

WHY EVALUATE?

Cautionary Words for the CEDO



by **Stewart E. Perry**

Even in the best of circumstances, a systematic evaluation of CED initiatives is a complex and difficult task. All the more reason, then, to be absolutely clear from the outset about the purpose or purposes that the evaluation effort is intended to serve.

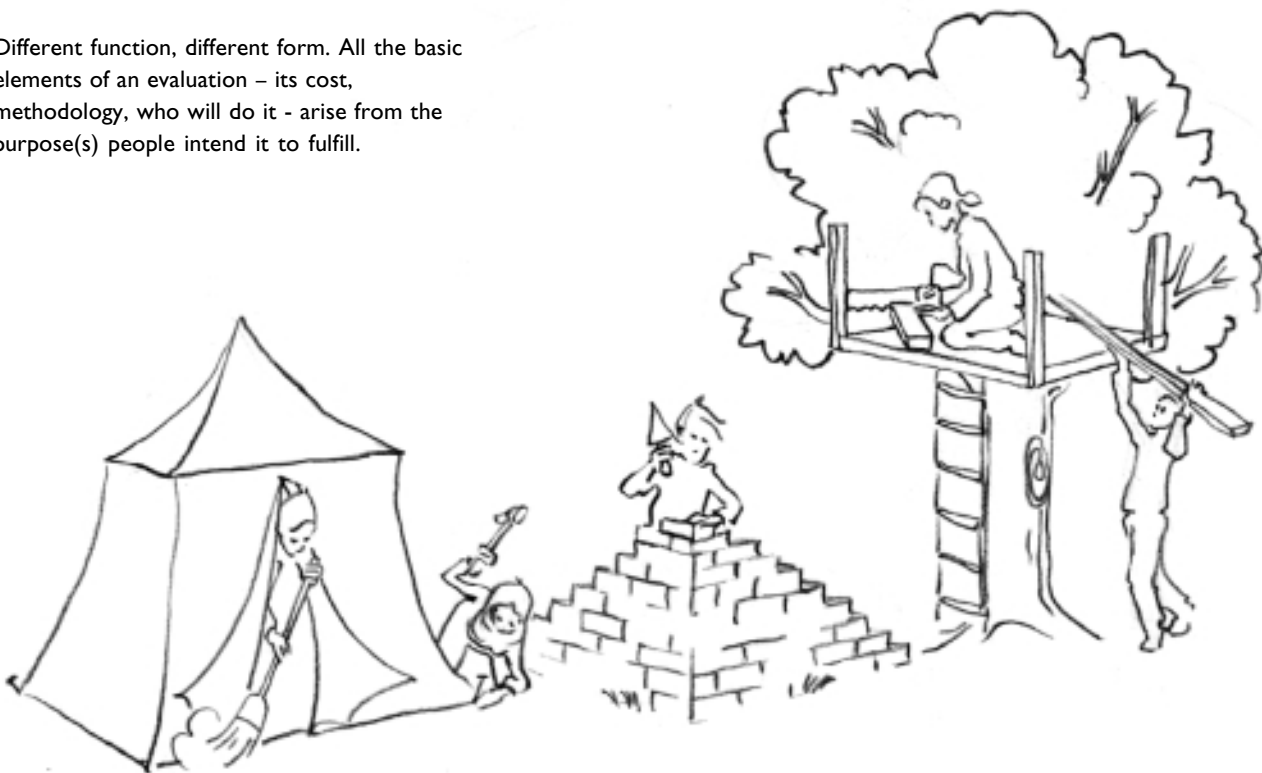
Achieving this clarity of purpose will help you to select a methodology or approach for the evaluation, and to decide whether the evaluator ought to be internal or external to the CEDO. It will also help to keep the evaluation on course. And, after all, specifying the purpose will indicate whether the evaluation is genuinely desired or required. Why bother going to all the trouble if it is not?

