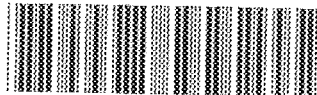


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Improving community health through evaluations

Joanna Becker

Abstract There has been an increasing emphasis on sustainable community development in recent years, which is linked to community health through quality of life and intergenerational considerations. Evaluations are one of the basic tools to improving community health with the most effective evaluations being those that are meaningful to the community itself, and which provide tangible feedback and incentives for improved performance. Drawing on well-known methods, this paper illustrates four important components of community evaluations. Although each method incorporates some or all of these components, their achievements to date have been limited. The reasons for this, as well as how evaluations can play a more effective role in improving community health, are discussed.

Introduction

Communities have historically had a close relationship to their natural resource base and have tended to remain within the carrying capacity of a region if they were to survive. However, this is no longer the case, especially for North American communities, which need to address sustainable development to continue in the future. This paper looks at to what extent evaluations help to do this.

Evaluating community life will not by itself improve its health but provides a reference to start from. As Besleme *et al.* (1999) concluded from a study of community indicators in two communities, the process itself produces outcomes, but moving from evaluation to action requires both citizen participation and policy implementation.

This paper considers to what extent four evaluation methods have improved community health in North America. These methods illustrate how public participation, clarity of presentation, repeated application and establishment of target behaviors emphasized in the Bellagio Principles (Becker, 2004) are important for community evaluation methods. The

paper summarizes the strengths and weaknesses of these methods and their accomplishments to date based on the literature and personal interviews. It concludes with suggestions as to how to better use evaluations to improve community health.

What is community health?

A community is an organized body of people who share a common interest, generally living in the same area. Jacobs (1995) identifies place as the important link between people in a community, whereas Warburton (1998) believes that the relationships between people are important as well as a sense of place. A shared sense of history is also important. A community may be little more than an extended family or a megapolis of several million people. Increasingly, there is also awareness of the global community consisting of all the Earth's inhabitants. Smaller communities such as business, religious and political groups may nest within larger ones. Membership in one community does not preclude membership in another.

It is not easy to define community health, often equated with 'quality of life', referred to in the 'Caring for the Earth' definition of sustainable development (IUCN, 1991). Quality of life has often been treated synonymously with the term 'well-being' (Rogerson *et al.*, 1987). Many characteristics have been identified with quality of life (Mitchell *et al.*, 1995) and include personal and community development and security as well as the physical environment and the provision of goods and services. If the intergenerational considerations of sustainable development (WCED, 1987) are included in community health, then the sustainability of many urban communities is questionable and may actually be deteriorating.

Ideally, community development is closely linked to sustainable development with provision of goods and services for both current and future demands. Sustainable development may be less relevant in poor communities where problems are immediate and environmental impacts are local and comparatively minor (McGranahan *et al.*, 1996). But at the most fundamental level, sustainable development means continued existence (Bossel, 1998). Many communities have persisted in the same location for years, whereas others have suddenly perished or been reformulated. Most survive now at the expense of resources from other places (see Ecological Footprint).

Agenda 21 identified the major physical environmental issues facing global urban settlements: as improved planning and management; integrated provision of environmental infrastructure, the promotion of sustainable intra-urban energy and transport systems, anticipatory planning in disaster-prone areas and urban health (UNCED, 1992).

How then can modern communities become more sustainable? Selman proposes that a top priority for sustainable urban development is the creation of viable political and institutional systems capable of 'framing broadly based strategies, programmes and policies' (1996, p. 41). Many of the characteristics of making a community sustainable are what make it a desirable place in which to live.

Components of a community evaluation program

An evaluation program uses some type of indicators, whether these are qualitative or quantitative, summarized in an index or assigned an arbitrary value. Much has been written elsewhere about the desirable qualities of indicators (Mitchell, 1996; Cairns *et al.*, 1993; Van der Bergh, 1996; among others) and those that are selected for the assessment of community health will depend on the interests of the specific group but should include social indicators. The social indicators movements arose in the USA about 1910 (Smith, 1991). Environmental indicators, including the pressure-state-response (PSR) framework described subsequently, were also inspired from the social indicator movement in the 1980s.

What are the important indicators of a community evaluation program? Cobb and Rixford (1998), in their history of social indicators, conclude that measurement itself does not induce appropriate action nor mean that it is a good indicator. They recommend seeking indicators that reveal causes not symptoms when planning to act and that a democratic indicators program requires more than good public participation.

Given the appropriateness of the selected indicators, can the implementation of an evaluation method itself help improve community health? No matter how well an evaluation method is devised and implemented, it will not help improve community health unless there is the political will and individual commitment to make it happen. However, the Bellagio Principles are important in all evaluation methods as illustrated in the following examples.

