

Hierarchy of Community Impacts

A Concept Paper on Community-Based Evaluation For Community and Economic Development

Overview

Communities engaged in innovative community and economic development undertakings often take for granted that what they are doing is making a real difference, but they don't have at their disposal practical tools to measure impacts day to day and over time. At the same time, many funding agencies feel frustration over the inadequacies of external evaluation or evaluation "by anecdote," where evidence of progress boils down to testimonials but little quantifiable evidence.

Over the past several years, several models for measurement of community progress against stated goals have been developed, but oftentimes community leaders have difficulty grasping the terminology of "baselines, indicators, measures and outcomes." Furthermore, these community leaders see many of these models as too cumbersome or too time-consuming to make implementation practical or worthwhile.

The Hierarchy of Community Impacts concept is in development as a way to help community leaders understand and implement a relatively simple, common-sense approach to evaluation of progress in a way that community leaders can embrace and feel ownership for.

An underlying assumption is both communities and agencies that may be supporting their efforts would benefit from an approach to evaluation that offers a way to count impacts from the very start of implementation of a community or economic development strategy or to look both back and ahead to assess whether such a strategy is making a difference.

The Hierarchy of Community impacts begins with documenting *activities*. It moves up the hierarchy through a series of increasingly sophisticated steps that ends in *indicators of systemic change*. In the example these steps are related to a community leadership development program. At the *activity* level, the questions are organized around these two:

- Has a program been created?
- How many people are engaged?

At the *evidence of systemic change* level, the questions become:

- Is the face of leadership more diversified?
- Are new sectors of the community represented in the leadership base?

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As the Hierarchy of Community Impacts model is a work in progress, these are intended as samples of impacts for the leadership development aspect of community betterment. Ultimately, communities themselves should decide what impacts are important to them in what arenas of community betterment.

Theoretically, this approach to community-based evaluation could be applied against any community or economic development undertaking. In the HomeTown Competitiveness (HTC) approach, in which the Heartland Center for Leadership Development is a founder and core partner, the Hierarchy of Community Impacts is being applied to the four so-called HTC pillars: strengthening leadership, nurturing entrepreneurs, attracting youth, and increasing charitable giving. In other contexts, it could be applied to reducing poverty, improving wellness, expanding low-income housing or any other efforts to improve quality of life.

Implementation Example

This example provides ideas about what type of results you might see in an assessment of the impacts of a community leadership development program.

1. **Activities.** Evidence of activities would be characterized by the development of a program, club, association or other initiative intended to strengthen community leadership. Is there a plan, a curriculum, and a schedule? How many people are signed up?
2. **Outputs.** This is what the program is producing, in other words, are participants attending? Graduating? What is their level of satisfaction? What do they say they are gaining from the program?
3. **Commitments.** This field is evidenced by what the graduates are saying, and what they are doing:
 - Expressed Commitments – What have the program graduates said they would do, as a result of their participation?
 - Acted Upon Commitments – What have the graduates done?
4. **Outcomes.** What community betterment has resulted from the graduates' actions? Has something positive happened as a result of their involvement?
5. **Indicators of Systemic Change.** This level indicates what type of long term changes have been affected. For example, has the pool of people engaged in community leadership roles become more diversified? Are there more young people or people of color, or at least new faces among emerging and engaged leaders?

Initial reactions to the Hierarchy of Community Impacts among community partners in the HTC collaborative have been positive. These community partners say the approach makes sense to them and they are beginning to apply it to their hometown improvement efforts.

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The Center for Rural Entrepreneurship's mission is to help community leaders build a prosperous future by supporting and empowering business, social and civic entrepreneurs. With our roots and hearts in rural America, we help communities of all sizes and interests by bringing empowering research, community engagement and strategy development to you through our many Solution Areas. Our **Solution Area Teams** empower communities to discover their own answers to the challenges and opportunities they face:

- **Community Development Philanthropy:** Providing research and community engagement strategies that help communities build philanthropic capacity and create development resources now and in the future.
- **Youth Engagement:** Providing tools and a framework for communities to engage young people now and to bring them home in the future.
- **Measurement Research Policy:** Providing the tools to help communities define development goals, measure success and improve outcomes.
- **Entrepreneurial Communities:** Providing a roadmap for communities to design and deliver entrepreneur-focused economic development strategies that work.

To learn more about us, go to www.energizingentrepreneurs.org.

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