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Evaluating for the Bigger Picture: Breaking Through the Learning and Evaluation Barriers to Advancing Community Systems-Change Field Knowledge

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Evaluating for the Bigger Picture: Breaking Through the Learning and Evaluation Barriers to Advancing Community Systems-Change Field Knowledge

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Introduction

Philanthropy is currently surfing a fieldwide wave of learning — strategic learning, peer and collaborative learning, learning from mistakes, emergent learning, learning from innovation, and learning while doing. We see these themes in the conferences attended by funders and evaluators, the publications they produce and share (including many in this journal), and in the changing titles of foundation staff responsible for knowledge building, evaluation, and internal staff learning (Center for Effective Philanthropy [CEP] & Center for Evaluation Innovation [CEI], 2016).

This desire for more learning is in part motivated by an increased mission-driven desire for foundations to be more transparent about the community benefit they are intending to create. It has also been driven by foundations' common frustration and accumulated dissatisfaction with deriving useful lessons from past work and failing to leverage evaluation and documentation effectively to provide translation of findings that are usable in new work. In a 2015 survey of more than 120 foundations, 83 percent reported that their evaluations are not providing useful information for the field — the most often cited challenge (CEP & CEI, 2016).

Often these frustrations and redoubled efforts to increase the effort and value of learning are internally focused in foundations on their own work. Encouragingly, these individual

Key Points

- Foundations investing in community systems change often fail to prioritize field-level and cross-initiative evaluation questions in building initiatives. As a result, many of the documented evaluations of such investments lack translatable lessons specific and influential enough to drive related decisions and actions of others in the field.

- This article developed from ongoing, multiyear peer learning across several foundations that collectively compiled recommendations for community systems-change funders and evaluators to implement more powerful evaluations. They are intended to help funders and evaluators engaged in these efforts build sectorwide knowledge capable of informing improved work across initiatives and communities. This article also prioritizes the inclusion of community in the entire process of field-knowledge creation and use.

- As the managers and advisers responsible for evaluating funder-led community systems change, we have struggled to ensure that our evaluations are capable of providing useful knowledge to future efforts. For that reason, this article focuses on strategies to address the gaps we see and with the intention that important lessons are captured, analyzed, shared, and used by others.

foundations are taking responsibility for their organization's accountability and effectiveness through intentional and ongoing cycles of assessment and learning. There is also the hypothesis that if more foundations are intentional with both their own learning and the transparency and sharing of that learning, the broader community will benefit from greater accumulated knowledge of effective grantmaking and practice. However, unless there is more disciplined and intentional investment of time and resources in our collective knowledge building, we believe there will continue to be a lack of available and useful lessons from both scholarship and practice to create sectorwide knowledge that contributes instrumentally to improved practice.

By definition and goal, the community systems-change field has always been directly engaged in places and communities in ways that have forced funders and evaluators to confront issues of systemic racism, racial and economic equity and opportunity, and the historic and structural imbalances of wealth and power omnipresent in all communities — especially the ones selected for investments and initiatives. As the fields of philanthropy and evaluation continue to advance their understanding and engagement around these issues, there is much to be learned from past community systems-change research and practice. As we consider field-building in this area, we must also address issues of "knowledge equity" (https://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/Strategy/Wikimedia_movement/2018-20, n.d., para. 5) — who has, holds, and has access and the opportunity to use and contribute to shared knowledge — and the ongoing challenge of foundations and evaluators to acknowledge and adapt their evaluation and learning practices to be more equitable in intent and execution (CEI, Institute for Foundation and Donor Learning, Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy, & Luminare Group, 2017). We acknowledge that foundation knowledge and field-building practices have often failed to adequately include community perspective and knowledge, and in our remaining discussion we prioritize the inclusion of community in the entire process of field-knowledge creation and use.

> *As we consider field-building in this area, we must also address issues of "knowledge equity" — who has, holds, and has access and the opportunity to use and contribute to shared knowledge*

The Bridgespan Group (2009) published *The Strong Field Framework* to examine philanthropy's approach to assessing what is needed for collaborative field building. The framework describes how collaborative practice will be built by assessing and addressing our shared identity and knowledge, standards of practice, field and leadership support, and supportive policies that guide the building of knowledge and improving practice in a specific field. The documentation and sharing of this knowledge are what help test assumptions and build consensus around shared conclusions, which make our collective knowledge stronger and more useful. This social building of knowledge allows for ongoing examination of multiple experiences and data, debate, collaborative reflection, and joint documentation of field consensus (Stahl, 2000). This requires active and ongoing collaboration among funders to build shared knowledge and not simply the accumulation of many individual foundation learning products.

The Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago examined the specific challenges and needs in philanthropy-driven community change investments for more strategic and intentional learning efforts (Hamilton, et al., 2005), and addressed the necessary intentions and actions required for foundations to be learning organizations. Even then, the authors asserted,

> Many foundation leaders believe they cannot successfully change communities by acting or learning alone. Their learning depends on learning throughout the fields of philanthropy and community change, and the fields' learning depends on

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individual foundations' learning. … It is a daunting intellectual and practical task to link the learning agendas of many institutions in a sector that prides itself on independence and exceptionalism — but it is the only way to achieve something larger and more coherent." (p.10)

Before we can learn together we must first address the question, "Why can't we collaborate?" In a recent survey, the CEP (2016) found one-third of foundation CEOs pointing to either the absence of collaboration or challenges in cross-foundation collaboration, and citing many internal and external reasons: One noted the challenges most succinctly as "ego, lack of collaboration, competition — people stuff" (p. 11). Foundation demands and expectations for grantee and community collaborations are not complemented with the same urgency for foundation collaboration. Individual strategic focus often results in shared goals, but in different approaches and priorities as well as disagreements over assumptions and theories of change.

Many of the documented and published lessons and evaluations of foundation investments in community initiatives lack translatable lessons specific and influential enough to drive related decisions and actions of others in the field. Brown (2010) assessed the challenges and trends of community systems-change evaluations, including the increased attention to learning in and from these initiatives as they are developing and being

implemented, and found real-time learning and shared learning frameworks increasingly being used and integrated into the community change work. But as Coulton (2010) pointed out in her response to Brown's summary, many of these initiatives and their evaluations are not prioritizing the field-level and cross-initiative evaluation questions. Coulton called this "evaluating for the bigger picture" in order to contribute knowledge effectively to the field across communities and not only to the stakeholders of a single initiative (p. 115).

This article developed from ongoing and multiyear peer learning across several foundations that collectively compiled recommendations for community systems-change funders and evaluators to implement more powerful evaluations that can build sectorwide knowledge capable of informing improved work across initiatives and communities. We will not address the broader challenges of evaluating complex change initiatives, which are presented more fully elsewhere (Brown, 2010). We also will not directly address initiative self-evaluation and ongoing, reflective learning that are now more commonly supported in foundation-funded work, including the engagement of grantee organizations and communities in foundation planning, investment, and evaluation; these related learning activities do contribute to and support knowledge translation and use, but are usually targeted internally at their own implementers. The outputs of this internal learning are a key source of knowledge for the field and we will reference their use and application; however, we specifically focus on what is challenging within community systems-change evaluation and implementation that prevents findings and lessons from being taken up and applied by other funders and implementers in their own initiatives and that precludes the building of useful sectorwide knowledge.

Learning Across Community Systems-Change Efforts

Community change efforts have been funded and implemented in the U.S. for more than 40 years (Hopkins, 2014; Turner, Edelman, Poethig, Aron, & Rogers, 2014). These foundation- and

government-driven efforts have been called comprehensive community initiatives (CCIs), place-based and neighborhood initiatives, and collaborative and collective impact approaches. What they all aim to do is invest in a variety of coordinated strategies in a specific place to achieve broad and long-lasting positive change in the community system[1] for groups of people and whole populations — to change the trajectory of concentrated negative outcomes (e.g., poverty, poor health, violence and lack of safety) in communities. We will refer to all these approaches as community systems change. Gardner, Lalani, & Plamadeala (2010) described the common elements of community systems change focused on poverty alleviation, which have general applications across goal areas as "broad-based collaborations of service providers, residents, advocates, businesses, governments and other stakeholders;

- "that come together to develop comprehensive and integrated multilevel service and policy responses;

- "they are community-based, meaning both located in specific places and contexts and being driven by community needs, perspectives, and mobilization;

- "they have long time horizons and broad ambitions — working to mobilize local communities to transform conditions and constraints." (p. 1)