Public participation

Community health must be determined by the citizens of that community. Participatory development is defined by the World Bank as 'a process through which stakeholders influence and share control over development initiatives and the decisions and resources which affect them' (World Bank, 1996, p. xi). Lack of participation and control of resources are recognized as contributing to threats and failures of projects (Machlis and Tichnell, 1985; Nepal and Weber, 1995). Cobb and Rixford (1998) conclude that moving

from indicators to outcomes is more likely with 'control over resources'. Community participation helps identify local issues as well as implementing necessary changes.

McAllister (1999) lists potential benefits of participatory monitoring and evaluation: as direct learning from the lessons for the community; information, ownership of the process by the community and community capacity building. A study by the World Bank's Learning Group on Participation found that, although more time was required for the preparatory stages, the costs may be no higher for preparing and implementing participatory projects than non-participatory ones (Bhatnagar, 1992). The study concludes that consideration should be taken of the costs of not providing for participation.

The concept of stakeholders has now expanded to include not only the rural poor, as in the FAO's People Participation Programme of the 1980's, but also local institutions and civil society in a power-sharing scheme based on negotiation and conflict management (Warren, 1998). Participation itself will not guarantee success, however, and Gilbert (1987) believes that the achievements of community participation have been greatly exaggerated, noting that the interests of weaker groups may be damaged and that such participation depends primarily on political interests. Participation itself needs to be evaluated to determine the extent and quality of participation, the costs and benefits of participation and the impact of participation on outcomes, performance and sustainability (Karl, 2000). One evaluation program notable for its public participation is the Sustainable Seattle Program.

Sustainable Seattle Program

This Program was initiated by public participation with a multi-stakeholder process of 150 citizens in 1992 (Sustainable Seattle, 1998). This process continues with a steering committee of twenty or more citizens and a bi-annual indicator review. It therefore also addresses re-application, although funding is not guaranteed for its continuance and it is not mandated by the legislature. It has improved its clarity of presentation by reducing the indicators from ninety to forty and presenting these as sustainability trends that are declining, improving or new with a further category for those with insufficient data (Figure 1). The indicators serve as educational tools, as well as being helpful to decision-makers. Atkisson (1999) attributes its success to its administrative base, good timing and skilled facilitation. He notes, however, that the long-term focus caused some alienation and the difficulty of handling technical topics by volunteers. Other limitations noted by Hardi *et al.* (1997) are that some indicators cannot be presented in time

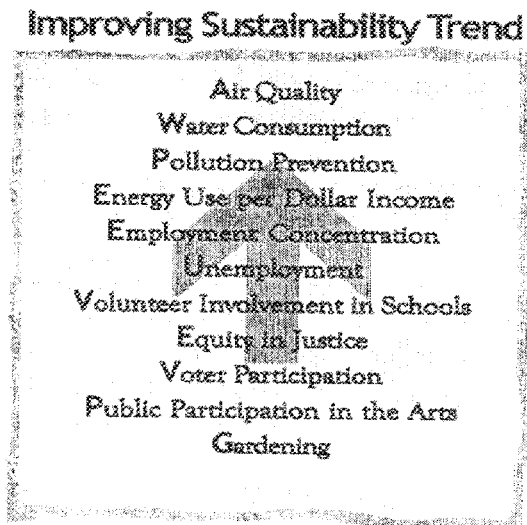


Figure 1 Sustainable Seattle indicator trends (Sustainable Seattle, 1998)

series, with changes to the indicator set making comparisons over time difficult.

Current work on the Program is addressing some of these issues, such as considering the use of targets and applying a filter to the indicators to determine their appropriateness, data availability and the ability to translate the findings into action. The current Executive Director, Chantal Stevens, is well aware of the need to incorporate the program with action. Strategies for actions are to be developed by the Steering Committee for the 2005 Indicators Update, with the data collected by Sustainable Seattle and community volunteers. Stevens admits that in the past Seattle has had little capacity to implement the findings of the Program, partly due to lack of paid staff, and she thinks it could be instructional to compare the performance of Seattle with other cities (personal communication, 2004).

As to its effectiveness, a study by Oiden (2003) found that, although the Sustainable Seattle Program did not directly affect policies, it did have a significant impact on decision-makers. Seattle has recently been praised for its indicators and comprehensive plan (Kent, 2003). However, the lack of incorporation into public policy and its dependence on volunteer staff has limited the effectiveness of the program to direct changes in Seattle and King County. As of now, therefore, its ongoing public participation is not carried into action, particularly by the business community, so as to maintain and improve the quality of life that attracts its workers to the community.

