

Lessons Learned September 2004

Beginning in 1999 to mid-2004, The French American Charitable Trust (FACT) developed a "Community Organizing Evaluation Project." The focus of the project was to help strengthen community organizing (CO) groups by improving the practice of evaluation. It was carried out in close collaboration with a small number of our grantees.

Many CO funders, FACT included, felt challenged to evaluate the effectiveness and impact of our grantees. It became clear that existing evaluation and documentation tools, methodologies, and frameworks were generally inappropriate for these kinds of organizations. Most traditional evaluation tools, principally designed for social service organizations for measuring and tracking quantitative data and hard outcomes, were inadequate for capturing the impressive story of empowerment, leadership development and social change exemplified by the work of many of our grantees. The creation of a different framework seemed essential.

As a result of the explosion of interest in evaluation practice at the time, many of our grantees were asked by grantmakers to participate in multiple **external** evaluations, each one designed to meet different objectives, governed by different methodologies, directed and shaped by outside consultants, and of questionable value to the groups themselves.

FACT believed that truly effective evaluation strategies should serve not only the funders' needs for data and evidence, but should also support the organizations' own priorities in the areas of internal learning, critical analysis, and program planning to strengthen their own work. We were surprised to find that this aspect of evaluation was rarely supported or emphasized by funders and evaluation practitioners. FACT concluded that the Project needed to **focus on strengthening the groups' internal capacities**, and then look at how the combined work of Project participants might be of value to the field.

FACT believes CO is an essential ingredient of lasting social change. This Project was undertaken with the conviction that funders should include CO strategies as a part of their grantmaking portfolios. We speculated that a more transparent and systematic practice of using evaluation to inform planning and decision making might help groups demonstrate the impact of their work and would help them make a more convincing case for funding CO.

A central question challenged us throughout: How can one measure the overall impact of an organization's work against broad social change goals in a way that can both 1) satisfy their internal need for deeper reflection and learning, as well as 2) produce essential information and compelling narratives that fulfill funders' requirements and lead to increased support and respect for CO? Throughout the course of the Project, and most recently, in conversation with peer grantmakers, organizers, and evaluators, we have continued to grapple with this challenge.

LESSONS LEARNED

Reflecting on the Project's work over the past several years, FACT identified several lessons that others in the field of grantmaking, evaluation, and organizing may find of value.

LESSON #1: DEVELOPING AN APPROPRIATE EVALUATION PLAN TAKES CONSIDERABLE TIME, PATIENCE, TRUST, AND IS INFLUENCED BY FACTORS UNIQUE TO EACH ORGANIZATION

A core premise of the Project's approach to evaluation is the following:

Evaluation is useful only if it is practically linked to the day-to-day planning, priority setting and decision making processes that operate throughout an organization. Additionally, evaluation work must be developed from the "ground up," tailored to meet the unique needs of each organization and respectful of its culture, processes, priorities, and organizational realities.

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One cannot parachute in and jump into the work of so-called evaluation.¹ One must first gain an understanding of the organizational needs, history, context, and priorities, and assess what is already in place, as well as determine what the organization's specific goals are with respect to evaluation. Evaluation is usually not a favorite or high priority topic and it means many different things to different people. Some are noticeably wary about getting involved. So, considerable time must be spent building trust and developing clarity about goals and expectations.

An unavoidable truth is that evaluation design work is slow. Evaluation planning represents time consuming work on top of already daunting workloads and schedules. The process is also, at times, confusing and frustrating. The process tends to be circular, rather than sequential, with a need to constantly double back to revise previous decisions as new learning occurs. Many variables, including the need to involve persons from each organization's board, staff, and membership, as well as the typical organizational changes that take place during a project's life span, influence how orderly the process can be. Evaluation terminology and techniques are often new and intimidating or seem incompatible with an organization's culture or style. It may take time to dig underneath the models and the language before those involved are able to agree on meaningful language and principles that fit their way of thinking.