More recently these community systems-change strategies have advanced to include goals for change at multiple levels of people, place, and policy within the contexts of broader community systems, economies, and histories — especially the multigenerational effects of systemic racism and urban neighborhoods of concentrated poverty (Hopkins & Ferris, 2014). Community systems change also invests in the communities themselves and their people and capacities as the mechanisms and levers of change in order to

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change the social outcomes affecting that same place. Much has been written about these experiences and many lessons have been shared in various forms; however, our conclusion is that there have also been frustrating challenges to the ability of community systems-change designers, funders, and implementers to gain important and translatable lessons from the past. Specifically, as the managers and advisers responsible for evaluating funder-led community systems change, we have struggled to ensure that the design and outputs of our evaluations are capable of providing useful and usable knowledge to future community change efforts. For this reason, we are focusing on strategies to address the gaps we see in community systems evaluations to increase the likelihood that the important lessons and knowledge of initiatives are captured, analyzed, shared — and used by others.

Even before the collective-impact framework was put forward by Kania and Kramer (2011), place-based community change efforts were using multiple strategies and investments over three to 10 years and longer to engage local communities and neighborhoods in addressing specific issues of poverty, community safety, health outcomes,

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[1] We use the terms "community system" and "systems change" here intentionally to underscore the importance of viewing the community as a complex, interactive social system; this includes, but does not exclusively consist of, government agencies and public systems.

This article developed out of ongoing peer conversations and consultations that occurred over a decade among the authors, who were responsible for managing and advising evaluations of community systems-change efforts of 10 years or longer funded by foundations.

and overall disparities (Kubisch, 2010). Most of these initiatives were designed and implemented primarily by single funders, both private foundations and government agencies, sometimes with other partner investors. Despite their many similarities in intention for change at a community level, there has also been wide diversity in the approaches and goals guiding these initiatives. And over time there have been multiple forums and opportunities for community change funders to share their experiences and lessons learned. Chief among these was the series of convenings and publications by the Aspen Institute Roundtable on Community Change,[2] including the *Voices from the Field* series, which shared lessons from multiple initiatives in three volumes (Kubisch, 1997; Kubisch, Auspos, Brown, Chaskin, Fulbright-Anderson, & Hamilton, 2002; Kubisch, Auspos, Brown, & Dewar, 2010). The *Voices* series compiled knowledge and experience of the design, implementation, management, and outcomes of multiple initiatives across many years. Other resources and networks continue to provide opportunities for funders and

implementers to learn both from past work and current peers, including the Collective Impact Forum,[3] CCI Tools for Feds,[4] the University of Kansas Community Toolbox,[5] the Tamarack Institute,[6] and the Grantmakers for Effective Organizations (GEO) Evaluating Community Change framework.[7]

The challenge of sharing learning and informing the field also comes from the diversity of approaches and even evaluation methods. A related review of community systems change evaluations concluded,

> As many CCIs are unaffiliated, vary in how they do their work, and [in] what they are working towards, apples-to-apples comparisons across communities are difficult to make. As a result, much of the generated knowledge on CCIs comes from internally generated reports and evaluations that are typically thin on methodological rigor. (Flanagan, Varga, Zaff, Margolius, & Lin, 2018, pp. 5–6)

This article developed out of ongoing peer conversations and consultations that occurred over a decade among the authors, who were responsible for managing and advising evaluations of community systems-change efforts of 10 years or longer funded by foundations. In addition, we have participated in and contributed to studies of place-based community systems-change initiatives funded by place-based, embedded foundations (Sojourner, Brown, Chaskin, Hamilton, Fiester, & Richman, 2004) and the Aspen Institute's Roundtable on Comprehensive Community Change's *Voices from the Field II* (Kubisch et al., 2002) and *Voices from the Field III* (Kubisch et al., 2010). Our professional collaboration developed first out of necessity — each of us needed to know and learn more from similar community systems-change efforts and evaluations — and grew into a genuine collegial and trusting relationship that helped each of us improve our own work in real time. Together

[2] See https://www.aspeninstitute.org/programs/roundtable-on-community-change.

[3] See https://collectiveimpactforum.org.

[4] See http://www.ccitoolsforfeds.org.

[5] See https://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents.

[6] See http://www.tamarackcommunity.ca.