There are at least three major purposes for undertaking an extended systematic assessment of a CEDO's work:

- to account for the resources used (assessing effectiveness)
- to improve current activities (assessing operations)
- to renew the CEDO's mission (assessing priorities)

While the first usually has a strong, externally-generated motivation, the latter two purposes clearly tend to be internal to the CEDO. I will examine the evaluation pro-

Different function, different form. All the basic elements of an evaluation – its cost, methodology, who will do it - arise from the purpose(s) people intend it to fulfill.



cess as it is relevant to each purpose. Note that in most of my observations I assume that the CED organization (CEDO) will be carrying out the evaluation. (Whether the CEDO or some other party ought to do the job is discussed in “The ‘Who’ of Evaluation,” p.31, this issue.)

**TO ACCOUNT FOR RESOURCES USED:
ASSESSING EFFECTIVENESS**

The most common purpose of evaluation is to see whether CED efforts are accomplishing what they should. If dollars are to be spent to strengthen a weak community, it is surely important to determine if they are making a difference. Whatever their source, these dollars are too scarce to waste.

So, from the community’s point of view,

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the prime purpose of the evaluation is to see if the community is getting a reasonable benefit from the CEDO’s activities. From the CEDO’s point of view, this evaluation can document its work and reassure its staff and board (and others) that their efforts have not been in vain. The evaluation might also provide the CEDO with information to justify current support and/or additional support.

These are all excellent reasons for CEDOs to launch an evaluation effort to assess effectiveness. Yet it is rare for them to do so. Time and expense may be the primary problem. But even when the assessment could be undertaken without too much expense, the task of self-examination may seem too hazardous.

Therefore, it is usually a funder that initiates the effectiveness evaluation and asks the CEDO to provide the evaluation data. A funder wants to know whether or not its dollars have promoted its intentions, or at least to what extent the intentions have been realized.

Since the funder wants the information, the funder will of course have to underwrite

the obvious out-pocket costs for the CEDO to gather and provide the necessary information. Unfortunately, there are also likely to be hidden costs for the CEDO. Staff time will be diverted in unexpected ways. These expenditures will be hard to itemize, and yet they also require compensation. Negotiating the terms of compensation is one of the initial challenges for the CEDO here.

There are other challenges. Depending upon the funder’s goals, evaluations actually may or may not be useful to achieve them. Thus it is critical that the CEDO be clear on what *the funder* has in mind! That may entail a very searching conversation to clarify the funder’s goals. Also, people within the funding organization may differ over what they want to accomplish and how they want to document it; and the CEDO

can get caught in the middle of that.

Most particularly, funding personnel can have rather unrealistic ideas as to what can be done in an evaluation effort. I have known, for example, a funding organization to expect, as a consequence of its investment, a documented decrease in the local unemployment rate over a certain number of years. And the evaluation was supposed to determine if that outcome had been achieved.

Now let’s think about this. The CEDO may take exactly the instrumental actions (successfully) that the funder assumed would happen, and still there will be no difference in the unemployment rate. Even if the unemployment rate falls, how can that be attributed to the CEDO’s activity? With some exceptions (like the closure of a chief employer in a small community) a single local actor does not ordinarily determine the unemployment rate in a community. Too many other factors are at play both inside and outside the community. Even if it were possible to take most of the important factors into account (for example, to consider in- and out-migration, national bank interest rates, etc., etc.), the scope of

the evaluation study would be exceedingly expensive and time-consuming - and still fail to convince some key people.

Faced with unrealistic expectations of this sort, the CEDO needs to re-orient the funder to what is possible and reformulate the evaluation accordingly. Instead of focussing on unemployment rates, for example, the evaluation might ascertain if the CEDO’s ventures had created the expected number of jobs for a particular income sector. True, this may seem very limited, but the reversal of a community’s decline is to some degree measured in such small steps.

