding that evaluation of these kinds of initiatives is too hard and too complex, so we can't do it. We have to do whatever evaluation is possible within our resources – as systemically as we can. And we have to build that evaluation into a learning culture that adapts and grows the initiative moving forward.

- The evidence on impact is uncertain and mixed; outcomes take many years to show up anyway, and how do we know that it is the type of initiative or its activities that really make a difference. But we and our policy making supporters should not conclude that CCIs or community-level interventions don't work.
 - we can't be stuck in the randomly controlled trials paradigm developed for clinical research;
 - one of the greatest brakes on social service innovation has been government and other funders' insistence for traditional quantitative proof that a particular program works:
 - it is very difficult to separate the impact of individual programs from all others in the field and from the context in which they work;
 - that just means we need to better address this challenges of attribution – of teasing out the impact of the particular intervention – and of understanding context – how interventions work to address specific problems in specific social settings;
 - but we mustn't simplistically conclude that programs don't or can't work because they have used inappropriate evaluation;
 - we need realist and developmental approaches that can deal with these challenges and help us assess what works, for whom, in just those conditions of change and complexity.

POLICY POTENTIAL OF COMPREHENSIVE COMMUNITY INITIATIVES

It isn't just community change activists and leaders who need to be concerned with realizing the potential of comprehensive community initiatives. From a policy point of view, CCIs offer a way to bridge the gap from local to system-wide: they can dig deep to address the local roots of poverty, while building broad local collaborations and integrated efforts, and highlighting the wider systemic and policy changes needed to address the roots of poverty. Especially given the ineffectiveness of most program and policy responses to date in shifting poverty and other deep-seated problems, CCIs can be a critical addition to the policy toolkit to address complex social problems.

More broadly, figuring out how to address such "wicked" problems as persistent poverty, social exclusion, and health inequalities has led to a wider recognition of the need for comprehensive and coordinated cross-sectoral strategies, and more horizontal, or "cross-departmental", processes within government. At the same

time, it is understood that complex problems are played out in particular places and there has been emerging emphasis across a number of different governments and countries on neighbourhood, or locally focused, social policy interventions:

- Many government, community, and cross-sectoral initiatives across Canada address neighbourhood renewal, the roots of violence in particular communities, concentrating services in high-needs/risk neighbourhoods;
- at the “federal meets local” levels, there have been local coordinating committees of immigrant settlement services, and this can also be a space to highlight wider issues of precarious labour markets, social exclusion, housing, and health, etc.;
- at the provincial level, the Ontario Ministry of Health Promotion and Sport is adopting a “healthy communities” strategy, and British Columbia’s Act Now strategy emphasizes community development and collaborative approaches.

To realize this potential, governments need to think about the policy, funding and regulatory enablers. There has been a great deal of thinking within government and the community sector about the need to restructure public funding regimes to more effectively enable community organizations to fulfill their mandates. In terms of CCIs specifically, this means explicitly funding collaboration efforts and infrastructure, not just the delivery of “X” discrete, narrowly-defined services to “Y” people.

This cannot mean simply adding collaboration and partnerships as one more requirement for funding applications; rather, it means explicitly recognizing that building collaborations takes significant resources. Longer-term funding and impact horizons are needed because comprehensive collaboration cannot be sustained with a never-ending series of short-term project grants, and their impacts will take years to show up.

Our research concluded that CCIs need to build evaluation into a continuous learning and innovation cycle. Governments need to fund evaluation to that end, and not expect community organizations to somehow pay for evaluation out of their overall budgets. Funders must also change their expectations regarding evaluation. They must support evaluation as an enabler of innovation, continuous service improvement, and

organizational learning – not simply as a means to meet narrow accountability requirements.

THE PROMISE OF REALIST EVALUATION

Question: What is realist evaluation? How does it differ from “non-realist” evaluation?

A “realist approach” seeks to unpack contextual factors and conditions for success, rather than offering simplistic or prescriptive solutions to complex social interventions. Realist evaluation – like broader developmental evaluation approaches – can be tremendously insightful in understanding the complexity and impact of community interventions.

The basic idea is we are looking to understand three elements – in their dynamic inter-dependence:

1. What works:
 - this doesn’t just mean how the particular services or activities of a program play out;
 - more how the resources and supports provided by a program allow participants to change, and allow the underlying social problems to be addressed;
 - in other words, the focus is on identifying the fundamental resources, incentives and enablers for people to be able to change because of the policy or program intervention.
2. For whom:
 - the premise is that thinking only about the impact of broad or universal programs tells us very little about how they actually work in different contexts, and most importantly, how they will affect specific populations or communities;
 - this is why this approach is so important for progressive change activists;
 - this begins from the interests and points of view of the communities we are working with.
3. In what contexts
 - this is also a crucial defining difference with most evaluation approaches;
 - we are always specifying the social and community settings in which the programs or initiatives are operating, and paying as much attention to context as to program design.

