# HOW DO YOU EVALUATE THIS STUFF?

**by Mark Cabaj, Guest Editor**

Boy, things have changed. There was a time, not so long ago, that my stomach juices would rise when I heard the words "evaluation" and "CED" in the same sentence, or even on the same day!

You see, I first dove into the evaluation pool at the deep end. As part of my graduate research, I agreed to evaluate the "cost-benefit and overall effectiveness" of a well-known community development corporation. I nearly drowned.

The problem, quite frankly, was that I put the cart before the horse. I paid a great deal of attention to the endless technical issues associated with the research side of evaluation (i.e., gathering and analyzing information). Yet I did not have a good grasp of the *fundamentals* of evaluating the work of community groups: what evaluation can accomplish, what should be looked at, who should be involved, and the nature of measuring progress.

After wrestling a good number of other projects to the ground since then, however, the evaluation of CED has become a satisfying, even enjoyable experience. I know now how it can be used fruitfully in the day-to-day grind of creating more equitable economies and communities. This edition of *Making Waves* is devoted to helping other practitioners, funders, and researchers explore those fundamentals and make evaluation enriching, rather than frustrating.

The eight contributors draw upon a rich range of experience and expertise. All are committed to using evaluation to strengthen the work of community groups and their communities. Here is what they have to share.

WHY EVALUATE?

Ever put down an evaluation report and feel it was not what you were looking for? Chances are it is because the people that produced it were not entirely clear what purpose it was meant to serve in the first place.

Stewart Perry, a fellow that has seen more CED work than most of us ever will, explores the three primary reasons for which community groups assess their work: to account for resources used, to improve the work, and as a means of determining if their priorities are in order. As with everything he writes, Stewart draws upon on his extensive experience, citing concrete instances to illustrate his points (see pp. 3-5).

WHAT ARE WE TO EVALUATE?

I have a good friend that fantasizes about creating a "model" for evaluating CED work. People would throw in a bunch of information about their activities and resources used, then churn out fairly objective information about the total impact of that work on the community, much like an accounting package does for a business.

Wouldn't be nice if it were that easy? Unfortunately, it isn't, nor is it desirable. There are certain types of CED work that lend themselves to this type of precision, small business lending, for example. But the field itself is a little too rich to design generic, detailed models for all CED-related work. I know - I've tried.

This is not to say, however, that we in the field cannot do a much better job of simplifying and clarifying the type of outcomes we are striving for. Eric Leviten's work is an excellent step in this direction, describing three broad areas in which CED groups attempt to make progress: improving the lives of individuals, strengthening organizations, and



THE EVALUATION HORSE & CART

DATA-GATHERING TECHNIQUES

PLANNING & PRINCIPLES
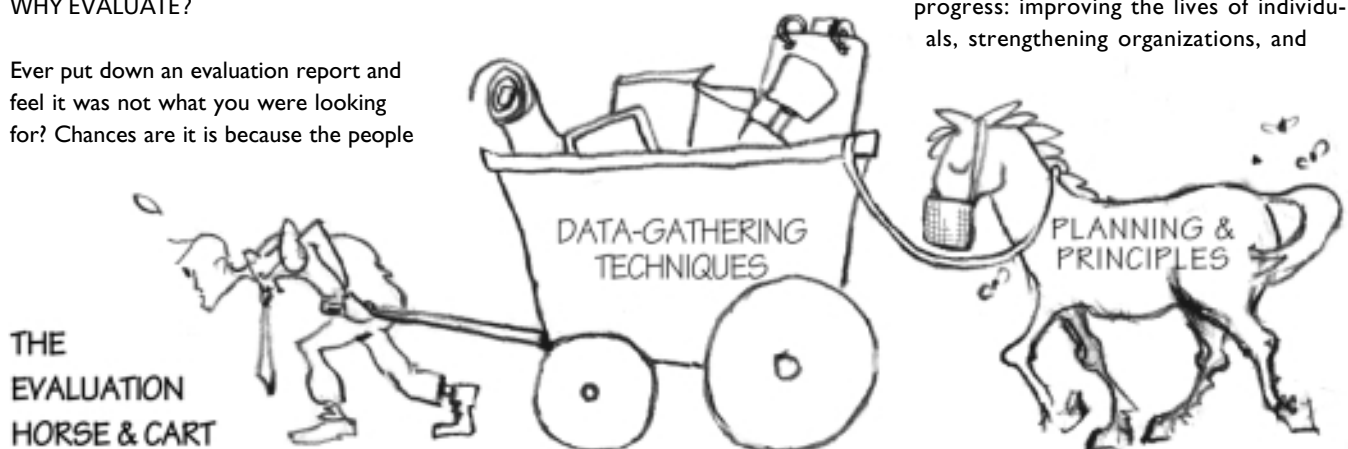
creating healthier, more inclusive, and productive community environments.

