V Evaluating Progress

Traditionally, community workers, whether professional or volunteer, have tended to rely primarily on intuition and experience to guide their work. Generally speaking, it is difficult to measure the outcomes of community interventions, as they are often related to prevention, mutual support and/or capacity-building objectives which are very difficult to measure. The time frame within which we can reasonably expect to see concrete results, is several years at minimum, and the complexity of factors involved in communities make it difficult to draw conclusions with any degree of certainty. Recently, however, there is growing interest among community groups in documenting the results of community improvement efforts and assessing whether the objectives of the group have been met.

Why Evaluate?

Evaluation takes time, effort and usually money, so it is important to examine whether evaluation is beneficial to your group or to the program or project your group is undertaking.

There are several reasons you might wish to evaluate your work:

- to demonstrate to others (e.g., funders, members, supporters) that the program or project is worthwhile
- to provide information that will be useful for planning future projects
- to meet funders expectations.

Before carrying out an evaluation, it is important to know why you are evaluating, as that may influence how you design your evaluation process.

Below are some other considerations to take into account when deciding the type of evaluation procedures would suit your group.

5.1 Choosing an Evaluation Format

(a) Formal or Informal?

A formal evaluation process is not always neccessary or desirable. If clear indicators of effectiveness are already present it may not be necessary. For example, if your group decides to plant 300 trees along a waterway, there may not be any need for evaluation beyond the observation of how many trees were actually planted. On the other hand, if you are thinking about doing a similar project in the future, you may want to keep notes on your planting methods, weather conditions and other pertinent factors, and check on the trees periodically to see how many survive over a specified time period. Perhaps you will want to evaluate how well the group worked together on the project, and identify things you would do differently next time. These questions can be answered informally through observation and group discussion and do not require a formal evaluation procedure.

A formal evaluation involves developing a detailed method of inquiry relating to specific variables, with links to related theory and research. However, before taking on a formal evaluation process it is important that community groups ensure that the methods used are appropriate and relevant to their goals and guiding principles.

There are several pre-conditions that should exist before you undertake an evaluation, such as:

- program goals and objectives are clearly stated
- expected effects (i.e. the outcomes or results) are clearly specified
- the causal assumptions linking the program to the goal and/or expected effects must be plausible and clearly stated. (Carter and Wharf, 1973:13)

Attempting an evaluation prematurely, or for programs that are essentially not evaluable, may lead to negligible or even negative results, which could well be a disservice to all involved.

(b) Internal Or External?

Many forms of evaluation can be conducted by the people involved in the program or project. Tracking the activities, inquiring about participants' level of satisfaction and measuring the benefits of the project are usually done internally by group members. However, there are times when it may be necessary to hire a professional to conduct a formal evaluation; for example:

- a complex evaluation of your activities is required
- the evaluation involves how you are perceived by participants or clients
- it is necessary to demonstrate objectivity in the evaluation (i.e. that it was not biased by the interests and wishes of the group members)
- your funder requires an external evaluation.

(c) Involving Stakeholders

No matter what evaluation format you decide upon, it will be important to involve your stakeholders in the evaluation process. Stakeholders are individuals or groups that either could be affected by the results of the evaluation or will have an interest in the results for other reasons. Usually stakeholders include program staff, participants, volunteers, funders, management, and possibly other community members and local decision-makers. The more involved the stakeholders are in designing the evaluation process, monitoring its implementation and interpreting the results, the more co-operative they will be about providing needed information and encouraging other to co-operate, and the more credible they will find the results.

5.2 Evaluation Methods

Ideally, evaluation is an on-going process. A good evaluation has its start at the beginning of the program or project. Some form of needs assessment should be conducted at the start of the planning process, to answer questions such as "What is the need (or problem or issue) that we are going to address?" and "How will the planned program/activity help to address this need?". This will provide important points of reference for your evaluation.

While the program is in progress, you might want to conduct a "process" evaluation, which looks at how the project is running, what resources it is consuming, whether it is reaching the people you intended to, and whether the activities are co-ordinated and managed effectively.

An "outcome" evaluation looks at the results achieved by the project, both in terms of "outputs"; i.e. quantifiable data (e.g. number of trees planted, number of homeless people housed), and the measurable results or impacts achieved (e.g. the trees prevented further soil erosion; the health status of individuals who are homeless has been increased).

An economic evaluation looks at the costs of the project in comparison with the benefits of the program, which are also quantified into dollar values, if possible.

The following sections provide a brief overview of some of the more common evaluation methods used by community groups. Further referenc meaterials on evaluation are listed in Appendix 3.

(a) Qualitative or Quantitative?

