

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT – CURRENT ISSUES SERIES

Innovative Measurement and Evaluation of Community Development Practices

Edited by
Norman Walzer, Jane Leonard and
Mary Emery

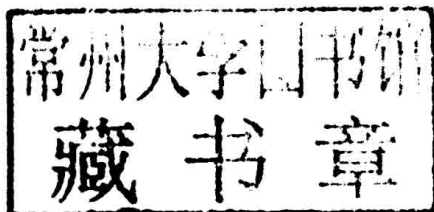


ROUTLEDGE

Innovative Measurement and Evaluation of Community Development Practices

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**Norman Walzer, Jane Leonard and
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Innovative Measurement and Evaluation of Community Development Practices

Finding innovative and useful measurement practices for community development projects is gaining in importance as policymakers increase the demand for accountability. This book examines some of the latest efforts to document the effectiveness of local development efforts. The forms of documentation differ by types of project, jurisdiction, and country but they have a common focus of recognizing the importance of the Community Capitals Framework. Public agencies in the past have often measured development successes by the number of jobs created and/or amount of private investment forthcoming. However, the impacts of community development reach much deeper than those indicators. Strengthening local decision-making capacity is a common component of development efforts, as is engaging populations that, in the past, have not been active in decision-making. These and other considerations are explored in more detail by the authors in this volume. Local policymakers and practitioners will be continually pressured to provide more documentation of outcomes, and readers will gain considerable insights into alternative approaches that can be included in projects but can also see the common elements needed to create a solid measurement system. International insights are a special strength of the discussions in this book.

—This book was originally published as a special issue of *Community Development*.

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John J. Green, Molly Phillips and Mary Margaret Saulters

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Norman Walzer, Jane Leonard and Mary Emery

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Measuring community development: what have we learned?

Andy S. Blanke and Norman Walzer

Community Development, volume 44, issue 5 (December 2013) pp. 534–550

Chapter 3

Measuring community empowerment as a process and an outcome: preliminary evaluation of the decentralized primary health care programs in northeast Thailand
Tatchalerm Sudhipongpracha

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Shared measures to achieve shared outcomes: lessons from Central Appalachia
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Lee Pugalis

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Comments from the Editorial Office: Exploring trends in community development research

This special issue of *Community Development* includes a collection of articles assembled under the leadership of Guest Editors Norman Walzer, Jane Leonard, and Máry Emery. The theme is “innovative measurement and evaluation of community development practices.” We hope you enjoy these timely, informative, and thought-provoking works. This collection represents an important step in advancing our approaches to development of knowledge in the field of community development and thereby better connecting scholarship and practice.

Connected to the topics addressed in this issue (e.g. community development, measurement, and evaluation), we in the *Community Development* Editorial Office want to share summary findings from the meta-study of research articles published in the journal over a five-year time frame (Green, Saulters, & Phillips, 2013). The following broad research questions shaped our study: What is the state of methodology in the field of community development? How do community development scholars design their studies, collect data, and analyze findings? What are the positive trends and where are the gaps?

To conduct this study, we adapted techniques from the meta-study approach (Paterson, Thorne, Canam, & Jillings, 2001) to examine, code, and analyze articles published from 2008 through 2012. From the 151 initially screened articles, we deemed 131 as being based on empirical research of some kind. A systematic assessment and coding form was used with each article, with special focus on their methods and analysis sections.

Approximately three-quarters of the applicable articles had clearly specified methods sections, while the others provided fewer details. Not surprising, about 60% of the articles specified a case study design. By far, the most common methods used were qualitative interviews, followed by surveys and use of secondary data. Approximately 80% of the articles were based on two or more research methods. Many of the methods sections fell short in terms of describing sampling techniques and coding strategies, and the omissions were frequent in those articles relying primarily on qualitative methods. In terms of quantitative studies involving hypothesis tests, there has been over-emphasis on significance/p-value testing and under-emphasis on confidence intervals and measures of difference between groups and the strength of associations and correlations.

On the positive side, we found that community development scholarship – as presented in these articles – in recent years has been based on diverse methods of data collection and analysis, and many scholars are embracing the use of multiple methods in their studies. Case studies are particularly prevalent, and appropriately so. Unfortunately, the challenge for sharing across the field is that insufficient information is provided in these articles in regard to specific designs and sampling techniques.

We are continuing this meta-study to include recently published *Community Development* articles in an ongoing manner, and we will expand it to include other related journals in the field. From this study, we do offer two recommendations for scholars writing for this journal and others in our field. First, case study designs should be more clearly described with special attention to the methods (interviews, observation, etc.) and sampling. To help with this, we strongly encourage all authors to consult Yin's book on case study research (2014) and to contextualize their cases within a broader context of socioeconomic trends to address the "so what?" question. Second, quantitative studies that entail hypothesis testing should attend to the critique of the "cult of statistical significance" (Ziliak & McCloskey, 2008) and focus on going "beyond significance testing" (Kline, 2013) to include discussions of magnitude and meaningfulness.