[7] See http://www.pointk.org/resources/files/geo2014_indicators_framework.pdf.

we and our foundation colleagues participated in regular peer exchanges and consultations with each other during the decade of the overlap of the three foundation initiatives, starting in the mid-2000s. These exchanges enabled us to share our frustrations and brainstorm new efforts around the constantly changing demands of our own community systems-change evaluations. This informal yet intentional collaborative learning enabled each of us to compare and contrast our three community systems-change initiatives operating in different contexts and scales — the three multisite initiatives covered city, state, and national efforts and addressed varied issues of child poverty and well-being, community health, employment, and education, which also enabled us collectively to define some field-relevant hypotheses and lessons that we could not have achieved individually in our own evaluations.

This informal peer learning in real time prompted reflection and problem-solving of both design and operational challenges throughout the initiatives. Honest and vulnerable requests for help and advice are difficult to have and address in public venues such as conferences. And when real-time solutions need to be identified amid complex contexts, published documents often lack detail and specificity around the decisions and compromises made throughout a complex initiative. We leaned on the trust and openness each of us brought to our peer sharing in ways that were helpful to our roles and work, to our evaluators and evaluations, and to our foundations and grantee partners. Now, by documenting some of these shared lessons, we believe our other funders, evaluators, and implementers.

Based on our collective experience, we began to compile over several conference calls and emails a set of challenges to designing and implementing community systems-change evaluations that contribute to broader field learning. We also identified specific tactics to address these challenges, some of which we were able to implement in our own evaluations. This summary of challenges and solutions (Kelly, Brown, Cao Yu, Colombo, &

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Chavis, 2017) was presented to a group of evaluators at the November 2017 American Evaluation Association national conference in Washington, DC, in a think tank inaugurating a topical interest group of evaluators active in community development evaluation.[8] We engaged 25 evaluators around three key questions to elicit their edits and additions:

- What prevents you as evaluators from helping your clients and others effectively use and translate community systems-change evaluation findings into decisions and actions (especially in new initiatives)?

- Can you give an example from your work where a community systems-change evaluation and its data were shared, leveraged, and translated into new decisions and actions? What behaviors or practices made this possible?

- What do evaluators and evaluations of community systems change need to do to

[8] See http://comm.eval.org/communitydevelopment/home.

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increase the use and translation of evaluation findings into other places and efforts?

We divide these challenges into categories representing stages in the timeline of designing and implementing the evaluation, starting with learning from past initiatives and intentionally designing looking forward with field-building as a goal. (See Table 1.) Addressing these challenges requires foundation initiatives and evaluations to include field-building as an explicit goal and to implement evaluation and learning strategies that can advance field knowledge, including:

- committing to field-building through the sharing and transparency of planning, implementation, and evaluation documents and data;

- using shared frameworks, vocabulary, and data across foundation initiatives and evaluations to better integrate existing and new knowledge;

- including intentional strategies for field-building and influence in community systems-change initiatives' theories of change and implementation;

- prioritizing the inclusion of community knowledge and perspectives in the building of field knowledge; and

- planning and investing the time and resources needed to promote and advance cross-foundation reflection and field-level knowledge building after foundation initiatives end.

Learning From Past Community Systems Change

Challenges

As Flanagan et al. (2018) noted, there is a wide variety of implementation theories and approaches deployed in community systems-change work, making it difficult to more easily draw lessons across initiatives. In addition, many initiatives use very idiosyncratic language and framing to describe their approach. For example, a common element of community systems change is the building of "community capacities," but there are diverse perspectives on what these are, how to define and assess them, and how much they contribute to overall community change. Initiative-specific language is often used to gain common and negotiated understanding among the stakeholders of that single initiative and also to stand out as a new and advanced effort over past work. Although this uniqueness may achieve an important communications goal, it greatly complicates building on field knowledge unless careful translation and links to field knowledge are made.

