Core Components of Community Organizing Evaluation

GUIDE

Around ten years ago, Alliance for Justice completed a systematic review to gather information related to the evaluation of community organizing. Designed to save the valuable time of organizing groups and others, this document synthesizes the results of this research by outlining seven key components to consider when evaluating organizing work.

DEVELOPMENT OF POWER

Increasing the collective power of a constituency or organization is a critical component of community organizing, recognized across different organizing theories and philosophies. Though closely related to the attainment of organizing "wins" on an organizational level, the development of power speaks more broadly to the perception of the organizing group in the broader political sphere. It is reflected in the ability to gain access to politicians, the ability to put issues on the map, and recognition of the organization as a "go-to" group on a particular issue, among others. When evaluating a group's organizing work, one should keep an eye on its strategies and success in developing its power, especially beyond the confines of an individual campaign.

Key Issues and Implications for Evaluation

The development of collective power is one of the most challenging core components to evaluate. Challenges include the fact that "power" is difficult to measure and can take many years to attain. In evaluating community organizing efforts, it is important to consider what "power" looks like, "indicators" that the constituency and organization are gaining power, and that evaluating this aspect of a community organizing group's work may require seeking input from stakeholders outside the organization and the constituency.

DEVELOPMENT OF CONSTITUENT LEADERSHIP AND POWER

Two of the key features that distinguish community organizing from other types of change efforts are its focus on developing leadership and developing constituents' sense of purpose and power. Well-crafted pathways for constituent leadership development within the organizing process (including intentional processes for consciousness raising and the development of critical analysis skills) take time, effort, and skill. Ensuring that the organizing process reinforces a healthy sense of strength among constituents is also something that requires intentional action. Though almost all organizing groups note the critical role of constituent leadership and power, the demands of ongoing campaign work sometimes lead organizers to trust that simple participation in campaign activities

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will create results in these arenas.

Additionally, these components are often viewed more as "processes" than "outcomes," making it difficult for many groups to evaluate their performance in these areas. However, tracking an organization's strategy and capacity for developing leadership and constituent power is a critical part of understanding how successful that organization will be at community organizing, especially in the long run.

Key Issues and Implications for Evaluation

One of the most common challenges to evaluating this core component is creating and measuring indicators of leadership development that move beyond simple participation in campaign activities. In addition to defining measurable indicators for leadership, power, and sense of purpose, evaluation of this component should include how to track and evaluate an organization's strategy and capacity for developing leadership and constituent power.

PARTICIPATION AND MEMBERSHIP

Closely related to the development of constituent leadership and power, constituent participation in decision making (often expressed as membership within the organization) is another hallmark of the organizing process. This participation can take place in identifying organizing goals, deciding on strategies and tactics, negotiating changes in plans throughout the organizing process, and even deciding organizational policies as a board member. Organizational training to facilitate such participation can be key. Also as much "process" as "outcome," some organizations do not include constituent participation in their evaluations beyond such measures as increases in membership or participation in annual meetings. Because of the central importance of participation to the organizing process, a more nuanced look at participation mechanisms and success is critical.

Key Issues and Implications for Evaluation

As with constituent leadership and power, one of the most common challenges to evaluating this core component is developing meaningful and measurable indicators of participation beyond counting the number of members and the number of meetings they attend. Evaluation of this component should include indicators of participation in other aspects of organizational decision making beyond organizing campaigns, such as training and evaluation decisions It should demonstrate if there is a line of progression by which those engaged in organizing and those benefiting from it can participate in campaigns, and eventually take leadership roles within the organization, including governance of the organization. Identifying related indicators and ways to measure them can be an organization wide conversation.

ORGANIZING WINS

The actual objective of a campaign — or, as it is often called in organizing jargon, the "win" — is often the most visible part of the organizing process and is probably the most commonly evaluated. Related to the development of power, in that achieving the outcome of a campaign is often associated with developing the power necessary to win the campaign, it is usually fairly easy to objectively identify whether or not an organization has reached its campaign objective. Yet, it is important for many groups to include a more nuanced definition of the organizing win that includes such outcomes as resident empowerment and organizational development.

Key Issues and Implications for Evaluation

Organizations' wins can be externally or internally focused. Evaluation of external organizing "wins" is seemingly straightforward and easy to measure by whether or not a campaign objective was met. Campaign objectives are frequently long-term, though, and a group might work toward an objective for several years, or longer. From an evaluation standpoint, organizations need to think about how to break down long-term campaign goals into shorter-term interim objectives. For example, gaining support for an issue from key neighborhood leaders or city council members can be an important stepping stone towards an eventual policy change sought. Some internal interim objectives might be "stepping stones" toward longer-term goals, and important "wins" in and of themselves, such as changes in constituent leadership and power, or changes in organizational capacity. An organization might lose a campaign but at the same time accomplish a "win" by building its power significantly.