There is often a debate about whether community projects and programs are best evaluated using quantitative methods or quantitative. Both are valuable sources of information.

Quantitative methods focus on things that can be counted. Often the "outputs" of the program will be counted; e.g., the number of participants involved, or number of sessions conducted. Outcomes may also be quantified by measuring the degree of change that has occurred. For example, participants might be given a pre-test before they start the program to measure their knowledge, skills or attitudes, then be given a post-test after they have completed the program. Comparing the group's average score for the two tests will give a measure of the change that has occurred within the group. Quantitative methods use standardized measures with pre-determined response categories and usually involve statistical analysis. They can be applied to large groups and the data can be summarized and presented concisely. Also, they can be repeated with other groups for comparison and are often generalizable to other similar populations.

Qualitative methods are generally used to provide more in-depth information about individual experiences, perspectives and context. For example, you might ask participants to give a subjective report of the benefits they feel they have gained, or any change they have had in their attitudes or perceptions. Qualitative methods include unstructured and open-ended questions, without pre-determined response categories. Because of the volume of information collected and the complexity of the analysis required, usually only small groups are involved. Another limitation of qualitative methods is that the findings of qualitative methods may not be generalizable to other groups.

Examples of common qualitative and quantitative evaluation methods:

Qualitative Methods	*Quantitative Methods*
• *Focus groups*	• *Surveys: drop-off, mail or telephone*
• *In-depth interviews*	• *Tracking forms*
• *Open-ended survey questions*	• *Service utilization statistics*
• *Diaries*	• *Direct measures of health indicators or behaviours (e.g. blood pressure, # of cigarettes smoked)*
• *Consensus building*	
• *Forums and discussion groups*	

(adapted from Evaluating Health Promotion Programs, The Health Communication Unit: p. 52)

(b) Impact Evaluation

Impact assessments attempt to establish whether or not a program is producing the effects that were intended. They look at the magnitude of the results (i.e. whether there were large or small effects), whether there were other factors that might have been responsible for the outcomes and whether there were any other "unintended" results.

Impact assessments identify the links between the various components of the program:

- **Inputs -** money, staff, facilities
- **Activities -** strategies, programs, services
- **Outputs -** products of the activities, such as the number of services provided, number of classes taught, number of educational materials distributed
- **Outcomes -** benefits or changes for individuals, or groups during or following participation (e.g., increased in literacy scores).

These components are often shown in a diagram called a project logic model. A sample is provided in Appendix 2.

Impact evaluations are used by program planners to identify the interventions that will best meet the needs of the program participants. They are also used by managers and administrators to document the value of a program to justify it to funders, and/or to help determine how to best allocate their resources. (Rossi et al. 1979: p. 161-165). Programs that have higher impacts are more likely to receive a larger share of the resources than are those with smaller impacts.

Most programs do not find it too difficult to measure inputs, activities and outputs, but often get stuck on measuring outcomes. Yet measuring outcomes is necessary if we are to be able to demonstrate that the program is actually making a difference. It can also help programs to:

- recruit and retain talented staff
- enlist and motivate able volunteers
- attract new participants
- engage collaborators
- garner support for innovative efforts
- win designation as a model or demonstration site
- retain or increase funding
- gain favourable public recognition
- focus staff effort on common goals and shared purposes
- communicate program results to stakeholders
- clarify the intended purpose of the program
- identify effective practices within the program
- successfully compete for resources/funding *(see http://national.unitedway.org/outcomes)*

More and more, community groups are being asked by funders to put evaluation processes in place that will demonstrate the impact of the project at the end of the funding period. It is advisable to seek professional consultation in this case to ensure that the methods you use will meet your needs and will be acceptable and credible to the funder.

(c) Participatory Evaluation

This type of evaluation uses the methods of participatory action research, which are based on the principles of adult education. "If one is concerned with increasing people's capacity to participate fully and gain some degree of control over their lives, then research methods themselves can be part of this method." (Hall, in Stinson, 1979:148)

To be truly effective, however, the community should be involved in the entire process, "…from the formulation of the problem to the discussion of how to seek solutions and the interpretation of findings." (Stinson, 1979:148)

There are many definitions of participatory research, but they all have the same basic themes:

- empowerment of participants
- collaboration through participation
- acquisition of knowledge
- social change.

The process that the researcher goes through to achieve these themes is a spiral of action research cycles consisting of four major phrases: planning, acting, observing and reflecting. (Zuber-Skerrit 1991:2, in www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arr/arow/rmasters.html#AR, June 2002)

The basic idea behind participatory action research is that ordinary people, including program participants and/or clients, are normally shut out from the research process. By becoming involved, not only will they learn more about the program and its effectiveness, they will learn about research methods, how to obtain information and how to use it. The involvement of participants may also increase the appropriateness of the methods used, the degree of co-operation in the evaluation process and, ultimately, the quality of information obtained.