Another common experience of community systems change is that the language and theory proposed in design are changed and adapted during implementation, often without clear explanation or documentation. Community systems-change evaluations struggle in both design and effort with changing theories of community systems change, and there may not be sufficient time and attention paid to understanding and documenting these key changes, especially for audiences outside of the initiative. Yet these changes often not only reflect real lessons learned by the initiative itself, but also are valuable knowledge and lessons for the field —

TABLE 1 Challenges in Learning Across Community Systems Change

Challenges in Learning From Past Community Systems Change	Challenges in Designing Evaluation With Future Translation of Findings in Mind	Challenges in Translating and Using Evaluation Findings
There is a lack of a shared, common vocabulary and framework for defining and measuring core elements of theory and implementation.	Funders and community systems-change implementers do not plan for intentional use and translation early enough in the evaluation.	The internal culture of the funder/implementer creates barriers to maintaining attention for 10-plus years; admitting failure; and focus on management and implementation.
Published evaluations lack detail on implementation design, management, and decisions, and/or do not always document evolving theories of change, including the analysis informing these changes.	There is a disproportionate focus of evaluation time and resources devoted to outcomes, compared to implementation or learning.	There is a lack of thorough and genuine inclusion of community reflections and analysis on the implementation and impacts of initiatives, including opinions or conclusions that disagree with funder and evaluator perspectives.
Published evaluations and documentation do not include adequate perspectives, analyses, and conclusions of the community members who are the focus of the community systems-change agenda.	There is a lack of time and resources for ongoing knowledge capture during an initiative, including the prioritization of authentic community engagement in evaluation and learning activities.	There is a lack of time and resources for intentional reflection and analysis to define and translate lessons for use.
In multisite community systems change, there is usually wide variation in approaches and timelines in implementation, and a lack of shared understanding and experience of system and community changes.	There is a lack of attention to and analysis and documentation of changing assumptions and theories of change.	There is a lack of coordination and integration among disparate evaluators in design, data collection, analysis, and reporting, both within single initiatives and across multiple initiatives.
Many published evaluations cannot measure population-level outcome changes due to the long-term nature of community change and difficulty of linking to implementation.	Maintaining common knowledge across time and transitions through turnover of leaders, staff, and grantees is inconsistent.	There is inadequate sharing of data and findings with the community and the field because funders or evaluators consider data proprietary.
Documentation of local place context, and how it affects implementation and outcomes, is incomplete.	Evaluation does not adapt to and accommodate emergent innovations and lessons.	Evaluation does not resource post-initiative data collection to document impact and influence occurring after investments end.

Reflective Practice

if they are documented and communicated intentionally and clearly.

What these challenges share in common is that most of these key elements are rarely documented fully in published evaluations and documents about the demonstrations of community systems change. In their systemic review of more than 2,000 published articles on community change investments, Flanagan et al. (2018) could find only 25 with sufficient documentation of implementation and impact.

TABLE 2 Solutions and Strategies for Learning Across Community Systems Change Field

Solutions for Learning From Past Community Systems Change	Solutions for Designing Evaluation With Future Translation of Findings in Mind	Solutions for Translating and Using Evaluation Findings
Share data and comprehensive evaluation documentation through open sources and public archives (e.g., IssueLab.org).	Resource capacity building intentionally and adequately for the community to participate actively in initiative evaluation and knowledge creation and use.	Engage in post-initiative intentional reflection, analysis, documentation, and dissemination.
Seek ongoing intentional learning communities (e.g., Aspen Roundtable, Community Development topical interest group of the American Evaluation Association).	Devote intentional time and resources throughout the initiative to document, analyze, and share.	Pursue post-initiative intentional communications efforts with an integrated communications and evaluation strategy.
Look to shared community systems-change frameworks that help build on knowledge (e.g., Aspen Institute, GEO Embrace Complexity, Collective Impact).	Increase staffing for and resourcing of more rigorous evaluation (especially of implementation) throughout the initiative, including evaluation capacity building and participation of the community in analysis and dissemination.	Evaluation and evaluators need to be funded post-initiative to share evaluation findings, along with complementary post-initiative investments in communities and the field that support translation and use of findings.
Use peer-sharing networks to structure learning across roles, funders, and initiatives.	Perform timely and regular implementation assessment (e.g., rapid feedback memo) from evaluation throughout implementation.	Produce shorter, user-friendly products with succinct analysis, conclusions, and recommendations, but without oversimplifying the complexity of challenges, initiatives, and lessons.
Develop and share implementation and planning documents across funders and initiatives.	Embed post-initiative leave-behind evaluation capacity in the overall initiative logic model.	Be transparent about mistakes, failures, and unintended consequences.
Address evaluation analysis and use in multiple stages of implementation.	Choose emergent learning processes that translate analysis and conclusions into changed behaviors.	Improve attention to and dissemination of process evaluation design, analysis, and findings, with explicit conclusions on what can be done differently.
	Evaluate the evaluation on its success in dissemination and influence of lessons and findings.	