The process requires a high level of honesty, candor, and trust. The process depends on asking and answering hard questions about goals and social change theories, day-to-day practice, accomplishments, weaknesses, and other aspects of organizational life. It forces organizational leaders to scrutinize their assumptions and expectations. A climate of trust that values honest feedback and is open to critical self-examination – within the organization and in organizational interactions with consultants – is essential.

Before an evaluation process can begin, other pieces need to be in place. Minimally they are a strategic plan of sorts, plus a relatively clear articulation of organizational mission and program goals. Each organization must also honestly assess its goals and capabilities for evaluation before undertaking the challenging work of evaluation design. The following sample questions, when asked at the outset, can help participants assess their readiness for engaging in this kind of work.

- Why is this important to undertake at this time? Is there organizational "buy in"? Can enough people see a practical value (a payoff) that may result from this work?
- What is a realistic expectation of time and involvement required by key organizational staff, members, etc? Who will "cheerlead" throughout the process, motivate and monitor others?
- Is there sufficient trust between and among the people who will be most involved with this process? With the consultants?
- Is this **honestly** a priority for the organization at this time or are there external forces pushing for this to be on the "agenda"?

Most importantly, to make this doable, the evaluation should **focus on just a few priorities and aim for practical objectives**. In evaluation planning, **starting with "lesser goals" is nearly always better than reaching too high**. And, **to the maximum extent possible, the work should attempt to build on what is already in place within the organization**.

LESSON #2: GOOD EVALUATION WORK REQUIRES ATTENTION TO THE BROADER ISSUES OF ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT, CAPACITY, AND PROGRAM PLANNING

A central lesson of this project was the sharp realization that evaluation necessarily deals with numerous aspects of organizational life. One cannot draw tight boundaries around evaluation as if it can be isolated from other key aspects of organizational development (OD) and operations, such as structure, staffing, decision-making, staff training, communications, and, most important of all – short and long term planning. In fact, we refer to Project work as Evaluation and Planning as the two are inextricably linked to one another in an ongoing process.

Given the important connection between evaluation and OD, it seems generally helpful that outside consultants bring a combination of qualities and expertise – in the field of organizational development, as well as the more specialized field

¹ For purposes of this paper, evaluation is understood to include a wide range of activities such as creating tools and systems to facilitate data collection, information gathering, documentation, assessment, analysis, and planning.

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of evaluation. Feedback from the grantees also highlighted the importance of working with evaluation consultants who have a deep understanding of, and appreciation for, community organizing.

In a project like this — where the central focus has been on helping groups design and implement a framework for evaluation responsive to their particular organizational makeup and needs — it is important that consultants offer assistance as coaches, teachers, partners, and guides, not as judges or technicians. Consultants must be able to help groups address important organizational issues affecting evaluation that inevitably arise, and be prepared to make course corrections in the work whenever necessary.

The Project's **approach to evaluation and planning, with an intentional link to OD, appears to be relatively uncommon in the evaluation field.**

LESSON #3. EACH ORGANIZATION UNTO ITS OWN: HOW DOES THIS FACT CONTRIBUTE TO OR HINDER THE ABILITY TO CREATE A COMMON FRAMEWORK OR TOOL USEFUL FOR MANY CO GROUPS?

The five CO organizations with which the project worked shared a number of features in common especially with respect to their theories of social change and the critical importance they place on the empowerment of and leadership by their primarily low- income constituents. But in many other ways, the groups are more dissimilar than they are similar. Their regional, political, cultural, and personal histories, circumstances, constituencies, and structures differ widely. Additionally, their specific entry points and priorities for Project work varied greatly. Therefore, for each group, a customized approach was necessary.

