

## Evaluation of Community Engagement Processes

Evaluation is a key part of all good community engagement processes and indeed all good development processes. From the proponent's perspective, evaluation enables a process to be refined and contributes to ongoing professional development. From the point of view of affected communities, evaluation is important because it provides an opportunity to critique and validate the process and to express any concerns or reservations.

### Evaluation frameworks

A supportive framework for incorporating experimentation into community engagement processes is *formative* evaluation. Sadly, evaluation of community engagement processes most commonly occurs *after* the process or project has been implemented. This is called *summative* (or outcome) evaluation. While useful for professional development purposes, this approach dilutes the ongoing responsibility of stakeholders, including developers, to pay critical attention to whether or not the proposed actions are being effective.

In contrast, *formative* evaluation can occur *during* a community engagement process, so that feedback can be incorporated and improvements can be made *as the process unfolds*, not just afterwards, when it is too late. Ideally, good community engagement and development processes will employ both types of evaluation. Formative evaluation processes can also add a degree of structure to projects which are – or should be – relatively open due to their complex nature. While this goes against the grain for many planners or developers who prefer to be dealing with 'known' outcomes, the reality is that complex socio-ecological systems like cities do not operate in a controlled and linear way. Cities, ecologies and societies are complex systems with non-linear causal relationships.

Sometimes, the best outcomes are achieved by not rushing to the finished product, but allowing for experimentation and exploration to find creative solutions to difficult problems. Experimentation is a relatively new concept for planners and for many developers as well. It requires that we explore *unknown* territory. This can be challenging for organizers of community engagement processes, who often feel that they are required, at least appear, to 'know the answers'. We need to embrace opportunities to experiment, however challenging, to allow new and innovative solutions for sustainability to emerge. In such cases, strong processes – including strong evaluation processes – can support stakeholders in exploring unfamiliar territory.

### Criteria for evaluation of community engagement

Therefore, any evaluation process must:

- build feedback into the process from the outset and not add it as an afterthought;
- ensure that processes are evaluated with the aim of refining future processes;
- allow for ongoing and continuing evaluation, as it keeps the process on track;
- be responsive to the needs of all participants;
- provide feedback on evaluation to all participants;
- be very explicit regarding the format the evaluation will take: who will have what responsibility (including financial responsibility) in the evaluation and what the time lines for evaluation are;
- Listen to constructive or negative feedback but do not get disheartened. If the criticism is valid, there must be processes in place to address the needs for change to that part of the process.

Remember that people are often silent when they are satisfied or you have gained their trust. Expressing negative feedback, in my experience, is much more common.

## Guiding Principles for an Evaluation Methodology

1. A multi-faceted and multi-method approach will be necessary because of the complexity of evaluating complex social processes and qualities.
2. At all costs, we must avoid a strict positivist and quantitative approach based exclusively on measurements of various indicators.
3. An effective evaluation framework will need to be highly participatory and involve a range of stakeholders, as well as residents and users of community spaces and facilities and services.
4. The evaluative framework will need to be flexible and modified over time as we become more sophisticated in our understanding of the factors associated with the topic at hand.
5. The evaluative study, while acknowledging that its subject matter is complex and difficult to quantify and measure, must nonetheless be purposeful and action-oriented with a view to making recommendations for change. It must be addressed to a body that is able to receive its findings and implement change.
6. At its base, the evaluation study must judge the value, merit and worth of policies and programs where the policy has been applied. The findings will aim to help planners and others make choices about future planning. The aim is to inform and guide future practical action.
7. Because this form of evaluation research differs from academic research (which aims to discover new knowledge), the political nature of the evaluative activity must be acknowledged in the research design. Numerous groups and individuals will have opinions and vested interests and will want to participate in the decision-making process. Thus, the emphasis must be on utility, relevance and meeting the needs of specific decision makers.
8. The sorts of evaluations envisaged are more complex and far-reaching than simple audits or monitoring of identified indicators. Evaluating a complex subject is much more ambitious. It can ask, for example, whether or not a certain strategy has worked and which observed changes can be seen as resulting from specific interventions. It can also examine the impacts of regulations or incentives from a number of different perspectives and explore causal linkages between activities and outcomes.
9. Values are explicitly part of the evaluation framework, whereas monitoring can be seen as essentially a value-free activity that emphasises information collection. A critical evaluation is likely to include components of auditing, monitoring and inspection but also a critical examination of the performance indicators that were originally established.
10. Of the various types of evaluation in a literature (formative, summative and knowledge), the most valuable approach to be *formative*, as its aim is to provide feedback to people who are trying to improve something. Thus, the timing is critical- to ensure that changes *can* be made.
11. Formative evaluation approaches can explore many questions, including:
  - How the intervention (s) might be improved;
  - How the specific aims were to be achieved and have been achieved;
  - How the various elements have or have not produced the desired effects;
  - Advice at intervals throughout the monitoring process; and
  - “Early warning” alerts about approaches that may not be working effectively.