Much of the documentation of implementation, theory changes, and collective sense-making is held in internal documents by the funders and implementers. We do not believe that funders and change agents are intentionally hiding their work. As Pennie Foster-Fishman of Michigan State pointed out in a meeting of community systems-change evaluators, the complexity of these initiatives leaves behind "swimming pools full of data" and documents that are challenging to manage, analyze, and communicate, especially once an initiative is over (Fiester, 2007, p. 5).

Solutions

The primary challenge that exists across all these barriers to knowledge building for the field is the lack of funding and time to plan intentionally for field building during the design and implementation of the initiative. We welcome the needed increased attention on real-time reflection and learning within initiatives during implementation. What we suggest is a complementary increase in attention to and support for linking these lessons with the existing knowledge in order to build and advance lessons across community systems-change experiences. (See Table 2.)

This first requires having intent and commitment to field and knowledge building and including adequate resources to build and integrate gained knowledge into the field and communicate in ways and venues that ensure the field has access to and can fully understand the community change lessons in the collective of other community systems-change experiences. Funders and implementers need to include field building as an intentional goal of their initiative and resource this goal appropriately — including time and investments in an intentional plan for analysis and dissemination. In addition, it is then appropriate for the systems-change evaluation to consider and assess the progress and success the initiative has in terms of influencing and informing the field of related community initiatives.

Commitment of intention and resources by funders and implementers to shared knowledge building is key, but so is rigor in the review and analysis of knowledge to put it in the context of what is known and the questions we collectively need to answer across the community systems-change field. This means there needs to be more willingness on the part of community systems-change funders and implementers to expose their theories to more rigorous definition and testing (Coulton, 2010), including intentionally linking developing community systems-change theories to existing knowledge in other fields, such as economics, community psychology, and political science (Kelly, 2010).

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Starting with the important field-building and field-networking efforts of the Aspen Institute Roundtable on Community Change (and now the Aspen Forum for Community Solutions), there continue to be opportunities for funders and implementers to connect and share data and lessons — in conferences, peer-learning groups, and professional association conferences (Ahuja, 2014). These network learning opportunities are important, but still disconnected from building if not a single, then a connected and disciplined archive of documents and examples that include unpacked theories of change that explain how they were derived and adapted; implementation models and data that contribute an understanding of community capacity building leading to measurable community change; and, especially, publicly archived outcome data and analyses that can be systematically compiled, reviewed, and even meta-evaluated. The Collective Impact Forum is an excellent example of collective knowledge building and sharing organized around a commonly understood and implemented framework across multiple places and initiatives.

Another good example is the Skillman Foundation's final evaluation report of its 10-year community systems-change program,

Defining and participating in shared frameworks and archives of similarly defined data and lessons are the best way for the community systems-change field to both contribute to and learn from the rich diversity of community change experiences and evaluations. And we need intentional support and participation for this networked scholarship to be viable, useful, and sustained.

Good Neighborhoods, in six Detroit neighborhoods, which included appendices of its theory and implementation as they changed over time (Burns, Brown, Colombo, & O'Laoire, 2017). These details of implementation and theory are usually missing from publicly available final community systems-change reports, yet they are important to understanding how the process and outcomes of the initiative are not only related to each other, but also to what is known in the community systems-change field. The Annie E. Casey Foundation's 10-year Making Connections initiative archived its community outcome survey data in a public data set.[9] An example of both field-knowledge building and sharing is the GEO peer-learning network, Embrace Complexity; in which more than a dozen community systems-change funders (both private foundations and federal agencies) compiled a shared framework of implementation and outcome elements that helped them and helps the field review and analyze experiences and data in

a more disciplined manner (Community Science & Bearman, 2014).