With these recommendations, we believe that community development scholarship can be presented and conveyed in a more useful way to better advance knowledge and inform practice. This will make our research more relevant to other researchers and practitioners alike.

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Introduction

Overview of innovative measurement and evaluation issue

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There is growing interest in finding ways to evaluate and measure outcomes from development projects addressing community change, especially as public and private organizations try to document positive results from their program investments. Since adverse financial trends such as high unemployment and slow growth in incomes affecting many communities and regions will continue in the near future, and opportunities borne out of these changes continue to evolve, community leaders must be able to make accurate decisions based on meaningful evaluations of past practices. Thus, development agencies, policy-makers, and funders will continually look for ways to measure and evaluate their programs.

Evaluating returns to investment in the private sector is often easier than in the public sector, because outcomes are more easily measured using return on equity and other investment management tools. Measuring and documenting outcomes in the public sector, however, can be more difficult due to the complex interactions among groups and less clearly defined or agreed-upon outcomes.

Public agencies often measure local economic development investments by the number of jobs created and/or retained, and the amount of private investments that occurred. These measures are tangible, and seemingly straightforward, indicators for documenting outcomes from participation in both state and federal programs, but they may also overlook other important effects. Recent research (see e.g. Flora, Emery, Fey, & Bregendahl, 2008) focusing on the importance of building community capacity indicates that investments into the less tangible areas of building human and social capital are a necessary prerequisite for many communities that want to increase jobs, local wealth, and overall prosperity for residents.

Measuring the number of jobs retained or created because of a specific project or outlay of public funds is especially difficult because of other factors involved, such as changes in the overall economy or adjustments in local job markets. Recognition of these limitations has caused policy-makers and funding agencies to search for more comprehensive and accurate ways to document results and outcomes of investments in development efforts.

The interest in more refined measurement and evaluation practices is part of a long-term movement by federal and state governments for more effective planning and

evaluation of public spending. An early example was the Government Performance and Results Act in 1993 requiring federal agencies to use strategic planning including goals and indicators that could be monitored (Office of Management and Budget, 1993).

At the same time, there has been growing interest by both scholars and practitioners in helping communities adjust to changing environments (Walzer & Hamm, 2010). The intervention programs provided by universities and other agencies to bring about changes in community planning and decision-making practices must be measured and evaluated to justify their continuation and funding. This need for more sophisticated measures generated an increase in the research and practice around measuring results from the intervention programs as well as finding better ways to evaluate outcomes. These efforts have generated a large database of successful and effective approaches (Boston Indicators Project, 2012; Community Indicators Consortium [CIC], 2013).

Documenting outcomes, especially in the public sector, is challenging for policy-makers. Distinguishing between inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes, and ultimate impacts requires extensive data collection over several years (W.K. Kellogg Foundation, 1998). This type of data collection and analysis is especially difficult for small public agencies with limited staff and expertise on these issues. Adding to the complexity is that many development projects are multidimensional, spanning more than one governmental jurisdiction, other sectors, and multiple years making tracking outcomes even more difficult.

Nevertheless, serious progress has been made in improving the measurement and evaluation processes. Organizations such as the CIC have led the way in constructing and documenting innovative measurement practices (CIC, 2013). They provide a nexus of information and best practices for agencies interested in upgrading their capacity to document outcomes and revise policy decisions accordingly. Cities and organizations such as Vibrant Communities in Canada have used these approaches with significant positive outcomes on a regional level (Vibrant Communities, 2013).

Boston Indicators and Minnesota Milestones (superseded now by Minnesota Compass) have spent more than a decade documenting measures for various sectors using a dashboard type of approach (Boston Indicators Project, 2012; Minnesota Compass, 2009; Minnesota Milestones, 1998). These approaches help local decision-makers monitor trends in local conditions and evaluate the performance of past investments or interventions through public policies using the milestone data.

Most recently, private and public foundations engaged in comprehensive community initiatives to reduce poverty or otherwise improve quality of life have tried to evaluate the success of their investments over many years, and they have had difficulty documenting the outcomes and impacts (Kubisch et al., 2002). The same interest led the Bush Foundation, based in St. Paul, Minnesota, to convene a team of scholars and practitioners in early 2012 to explore more innovative measures for programs underway in several Midwestern states. This special issue of *Community Development* is one product of those discussions, and is an effort to document new and innovative approaches to measuring and evaluating outcomes. The articles identify and illustrate key components in designing measurement and evaluation systems in the USA and in other countries such as Australia, Britain, Canada, and Thailand.

Overview and themes

The articles in this issue identify several major themes that are important in designing useful measurement and evaluation systems for community development. Each is described below with a brief discussion of how it is included in the various articles.