12. The objectives of evaluation in this context could be the following:
  - Assessing and predicting the economic efficiency and costs involved;
  - Calculating the costs involved;
  - Addressing the question of whether the mechanisms were established and maintained as originally intended; and
  - Evaluating the reactions and responses from the recipients of the strategies. This would be most useful for housing and the public realm.
13. Staged evaluations can yield valuable results. There is value in conducting a “pre-evaluation” before the formal, full-blown evaluation. Even a limited, “diagnostic” evaluation, such as those frequently used in post-occupancy evaluation (POE), can help with early estimation of technical difficulties, practical implications, and financial implications associated with various planning, design and tenure models.
14. The social and political context of evaluation: Because of the multiple stakeholders involved in many community planning contexts, the researchers need to be aware of predictable, practical difficulties (and if possible to maximise stakeholder involvement):
  - Multiple stakeholders, some with vested interests;
  - Policy-makers who may not want to hear “bad news”;
  - Senior officials in government departments who may be eager to replicate projects before evaluation is completed; and
  - Workers engaged in delivering the project.
15. Considerations to take into account when conducting a formal evaluation:
  - The need for absolute clarity about different objectives and relative importance of different objectives;
  - Acceptance that the evaluation cannot please everyone and that findings will be rejected by some and welcomed by others;
  - The necessity of handling the potential for conflict throughout the evaluation process: this involves accepting that there will be vested interests, that the different perspectives of stakeholders must be acknowledged and that with care, the different objectives of stakeholders can be identified and specifically evaluated; and
  - The importance of acknowledging “situational” factors (including the original conditions and political circumstances at the time of the project’s inception) so that the dissemination and implementation of findings can reflect those realities.
16. Collaborative evaluation: Given the sensitive and political nature of the evaluation process, a stakeholder-based or community-based participatory or collaborative evaluation is a wise approach to take. Stakeholders can provide advice about evaluation questions, definition of successful outcomes and measurement of effectiveness.
17. There are three major reasons for a collaborative approach:
  - *Utilization*: If salient issues can be identified, there is an increased likelihood that stakeholders will act on the findings;
  - *Multiple views*: multiple participants with multiple views help us acknowledge that there is no “right” or “objective” interpretation. Parties can work together to achieve an acceptable accommodation, accepting that no one action is more correct or rational; and
  - *Influence*: A collaborative approach offers the opportunity for a wide range of groups to bring their concerns to the attention of those who have the power to make changes.

## Guiding evaluation questions

1. **Holistic:** Does the evaluative preserve unity of the whole setting under consideration and view the social unit as a whole?
2. **Contextual:** Is the study clear about explaining the wider context of a case or a site?
3. **Sensible:** Does the evaluation yield a sensible, plausible account of events or outcomes?
4. **Explanatory:** Is there an adequate causal explanation that makes sense of how events unfolded and how they are linked to one another? (de Vaus, 2001: 234-236)
5. **Social Justice:** Were social justice concerns clearly voiced in the evaluative framework so equality was sought in the distribution of benefits, as well as in the status and voice of the participants? (House, 2008: 630, 633)
6. **Appropriateness:** Are the form of evaluation, its timing and the degree of stakeholder and community engagement appropriate to the scale and nature of the project and the issues under consideration?

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## Some Sources on Evaluation

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- UN Evaluation Forum [www.uneval.org](http://www.uneval.org)
- Canadian Evaluation Society [www.evaluationcanada.ca](http://www.evaluationcanada.ca)
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