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Designing and Implementing Evaluation to Promote Translation and Use

Challenges

Designing and implementing community systems-change evaluations are complicated for all the reasons we have discussed — multiple levels of intervention, adapting theories, changing strategies, and usually a wide scope for what is included in the community intervention and expected in terms of interim community-capacity outcomes. Population-level outcomes may be few and specific, but the pathways to achieving these outcomes are varied and inter-related. Because of this, most community systems-change evaluations are stretched by available resources, especially time, to maintain a focus on what is needed to document the levers of change, program and population-level outcomes, and system changes. There is often a disproportionate amount of evaluation time and funds spent on chasing after and measuring intended (and unintended) outcomes at various levels of program, systems, and community. This leaves fewer evaluation resources to address the most overlooked evaluation questions in the field around design, implementation, and adaptation of the theory and interventions.

There are two other key challenges to community systems-change evaluations being effective in facilitating translation and use of knowledge. The first, similar to many evaluations, is the failure of evaluators and implementers to plan early enough for post-initiative communications and

[9] http://mcstudy.norc.org/

dissemination. It is understandable that many funders and evaluators are cautious about getting too far ahead of the work, data, and analysis, but without some early planning and integration of field-building resources and activities into the evaluation and documentation of the initiative, there will likely be neither the right evaluation questions answered nor the appropriate methods and documentation of those answers contributing to field-building.

Second, we have rarely seen examples of goals and strategies for field-building dissemination, communications, and influence built into the theory of community systems change. Many funders and implementers talk about "influencing the field" through their investments and work, but without an intentional strategy of communications and influence during or after the initiative or period of investment. This includes not fully investing time and funds into documentation that is intentional about field audiences and learning.

Solutions

One of the biggest challenges most community systems-change implementers and their evaluators face in time frames of five to 10 years or longer is the inevitable turnover of people — funders, designers, investors, community leaders, and even evaluators. Planning for constant turnover and onboarding of new actors is a must in yearslong change initiatives. Ongoing documentation and learning strategies are needed to maintain knowledge and momentum of a constantly changing team of implementers and community. A related challenge once the initiative is near its end is that individuals move on — to new work and new opportunities — and if the experiences and lessons of people earlier in the initiative are not adequately captured, including their analysis based on data collected after they left, our ability to make field-relevant conclusions is weakened. Community systems-change evaluations need to address this challenge throughout the initiative by repeatedly advocating for adequate time for review of data and documentation of participants' analysis, reflection, and lessons learned.

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Much attention has been given to improving the ability of stakeholders, particularly foundation funders, to be proactive in their learning, including the sharing of failures (Hamilton, et al., 2005; Leahy, Wegmann, & Nolen, 2016). Funders and implementers hold optimistic and ambitious goals for community change — optimism and ambition that often do not make room for planning for failure and unintended consequences. It is also difficult in long-term initiatives to garner the energy and attention to re-question original assumptions in light of new data and experiences. These cognitive traps in philanthropy require an effort, especially by evaluators, to intervene with reflection and learning tools and practices that challenge thinking and assumptions in helpful ways (Beer & Coffman, 2014).

Most community systems-change evaluations fail to include adequate time and resources for the evaluation to continue to collect data beyond the period of implementation and investment. These efforts are about changing the systems and capacities of communities to take on complex strategies that impact populations — changes in outcomes that may require years to observe. The field suffers from a lack of evidence establishing clear causal linkages between complex interventions and population outcomes (Kubisch, et al., 2010). Without continuing to collect data and test community systems-change theories fully, implementers and evaluators will continue to make attempts to obtain and

A more important gap in most foundation reflection and analyses of community systems change is, in fact, the perspectives of the community itself. Even as community residents are sources of knowledge and data, oftentimes they are not engaged and involved intentionally enough (and lack adequate resources and support) to participate in post-initiative analyses and sense-making prioritized and legitimized by formal and even independent documentation.

measure impact and make field-contributing conclusions inadequately.

This also points to the need for most community systems-change initiatives to consider funding evaluators beyond the implementation period of both the initiative and evaluation to contribute to field-knowledge sharing. Evaluators are often tasked with being the documenters and translators of the theory of systems change as well as being the "sense makers" of a complex intervention and experience, particularly when there are multiple sources of data and, likely, a mixed set of complete and incomplete findings. There are some examples of foundations and implementers commissioning re-visits and look-backs after an initiative has ended that are often focused on sustainability of change momentum and looking for aftereffects or longer-term impacts and

influences (Brown, Butler, & Hamilton, 2001; Hebert, 2014). However, these reviews often are missing reexamination and re-questioning of original hypotheses about implementation and causality — reflection and analysis which would contribute more to field building.