One of the Project's original goals — that of using this experience and the tools we were collectively developing to create a common evaluation framework for CO groups — remained a distant and uncertain goal. We did look for opportunities to create common definitions and indicators, but early on reached the conclusion that there would never be a "one size fits all" outcome. Still, we continue to ask ourselves: What would a common structured inquiry process look like? Will most groups of this kind want to ask and answer similar questions? Will there be findings, indicators, and processes that can be generalized to others, or must the measures, process, and internal practice be tailored each time to each organization? What do these organizations have in common that can contribute to a common framework?²

We concluded that for the purposes of this Project, it was not necessarily important (and is, indeed, unlikely) for the groups to reach agreement on specific systems and measurements of benefit to all, or find some sort of pre-packaged framework. However, the groups do seem equally committed to the following:

- Strengthening internal systems and processes that will serve to deepen their existing commitment to critical reflection and learning — asking and answering hard questions; and
- Collecting information about their work, and giving greater emphasis to the ways that they use the data and the stories to inform their plans and communicate their impact.

[Please note that OD and evaluation consultants, funders and non profit representatives who met at Gray Rocks conference Center in Canada in September of 2003, are interested in sharing tools and strategies around assessment and creating a space for non-profit organizations to exchange with peers.³]

LESSON #4: IT TAKES YEARS TO BE ABLE TO MEASURE MACRO LEVELS OF IMPACT

Very few social change organizations or community based organizations (CBOs) have made substantial progress evaluating the long-term impacts of their work. Most evaluation still takes place at the level of program (or project or strategy), and, indeed, this is a logical place to begin. Working at this level, it is likely to take at least two years for measures of short-term

² For example, the Environmental Health Coalition was interested in integrating evaluation into its Social Change for Justice (SCFJ) model. KFTC wanted to assess and improve new aspects of its leadership development training program. Citizens for Quality Education needed help with the planning of an organizational newsletter as well as learning how to continually evaluate the strengths of its communication strategies. Action/YIMS needed a strategic planning and evaluation template for decision making related to its youth leadership development institute.

³ Strengthening Social Change Through Evaluation and Organizational Learning, a report from the September 2003 Gray Rocks Conference available from the Community Learning Project — www.communitylearningproject.org

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progress to be realized by any CO group. Even then it will remain difficult to provide much cause and effect evidence that can isolate change that resulted from the work of a particular organization or strategy, given that there are many other factors and players also contributing to change.

Not only does it take time to develop useful frameworks to help groups assess their work at the program level — and truly integrate ongoing evaluation in a permanent way — but it is even more difficult (and, thus, more expensive and time consuming) to try to bring evaluation into play at the level of the mission or vision and goals of long-term change. To the extent this can be done at all, most people believe that it can well take five or more years for evaluation to prove significant impact. And this belief comes with other qualifiers: First, the evaluation needs to begin with programs that have a certain level of stability and maturity. Second, it takes time to design an evaluation process and develop the internal capacities to collect data, especially one that accurately and carefully captures the multi-layered outcomes associated with CO. Finally, the combined programs have to operate for some period of time before real change (or change that can be attributed to the organization's interventions) can be expected.

LESSON #5: EVALUATION CAN FULFILL MULTIPLE GOALS. EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION REQUIRES CLARITY AND HONESTY ABOUT THE GOAL OF THE EVALUATION.

Evaluation initiatives sometimes represent a big source of frustration and wasted resources for organizations and foundations alike. Our experience suggests that one reason is that funders and/or grantees frequently lump together various evaluation goals. There are two primary goals:

- Quantitative: a funder's primary interest in an evaluation process may be to demonstrate the impact of grants within a certain grantmaking strategy to its trustees. To provide evidence that the trustees may find compelling, the evaluation may stress quantitative outcomes, i.e. dollars leveraged, new homes built, wages increased, people directly impacted, policies changed. In other words, very concrete and demonstrable wins.
- Qualitative: the targeted grantee may prefer to evaluate whether the strategies undertaken were the best ones, whether they led to the desired results, which could include softer outcomes such as the extent to which the community was engaged, how much progress was made educating an elected official, how well integrated the various programs were, or other such measures harder to quantify.

These very different types of measurement require different evaluation plans and processes. One process and design is unlikely to serve both sets of needs.