Analytical framework

Because community development issues are multidimensional, it is vital to have a solid analytical framework as a base for measurement and evaluation of policy changes. The Community Capitals Framework (Flora et al., 2008) provides this structure, because it helps to describe the important components in community development. A single measure used to describe results or outcomes from policy interventions risks overlooking improvements in other arenas important to overall community wellbeing. This point is highlighted in the article by Pugalis.

Several papers in this volume use community capitals in some form as a basis for their measurement and evaluation systems. Hightower, Niewolny, and Brennan examine the results of participation in immigrant farmer programs in the USA. Based on surveys of immigrant farmer programs and more detailed studies of programs in Cleveland, OH, and Fredericksburg, VA, they report that social capital is critical to the success of economic program outcomes and can be measured effectively in the process.

Ratner and Alan report on a project that used the community capitals for a system of comprehensive measures in working with six nonprofit sectors on programs to increase local wealth in five states through the Central Appalachian Network (CAN). The CAN tries to build sustainable agricultural wealth in a relatively low-income region. Of special note are the ways in which the CAN shifted the focus from outputs to outcomes by including indicators that reflect how producers changed behaviors or their techniques used in producing crops. The linkages between the capitals and the outcomes are especially important in this analysis.

Keeping track of the overall picture

In an analysis of regeneration efforts in the Sunnyside area of northern England, Pugalis found that overconcentration on specific development indicators may cause policy-makers to lose sight of the overall aims of the redevelopment initiative. He places part of the responsibility on the *new managerialist approach* used in the project and also on the emphasis placed on achieving specific outcome measures rather than monitoring the overall impact on community conditions. He supports these contentions with information obtained from interviews with practitioners and policy-makers that suggest focusing on specific measures can gain acceptance of project outcomes without necessarily having to address the overall effects.

Effective implementation approaches

Bringing about effective community change requires alternative approaches that work especially well in each setting. Cavaye reports on a project in Australia that used a learning community approach to foster community development. Several key factors in implementation included a rigorous framework and methodology, incorporating both qualitative and quantitative measures, viewing evaluation as a tool for continuous improvement, and an understanding by participants of the limitations of the measures used in the project. Equally important in a learning community approach is to have a baseline against which participants can measure progress on the project. The progress is not short term, and Cavaye argues that it may take from 5 to 15 years.

Matching the analysis with the level of government at which community development is delivered can also be a significant factor affecting outcomes. In an effort to obtain better programmatic outcomes, the Parliament in Thailand decentralized health

services in several regions. Sudhipongpracha describes the outcomes achieved in four Thai cities along with difficulties associated with the transition. He compares two communities where decentralization has occurred with two other communities that still receive centralized health services. Of special note is that the analysis includes both traditional quantitative and qualitative measures.

Key to success in the decentralization process involved helping residents in the communities to understand the benefits received from better health practices and ways to change their food management approaches. Based on detailed interviews with residents and local policy-makers in the four communities, Sudhipongpracha shows that the decentralized communities had better health outcomes because of a transformation in nutrition and health habits. Finding these results, however, required a detailed examination of health care practices rather than relying solely on traditional quantitative indicators. The findings also show that a developmental evaluation approach can be instrumental in achieving desired outcomes.

Impact investing

Both private and public agencies understand the need to obtain positive outcomes from their investments in community development projects and, thus, now pay more attention to selecting funding opportunities with defined results. This interest has led to an impact investor industry that tries to create jobs and businesses but also seeks to enhance the quality of life for all residents. These types of endeavors create additional need for innovative community development measures that capture the effects of policies on various segments of society, including the disadvantaged.

Jackson points out the connections that already exist between impact investing and community development as well as the relationships between measures of individual outcomes and community impacts. Community development leaders can play a major role in helping impact investors understand the potential outcomes of their investments and can hold them accountable for obtaining overall results. Impact investing relies on collaboration with community leaders and institutions to gain the desired outcomes or impacts.

At the same time, bringing about effective community changes that improve quality of life and development requires careful monitoring of progress. Blanke and Walzer show that accurate and comprehensive measures that can be integrated into policy decisions so as to achieve the community goals are integral to the monitoring process. Policy-makers and residents must agree on the measures early in the process. Planning discussions help policy-makers and residents see more clearly the role of the measures in implementing the strategies. In other words, the measures are not simply a way to evaluate the progress; rather, they become part of the decision-making apparatus that leads to community changes.

Innovations in measurement will be essential to improving not only the understanding of the community change process but also in designing effective programs to bring those changes to reality. The articles in this special issue identify key elements in community change programs, measurement, and evaluation in a variety of settings and approaches. The discussions in this special issue can serve as building blocks for other groups interested in looking beyond a few simple employment and investment measures.

The editors thank the Bush Foundation and the authors in this volume for making these materials available.

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