A more important gap in most foundation reflection and analyses of community systems change is, in fact, the perspectives of the community itself. Even as community residents are sources of knowledge and data, oftentimes they are not engaged and involved intentionally enough (and lack adequate resources and support) to participate in post-initiative analyses and sense-making prioritized and legitimized by formal and even independent documentation. This crucial community knowledge source may be included as one perspective on community systems change while often not given the same value and attention as the foundation's or evaluator's, yet represents the living knowledge that community possesses to continue change efforts beyond foundation initiatives and investments. Hebert (2014) revisited communities affected by community systems change after the foundation investments ended to gain their perspectives on not only the sustainability of impacts, but also the lessons they learned independent of the foundation.

We also argue that at the heart of all community systems change theories is not only the goal to change the specific place and community, but also to learn more about systems and community change in order to scale positive impact more broadly — to address entrenched, systemic inequities in many more communities. The real goal for most of these efforts is to bring effective community systems change to scale in more communities (Hopkins & Ferris, 2014). This implicit goal for scale is why cross-initiative evidence and learning are important and should be prioritized more. And how the single program or place of focus must be connected to and instrumental in sharing and advancing knowledge in other communities must be a part of the overall theory and implementation of the initiative.

Evaluating for the Bigger Picture: Building Knowledge for the Field

There remains much intention in most community systems-change efforts to contribute to and influence the field, but without explicit theories, funding, and effort of knowledge sharing and dissemination that lead to translation and use of information that actually affects decisions and actions. Current and future evaluators should include in their implementation both theory and planning for this dissemination of knowledge.

Community systems-change knowledge building requires the integration of intentional strategies to influence and disseminate knowledge to the field into evaluations early enough so that appropriate documentation and data are prioritized around the field questions needing to be answered. We recognize that this is not a priority for individual initiative funders and implementers, but our mutual dependence on each other's knowledge and experience is what has built this field over time and we need more attention to ensuring that field-building questions are defined and answered. These questions include needing to know about the complex interactions of capacity building, policy and systems changes, and the achievement of population-level outcomes within a broader context of history and systemic forces acting against specific communities. Without data from multiple community systems-change demonstrations, it will continue to be difficult to obtain the evidence needed to justify the types and levels of investments needed to understand how to achieve long-term community change. The field now has more opportunities to learn from a wide set of initiative examples, and we should continue to commit to the goal of openness and shared learning:

> A commitment to share with the broader field: Foundations that learn often are foundations that share. These foundations see themselves as contributing members of a broader field of inquiry, with reciprocal obligations of openness. Their leaders view their organizations' knowledge and experience — good and bad — as an asset for the field. These funders are not naïve or unsophisticated about sharing information, however. They know they need to be strategic — to have a clear purpose

for sharing, to define the audience with whom they are sharing, to choose the right time, and to tailor products to their audience's needs. (Hamilton et al., 2005, p. 46)

It is not simply the commitment and will to share, however, but also intentional effort, leadership, and supportive resources that are necessary to ensure that collaborative knowledge and field building routinely occur. Beyond the challenges to foundation collaboration and learning previously discussed (CEP, 2016), what is most needed is for foundations to take a systems view of their shared goals and need for learning, and then consider themselves as part of a social system necessary to create and codify greater knowledge — which is possible only in collaborative relationship (Hirschhorn & Gilmore, 2004). We must think beyond the needs and demands of an individual foundation and, instead, prioritize the shared goals philanthropy has within a field and invest time and resources to support intentional, well-designed peer-learning collaborations. We need to step up and become field catalysts to promote innovation and learning in philanthropy and creating a "road map for change" and field building, to ensure that we continue to learn and advance shared knowledge and practice in community systems change (Hussein, Plummer, & Breen, 2018, p. 51).

The collaborative knowledge and field building we need in community systems change requires foundations and evaluators to proactively and intentionally define goals and plans to address the field-level questions we still have. This certainly requires the motivation, time, and financial resources to support and engage foundation staff, evaluators, and community to work together with other community systems-change efforts to compare and contrast hypotheses, data, experiences, contexts, and analyses so that we can advance and construct consensus-built common knowledge capable of influencing and being applied in practice beyond single foundation efforts.

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