What can be done? At the very least it is important to determine whether the needs for a prospective evaluation are primarily internal to the organization or external to meet a funder's need, and design a strategy accordingly. Or, if both goals are central to the evaluation, then it is crucial to assess whether a chosen strategy can realistically serve both ends. There is considerable debate in the field about whether there can indeed be compatibility between strategies aimed at primarily advancing critical learning internally and those focused on external accountability and reporting. Making decisions about the following uses for evaluation may help contribute to developing a more suitable strategy and design. Evaluations can:

- Strengthen organizational learning, planning, and effectiveness by improving an organization's internal capacity to engage in more systematic evaluation practices.
- Convince and educate others about the impact, lessons, or validity of an organization's work (or a grantmaking strategy) through an externally conducted evaluation and report.
- Help groups tell or market their story better with more effective communication strategies or tools.
- Help organizations gain more funding and credibility by equipping them with tangible outcomes of their work to share with external audiences.

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LESSON #6: THERE IS MUCH TO BE LEARNED FROM “TRADITIONAL” EVALUATION PRACTICE AND EXPERTISE. BY AND LARGE, WE BELIEVE THAT EVALUATING CO REQUIRES FLEXIBILITY IN THE APPROACH AND PRIORITIZING THE INTERNAL NEEDS OF THE ORGANIZATION.

The design of this Project has taught us much and will provide useful guidance as we consider other initiatives of this kind. First and foremost, the Project sought to help the participating groups develop their own internal capacities for conducting evaluation in a more systematic, practical, and responsive way. We also recognized the need to adapt the Project to on-the-ground realities, and respond as flexibly as possible to the groups' evaluation-related OD and program priorities. We come away from this experience believing that a flexible, bottom-up approach to evaluation design and implementation serve to strengthen individual organizations, but may also be the best methodology for producing the kind of data that makes the case for funding CO.

Most evaluations continue to be external – initiated, conducted and paid for by foundations. They are geared almost exclusively to meeting foundations' needs (accountability, policy, improved grantmaking, etc.). While foundation-driven, external evaluations have resulted in some extremely valuable knowledge about a wide range of community-change interventions and strategies, they have rarely left any evaluation capacity in the hands of the individual groups themselves, nor have they addressed organizations' most critical OD or program needs that a different evaluation might satisfy. It is an enormous challenge to work toward securing foundation investments to strengthen the capacity of CO groups to reflect on, analyze and improve their own practice, to collect their own data, to design their own tools, to meet their own organizational learning goals, to use evaluation to make better decisions and get better results.

CONCLUSIONS

Much that we have learned in this Project will help guide us as we engage in our own capacity building and programmatic initiatives that involve close work with our grantees. We look forward to continuing the dialogue with our peers about this important area and look forward to an ongoing and frank exchange about each of our lessons, observations, and perspectives. In sum, we take away the following conclusions:

- #1** Evaluation is a powerful learning tool for organizations and more resources should be directed towards capacity building in this area.
- #2** One size does not fit all. Evaluation and planning work, as well as capacity building more generally, needs to be customized to respond to the particular needs, priorities, and culture of each organization, and build on the practices and strengths that already exist. Outside consultants need to bring a combination of methodological expertise, along with an understanding and sensitivity to organizational development issues that CO/social change groups experience.
- #3** In order for evaluation to be of true value, it must be explicitly linked to planning (program design), and no longer be seen as something that happens at the end. Effective evaluation is integrated into the ongoing work and life of an organization.
- #4** Evaluation leaves something behind. Too often, externally designed initiatives simply take from groups – time, resources, expertise, and stories. All of us in the grantmaking world must check ourselves in this regard.
- #5** The accomplishments and impact of CO groups are impressive and far-reaching. In order to receive increased resources, groups need help translating their rich and powerful stories of individual and societal change into language and data that others can understand.
- #6** The ability to measure progress regarding an organization's overall mission to bring about long-term social and institutional change remains a work in progress that organizers, evaluators and funders will need to engage in together for many years to come. ■