Eric then applies this framework to the Opportunities 2000 project, a multi-sectoral poverty reduction initiative in Waterloo Region, Ontario, complete with tailored indicators and data collection tools (see pp. 6-9).

THE "MEASUREMENT CHALLENGE"

Jed Emerson's article on the Social Return on Investment is going to appeal to many, many people (see pp. 10-14). He and his colleagues in the United States have created a tool to capture the cost-savings and increased revenue to the public treasury generated by "social purpose," or "skills training" enterprises. And they are also working hard to ensure that the managers and boards of these ventures are able to manage and use the tools themselves. This is a great addition to the field. We should keep abreast of Jed's work in future.

Sherri Torjman is wary of people getting carried away with the idea that if you can't measure something, it isn't real (see pp. 15-17). On the contrary, she argues that some of the most important work a CED group can undertake – such as getting the community to stand up, notice, and act upon complex, at times controversial problems - is tough to quantify. Like Eric, Sherri speaks about Opportunities 2000, but her findings are relevant to any community group interesting in "fixing communities," not just "serving clients."

It is clear that any comprehensive assessment worth its salt requires both "hard" and "soft" information. But experienced practitioners, policy-makers, and funders know the challenge of measurement goes beyond this debate. They want to know the degree to which a community group's work is responsible for progress at various levels. How many people, for example, would have started a successful business without that expensive training program? To what extent is that drop in unemployment due to such and such an initiative?

This issue of "incrementality" has been driving CED researchers nuts since the 1960s. My review of several articles on the subject identifies how far community groups and researchers can practically go to answer these questions (see pp. 19-21).

WHO SHOULD EVALUATE?

External experts can be very helpful in an assessment. They can provide relatively objective insights into a group's work and help with the many technical issues of assessment. Companies do not allow auditors to manage their corporate operations and judge their performance, however. Likewise, community groups need to be in the driver's seat when it comes to evaluating and making decisions about their work.

François Lamontagne describes the management information system developed by CRÉEQ, a CDC in Québec City. The project is notable both for the usefulness of its 4-point evaluation framework and for the participatory process itself, which resulted in greater buy-in from staff and stakeholders (see pp. 27-30).

Kathryn Church argues that any evaluation project or information system must directly involve from beginning to end the members of the organization being evaluated. This is an ethical necessity, to give voice to the people whom programs are meant to serve. In addition, their uninhibited reflections are generally the best feedback on the impact and possible improvements a project might have (see pp. 21-26).

Skeptical? Not worth the effort? Check out "Storylines," Kathryn's summary of a CED evaluation completed by and for survivors of the mental health system. It is hard to beat the biting honesty and the richness of how they feel about their involvement in these initiatives. Wouldn't it be nice for every assessment report to begin with this type of feedback?

Is your community group warming up to the idea of taking more control of assessment, but still a bit unsure about how to make that decision? If so, you may appreciate the article by Pippa Rowcliffe and Greg Tolliday. They review seven questions that groups should ask themselves when dividing work up between a community group's staff, volunteers and participants, and external consultants. A very nice checklist to have on anyone's desk (see pp. 31-34).

WHERE TO GO FROM HERE?

The vast majority of people working to rebuild local economies and improve the lives of marginalized residents are doers, not thinkers. This is good. It means that a lot gets done.

Our efforts could generate a greater impact if we could better integrate evaluation into our work and accomplish the things that Stewart Perry outlines: a better grasp of the outcomes of our efforts, improvements to our work, and a heightened awareness of priorities.

Can't fit that into an agenda and budget that is already bursting at the seams? I can understand that. But the alternative is to leave the entire job to outsiders to our organizations and to CED as a whole. Geez, haven't we heard that lesson by now?∞

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