CONTEXT IS ALL

Question: Realist evaluation places a strong emphasis on the importance of context in interventions. In fact, one of the ways some people describe realist evaluation is “context + mechanism = outcomes”. This implies that an intervention – say a community safety initiative – may generate different results in neighbourhood A than in neighbourhood B. Can you explain this a bit more?

We would need to look both at the nature of the initiative and the dynamics of the specific communities involved:

- amazing programs have been developed by the women’s movement over the years to address family violence – not just to support women who have faced violence and its effects, but to challenge and transform the power relationships that underlie the violence;
- but family violence has very different dynamics in different communities – e.g. between an affluent and well-served neighbourhood and a poor, underserved and stigmatized neighbourhood;
- people working in particular cultural communities have found significant and specific barriers of silence and denial;
- that means that such programs have to confront these challenges in their particular context – and there have been tremendous innovations to do just that;
- it means that anti-violence interventions – as with interventions addressing so many other complex issues – cannot be successful over the long-term if they don’t take social and community context into account.

This is a crucial idea for evaluating and learning from/about community change. We don’t just look at types of interventions as they work across different contexts. We can also slice by context: looking at different types of programs and partnerships as they work in similar social contexts.

- for example, evaluating what kinds of prevention and management programs for diabetes and other chronic conditions work in vulnerable communities:
 - we very well might find that certain factors are indispensable success conditions across different poor communities – such as the programs addressing the roots of the greater risks of diabetes in social

and economic inequality; recognizing the challenges poorer people face in securing nutritious food, exercise, information, costly medications and other means of coping with chronic conditions; and providing appropriate customized supports; speaking the language of the community, etc;

- but we could also assess what kinds of mechanisms or interventions work best in particular types of contexts – for example, how does a diabetes program need to be grounded and structured to work for homeless people; in specific newcomer communities, such as central African refugees; in isolated rural regions?

CONTEXT + MECHANISM = OUTCOMES

Realist evaluation involves complex ideas for complex interventions. So we need to drill down into each. For example, mechanisms basically mean:

- the mix of programs, services, partnerships and other activities provided and designed to achieve certain ends;
- interventions is a similar description that captures some of this;
- but we don’t just mean formal programs and defined services, but also the working cultures in which these activities are developed and provided, and the impact on the culture of the communities with which they work;
- and we don’t just focus on specific service or program interventions, but the cumulative effect of the full range of activities involved – especially when we’re considering comprehensive community initiatives;
- one problem with the idea of mechanisms is that it can seem ‘mechanical.’ In fact, practitioners mean it to be very dynamic and multi-level – capturing all the various components of change.

We also need to drill down to specify what outcomes mean:

- this is not just the traditional quantitative evidence beloved of randomly controlled trials but much longer term accretion of capacities and opportunities within individuals and communities;
- it can also include success as defined by community members and program participants;
- in the long-term, successful outcomes involve trans-

forming communities and reducing or eliminating the structural roots of poverty, health inequities or whatever other problems are being addressed.

We don't just think about programs or interventions in isolation, but how effective interventions are generalized more broadly across the system – how they can be spread. We need to:

- identify promising practices and interventions across many social, health, community-building and other fields addressing complex social problems;
- allow practitioners, evaluators and leaders to share experiences and lessons learned;
- assess promising practices, using appropriate realist and developmental evaluation approaches; and
- scale up effective interventions where appropriate.

While learning and innovation may be local, this knowledge management infrastructure needs to be systematic and broad, and it is one more critical enabler that governments need to ensure.

The Wellesley Institute is a Toronto-based non-profit and non-partisan research and policy institute. Our focus is on developing research and community-based policy solutions to the problems of urban health and health disparities.

We:

- identify and advance practical and achievable policy alternatives and solutions to pressing issues of urban health;
- fund research on the social determinants of health and health disparities, focusing on the relationships between health and housing, poverty and income distribution, social exclusion and other social and economic inequalities;
- support community engagement and capacity building;
- work in numerous collaborations and partnerships locally, nationally and internationally, to support social and policy change to address the impact of the social determinants of health.

Our organization is a unique hybrid: while there are many policy institutes and think tanks, many organizations providing capacity building, and some funding of community-based research, no other institute in Canada brings all these strands together, all focused on developing research and community-based policy solutions to problems of urban health.

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