There is a strong emphasis on social change in participatory action research. Embedded in its practice is the goal of engaging in action that "reverses inequalities, empowers the have nots, and ultimately transforms society so power is based in grassroots organizations and individuals." (Community Development Society www.comm-dev.org/par-is.htm, June 2002)

Empowerment evaluation, which is closely related to participatory action research, aims to "use evaluation concepts, techniques and findings to foster improvement and self-determination. It recognizes that in order to reflect an on-going change process, the evaluation process also needs to be on-going. Program participants establish their own goals and assess their progress using both qualitative measures (e.g.; reflection on their experience) and quantitative measures (e.g.; self-evaluation procedures). In a continuous cycle, they plan, evaluation, then re-shape their plans and strategies based on the results of the evaluation. The role of the researcher is empowerment evaluation is that of coach and/or facilitator.

Steps in empowerment evaluation generally include:

- taking stock of where the program stands now, including assessing its strengths and weaknesses
- establishing goals to determine where the participants want the program to go in the future, with an emphasis on program improvement
- developing strategies to accomplish program goals and objectives
- determining the type of evidence required to document their progress and how it will be obtained

(Chelimsky and Shadish, 1997; pp. 382-384)

(d) Economic Evaluations

Economic evaluations are mostly concerned with the question "Is it worth it?". They are important because resources are usually scarce, and often there are hard decisions that need to be made as where those resources are best placed. There are many different ways of looking at the costs of a program and relating them to the effectiveness of the program:

- **Cost Descriptions -** itemizes the costs involved in delivering the program
- **Cost-Outcome Descriptions -** identifies how mush it costs to achieve a particular outcome
- **Cost-Effectiveness Analysis -** compares the costs of two or more alternative methods which achieve a particular outcome with varying degrees of success

- **Cost-Benefit Analysis -** compares two or more alternatives whose costs and consequences are expressed in terms of the dollar value
- **Cost-Utility Analysis -** compare the costs of two or more alternatives whose outcomes are judged by their perceived usefulness

In order to conduct an economic evaluation, you must be able to identify the costs involved in the program you want to evaluate. Depending on the nature of the program, this may require considerable time and specialized skills. In most Healthy Community projects it is very difficult to put a dollar figure to the benefits that are attained but, if it is possible, it is highly recommended. Tangible economic benefits will help ensure that your project is well-received.

(e) Ethics in Evaluation

There may be some ethical concerns that need to be addressed before you undertake an evaluation. If you are hiring a professional evaluator, the Canadian Evaluation Society has established guidelines for ethical conduct around their competence, integrity and accountability. Whether you are using a professional service or doing it on your own, you should consider the following:

- Confidentiality is an important consideration. Participants must be informed whether the information they provide will be confidential or not. If it is, proper care must be taken to ensure that the confidentiality is securely maintained (e.g. use codes, not names on questionnaires). If not, participants should be informed how and to whom the information will be communicated.
- Protection of the people being studied - participation should be voluntary, with full disclosure as to the purpose of the evaluation, and if there is any aspect that causes discomfort to a participant they must be allowed to withdraw from the study.
- Possibility of negative side effects that may affect the program and/or participants
- Different needs and interests of various stakeholders; for example, program staff and volunteers may feel threatened by an evaluation process. It might be helpful to use a framework of quality improvement as it may be seen as less threatening.

This chapter has given a brief overview of some of the things you might wish to consider before deciding how you will plan to evaluate your group's activities and progress. Many books, workshops and other resources are available to assist you in your efforts to design an evaluation framework that is appropriate for your group. A few of these resources are listed after the references.

VI Sustaining Momentum

The challenge of sustaining momentum arises at some point or another for every group and organization. It is a completely normal stage in group development, so expect it. There are a number of reasons why this happens, and a number of ways of addressing this issue.

At the root of a loss of momentum lie the fundamentals of human and organizational dynamics.

Margaret Wheatley, in her book *Leadership and the New Science* (1992) offers some explanations for why often our organizations are not working as well as we would like. Why do we sometimes feel uninspired even though we truly believe in our organization's mission? Why do projects take so long and often get stalled? And why is it that often when we experience success it has more to do with unanticipated events or factors than with following the strategic plan?

Using concepts drawn from quantum theory, chaos theory and biology, she identifies the tension that exists in organizations between:

- order vs. change;
- autonomy vs. control;
- structure vs. flexibility; and
- planning vs. innovation.