Now, funders are not the only outside people who are interested in the effectiveness of dollar infusions for CED. Even when their money is not involved, there can be other parties in academia, in the corporate world, and in governments who may be interested in CED effectiveness, all with their own purposes. And their appreciative reactions to the evaluation could be of some importance to the CEDO.

To take their interests into account, the evaluation might try to intuit how to shape the evaluation to suit such purposes. A better approach would be to get a direct response from such parties, consulting with them before the evaluation begins. And perhaps submit the draft evaluation report to a number of such stakeholders inside and outside the community. A public panel discussion might also be useful. The point is that in the course of defining and documenting effectiveness, many perspectives need to be considered if the results of the study are to be widely accepted.

**IMPROVING CURRENT ACTIVITIES:
ASSESSING OPERATIONS**

Another primary purpose of evaluation is self-education for the sake of improved operations. The CEDO may launch an internal evaluation of a particular project or program in order to understand its ins and outs better and to design improvements. Or the CEDO may set out on an organization-wide assessment of activities. In these instances the learning is targeted to limited operational issues, such as whether or not reports are being produced in a timely



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fashion. The techniques for information gathering are apt to be relatively informal - for instance, group discussions.

The usual setting is probably a day’s retreat during which staff review their activities and performance. The chief challenge here is to create an accepting atmosphere in which people can undertake self-assessment without anxiety about retribution if shortcomings are discussed or complaints raised. Paradoxically, an outsider in this instance may be able to help set that atmosphere, as a facilitator for the meeting.

RENEWING THE CEDO’S MISSION: ASSESSING PRIORITIES

A third prime purpose of evaluation is to determine whether the CEDO is going in the right direction, generally speaking. As Peter Drucker has put it, “The question becomes not ‘Are we doing things right?’, but ‘Are we doing the right things?’”

The CEDO will have a variegated set of activities in its strategy. Is it stressing the right ones? For example, a CEDO may be heavily involved in lending capital to local microentrepreneurs. This is a very time-consuming and expensive proposition. It is certainly one of the appropriate tasks that a CEDO can undertake. But given what might be substituted for this effort, is it the best thing for the CEDO to be doing for that community? The CEDO asks itself,

“What are our priorities here? Should we spin off the microenterprise program to someone who could do it just as well?”

I was once involved with a group that had a fine record in its operation of more than a dozen programs, especially in the field of employment services. The staff, board, and clients all seemed to feel that the CEDO was performing well, helping clients to find satisfying jobs. Nevertheless, the CEDO undertook to review its situation to see if, in fact, that accomplishment could be documented and if any improvements should be made.


A searching process of staff discussions confirmed the good performance. Still, the staff expressed discomfort; something was missing. The focus on operations left too many questions unanswered. They began asking themselves different kinds of questions.

Ultimately the group began to reformulate its prime work. The focus on helping people to find jobs was replaced by a broader concern with confronting poverty in general. And the successful administration of its own programs was seen as less significant than a new effort to build and strengthen empowering institutions in the community. In short, the CEDO began to re-think its central mission - not so much in the sense of changing its wording, as to evolve a new sense of purpose.

In this sort of evaluation a key concern for a CEDO is to determine how best to use an

assessment to explore the meaning of its mission. For example, submitting an evaluation report for community discussion could reveal that new priorities are emerging in the community. In fact, that sort of potential re-thinking probably should be included as a genuine parallel purpose for any assessment effort, something to integrate right into the early planning of the evaluation. At the same time, it should be recognized that this sort of re-thinking can be intensely anxiety-provoking, as the CEDO and its staff and board wonder about their work.

CONCLUSION

All the basic elements of an evaluation, including its scope in ambition, time and expense, the methodologies used, the choice of who will do the work - all will arise from the purposes of those who seek the evaluation. Clarity in those purposes, from the perspective of the community, the funder, and the CEDO itself, should underlie planning for any evaluation and will help make it more precise and useful. 

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