MEANINGFUL IMPACT

While the evaluation of an organization's success at reaching its campaign objectives is critical, it is also important to gauge the meaningfulness of the campaign objective in terms of its impact on a community or on a particular issue. Choosing and winning campaigns that, in and of themselves, do not have a meaningful impact does not necessarily indicate successful organizing work. Including measures of the larger impact of organizing campaigns helps us see the forest for the trees.

As an additional note for this component, many organizations recognize the need to think beyond individual campaign outcomes and focus on how the organizing process also contributes to a larger movement for change. Including the concept of meaningful impact in evaluation conversations not only helps organizations think critically about the relevance of their campaign objectives, but also about how the process of achieving these objectives can contribute to a larger vision of positive change.

Key Issues and Implications for Evaluation

Evaluating "meaningful impact" is something that organizations need to start thinking about in the early planning stages of a campaign, or even in the issue identification stage. They can ask themselves what will be different for people in the community if the campaign is won and what will be the measurable improvement in people's lives. Another question about impact is what will be the range of people that benefit from the changes sought. Further, it is critical that constituents themselves be involved in defining what is meaningful. A longer term challenge is to identify ways to track outcomes beyond the life of the campaign. For example, once a group has won a policy change it might track the implementation of that change and measure its impact on people's lives.

ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY AND MANAGEMENT

In order to engage meaningfully in long-term community organizing work, an organization needs to continue to assess and develop its capacity to do and manage organizing. The greater the focus (among staff, membership and board members) on analyzing root causes and structural causes of social problems, and the use of this analysis to sharpen the identification and attainment of campaign objectives, the greater the impact an organization will have in creating small- and large-scale social change. Additionally, an organization needs to be developing its capacity (from the board to the staff level) to manage and understand the role of organizing work within its vision, mission, strategic plan, etc. Critical areas within organizational development include, but are not limited to, organizational operations, the development of relationships and collaborations, and planning and implementation capacity.

Despite its importance, especially for longer-term movement building work, an organization's ability to build capacity for and manage organizing, as well as an organizational structure that supports organizing, is easy to overlook, and often gets lost in the day-to-day needs of an organizing campaign. However, the intentional development of organizational capacity and management will often distinguish a group with the ability to have one successful campaign from a group that has the ability to make a more lasting impact.

Key Issues and Implications for Evaluation

While many tools have been recently developed for assessing nonprofit organizational capacity, identifying capacity needs, and measuring results of capacity building efforts, there has been less research and are fewer assessment and evaluation tools tailored to evaluating organizational capacity for effective community organizing. Organizations considering their key evaluation questions and appropriate indicators of capacity for organizing might include the organization's capacity to: cultivate and manage membership; engage diverse stakeholders in setting goals and priorities; adapt those goals and priorities quickly in response to changes in the environment; and create and maintain internal systems that support organizing (such as appropriate supervision for

organizers and personnel policies that reflect the organization's social justice goals). One key evaluation question is whether or not a group is part of a larger world of organizing in order to aggregate power to accomplish its mission.

ONGOING REFLECTION AND INNOVATION

Related to organizational capacity building and management, but more specifically focused on ongoing implementation and adaptation of campaign strategies and tactics, a critical component to organizing success is the process of reflection and innovation. Organizing is as much art or craft as science, and organizers and the organizations that support them need to be able to recognize when situations mandate changes to the organizing formula. Equally as important, as campaigns come to a close, a process of reflection and celebration are critical—and again often overlooked—pieces to successful organizing work.

Key Issues and Implications for Evaluation

Evaluation, at its heart, is about incorporating ongoing reflection and learning into an organization's work. Community organizing work in particular is about learning as you go – learning about what kinds of strategies and tactics work when, where, and under what conditions, and paying close attention to process and how leaders grow and develop. The implications of this for evaluation are twofold: (1) it suggests that a highly participatory form of evaluation that engages all stakeholders in the process of defining evaluation questions (what is to be learned through the evaluation) and carrying out the evaluation is appropriate; and (2) it suggests that an organization's evaluation plan should ensure that the process builds in points along the way for stopping and looking at evaluation "results" to date, reflecting on them, and drawing lessons learned.