The principles that are inherent in the organic world, when applied to organizations, can have a profound effect on our understanding of organizational dynamics and, consequently, on how we function and relate to others within our group. A brief summary of some of these principles is given below.

- Every organization is unique and must chart its own course - it is the process of its creation; i.e., how we relate and engage with each other, that will determine its characteristics
- Organizations are holistic - you cannot understand them by breaking them into their component parts. Everything is related to everything else, and it is the relationship between the parts as much as the parts themselves that is important.
- Successful organizations are largely self-organizing. Within the structure of commonly held vision, values and guiding principles, individuals are free to act independently. Self-organizing structures experience a loss of coherence and energy from time to time, but it is a necessary prelude to the emergence of another form better suited to its environment.
- Organizations and communities are chaotic systems which are sensitive to initial conditions, i.e., small variations are often replicated and magnified and eventually can have explosive results. It is sometimes referred to as the "butterfly effect", in which it is envisioned that the flap of the wing of a butterfly in Tokyo is an initial factor in a subsequent thunderstorm over New York City.
- There is order in chaos - but it is unpredictable. If you bring a group of well-intentioned people together to work on improving their community, no one can predict exactly what the results would be, but it is a pretty sure bet that something positive will come out of it. Unpredictable quantum leaps describe most successful organizations more so than strict adherence to a strategic plan.

Wheatley suggests that in order to improve the functioning of our organizations, we:

- talk less about leadership and more about relationships and empowerment
- recognize the deep longings we all have for community, meaning, dignity and love and stop seeing people as cogs in a wheel
- realize and accept that the universe will not co-operate with our demands for order, control, predictability and stability
- spend less time on strategic planning and more time on fostering relationships
- recognize the potential that is within people and help them find ways to actualize it
- share information widely and listen to various interpretations of it.

As Brenda Zimmerman of York University once stated in reference to bringing the lessons of the new sciences into the realm of organizations: "It is the end of the age of innocence because I know I can be the butterfly and it is the end of the age of guilt because I know I cannot control the outcomes".

Loss of momentum in a group can also arise when a key person leaves, when a major community issue arises or due to a shift in community priorities. Community groups often find that after a major project or event has been wrapped up, there is a lull in the energy of the group. They are understandably drained. If you try at this point to push the members into another project right away, it is almost certain that you will lose at least a few of them. Instead, take some time out from the hectic business of developing and implementing projects to focus inward for a time. Think about what would be helpful, useful and/or enjoyable for the members. Activities could include the following:

- Celebrate the group and its accomplishments. This would not be a public event to raise the profile of your organization, or a sophisticated affair that would take a lot of work; it would be solely for the enjoyment of the members.
- Hold a training session. Maybe the group would like to learn more about the issues they are involved in, or perhaps some organizational development would be helpful; e.g. some training on board roles and responsibilities. Why not bring in a consultant or speaker?
- Visit a related group or program. It is often very instructive for groups to visit the location of a program or site that relates to their areas of interest and/or is operated by a group with similar goals. Exposure to other programs can lead to new insights and increase motivation. Enthusiasm is contagious!
- Evaluate your work. Perhaps it is time to evaluate the group's progress. Don't feel that time away from projects is wasted. Regular evaluations can increase the effectiveness of your group and move you closer to your objectives faster.
- Engage in a strategic planning exercise. Every 3-5 years a group should undertake a thorough strategic planning process. In today's world it is essential that you keep up to date with new developments, changes and trends. Your mission, goals and objectives need to reflect the environment in which you must operate.
- Investigate opportunities to work collaboratively with other groups; this will ease the strain of having to do it all yourselves.
- Structure meetings so they are productive, informative, and enjoyable - every now and then use part of your meeting to spark new ideas: share examples of other organizations through guest speakers, video, web sites, news articles or pamphlets.
- Find ways to increase the amount of community involvement in your group; be creative about how you fulfill your mission - find a variety of ways that people can be involved.
- Recognize members' efforts both publicly and personally.
- Promote your activities and success to the public; positive feedback is a great motivator and increasing your level of public support never hurts.
- Continually recruit new members from all walks of life; provide effective orientation and ensure they feel included in decision-making.
- Give yourself a break and pat yourself on the back.

Knowing that the personalities, interest and level(s) of commitment of the group vary over time, it is possible to develop a strategy to address loss of momentum. If it is time for the group to disband, accept it, knowing that as the members leave the group they will take valuable skills, knowledge and experience with them. Very likely they will continue working to create a healthy community, whether as individuals or as part of a new group.