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# The Evaluation of Place-Based Approaches

Questions for Further Research

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# The Evaluation of Place-Based Approaches: Questions for Further Research

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**The opinions expressed in this paper are those of the authors.*

## 1. Introduction

Collaborative place-based approaches (PBAs) have emerged as a means of addressing "wickedly" complex issues: those that have many interacting causes and are seen to require multiple actors to develop a co-ordinated response (Shugart and Townsend, 2010). Some wicked issues commonly associated with PBAs include climate change, poverty, obesity, crime, indigenous disadvantage, and natural resource management (Australian Public Service Commission, 2007).

**Table 1: Common Characteristics of Place-Based Approaches**

- Are designed (or adapted) locally to meet unique conditions
- Engage participants from a diverse range of sectors and jurisdictions in collaborative decision-making processes
- Are opportunity-driven, dependent on local talent, resources, and constraints
- Have an evolving process due to adaptive learning and stakeholder interests
- Attempt to achieve synergies by integrating across silos, jurisdictions, and dimensions of sustainability
- Leverage assets and knowledge through shared ownership of the initiative
- Frequently attempt to achieve behaviour change

Complexity has been identified as a challenge across disciplines, particularly in the public sector (Venema and Drexhage, 2009). Place-based approaches have been identified as one possible way[1] to address these intractable issues and are gaining momentum in Canada[2] and internationally. The Government of Canada's Policy Research Initiative (now Policy Horizons Canada) published two related issues of *Horizons* – Sustainable Places and Innovative Communities – that more fully explore the increase in place-based approaches and social innovation, as well as the federal government's role within them.

[1] For example, Nancy Roberts analyzed three potential responses: collaborative strategies, authoritative strategies, and competitive strategies. She concluded that collaborative strategies are most appropriate for wicked issues (Roberts cited in Australian Public Service Commission, 2007: 9).

[2] See the Policy Research Initiative, *Horizons: Sustainable Places*, volume 10, issue 4, for an exploration of place-based approaches in Canada: http://www.pri-prp.gc.ca/page.asp?pagenm=2010-0022_01 .

Place-based approaches can be most simply defined as stakeholders engaging in a collaborative process to address issues as they are experienced within a geographic space, be it a neighbourhood, a region, or an ecosystem. These approaches have a common set of characteristics (see Table 1) that challenge traditional notions of evaluation (Coote et al, 2004; Federal Family, 2008; PRI, 2010b; RGI, 2010). Persistent challenges for evaluation remain: the nature of open systems, long-term objectives, accountability in collaborative stakeholder processes and, in particular, measurement. A workshop held in March 2010 at Carleton University explored the current place-based priorities for the federal government.

Academics and senior Government of Canada officials identified the increasing involvement of the federal government in PBAs within Canada and the need to better answer the question: how do we know if PBAs are working (RGI, 2010)? This question implies a need to understand whether PBAs are working, when, and under what conditions; and whether there are effective evaluative processes by which governments can best come to this determination. These questions accompanied a call for the federal government to "adopt new performance metrics that embrace uncertainty, are open and transparent, and are outcomes-based" (RGI, 2010: 9).

This paper documents the characteristics of PBAs and the reasons they have been identified as needing more effective evaluation to enable a discussion of possible alternative evaluation approaches, particularly within the public service context. The paper seeks to raise questions from the perspective of place-based research, and concludes with suggested areas for further research. By looking across policy areas, this paper endeavours to encourage a broader base of learning for PBAs. This paper has been developed with input from an interdepartmental network of federal public servants working on place-based issues and an advisory committee of evaluation practitioners. (See the annex for a complete list.)

> "The [Canadian] federal government can develop tools to evaluate the effectiveness of place-based initiatives and design its own performance metrics in a way that they are sensitive to local contexts, for example by including indicators of local performance."
>
> - RGI (2010: 2)

## 2. The Adoption of Place-Based Approaches

PBAs are a "collaborative means to address complex social-economic issues through interventions defined at a specific geographic scale" (Cantin, 2010: 7). They are discussed in the literature under a variety of terms depending on the policy field, including comprehensive community initiatives, collaborative environmental management, community economic development, and complex adaptive systems. While acknowledging the methodological and language challenges, we attempt to draw high-level commonalities across these disciplinary approaches. Definitions of place and PBAs vary, but for the purposes of this discussion, we describe place-based initiatives as having several key characteristics including multi-sectoral stakeholders (Koontz and Thomas, 2006), leveraging local knowledge and assets (Orszag et al., 2009), and shared stakeholder ownership of the initiative, which entails pooled resources and entwined accountability (Kubisch et al., 2010). PBAs can involve different combinations of stakeholders including multiple levels of government, business, non-profit organizations, and individual citizens (Federal Family, 2008; Orszag et al., 2009). However, some degree of multi-sectoral involvement is typical, as this creates the value-added process (Orszag et al., 2010). Place-based initiatives can be instigated from the bottom up or the top down (Shugart and Townsend, 2010), but decision making is collaborative, not merely consultative.

> "Coming from both ideological and pragmatic starting points, the trend has been to see "big government" solutions to complex and interconnected social problems as increasingly inappropriate, unworkable and expensive (or all three). Partnerships and smaller-scale, place or community focused strategies started to emerge as at least worth trying."
>
> - Stewart-Weeks, 2002, p. 2 (Australia)

> "Just as we know that parents are in the best position to make decisions for their families, the best solutions to the diverse challenges confronting Canada's communities are often found locally. Every day, the power of innovation is seen at work in communities across this country, as citizens, businesses and charitable groups join forces to tackle local problems."
>
> - Speech from the Throne, 2010 (Canada)

Driven by local opportunities, the paths in PBAs are multiple and exploratory (Patton, 2011; Sridharan and Lopez, 2004). This means the direction of the project is uncertain during the initial phases, so trial and error and unexpected synergies are anticipated as part of the iterative learning process (Patton, 2011). The social complexity is also reflected in the partnerships. Stakeholders may have different objectives from the partnership, and pure consensus may not be possible necessitating compromises or trade-offs in the decision-making process. Partnerships may also change, affecting the knowledge base, resources, and intended objectives

over time. Despite these challenges, PBAs report remarkable levels of commitment from stakeholders in terms of time and resources, as well as frequently achieving consensus or near-consensus decision making.[3]

PBAs are considered suitable when complex social, environmental, health, and economic issues defy a single solution by a single actor. From a national perspective, advancing PBAs enables a country-wide investment in locally appropriate solutions (Cantin, 2010). They also can enable the federal government to communicate and co-ordinate around federally mandated areas that intersect with other jurisdictions, and to improve relationships with other levels of government (Cantin, 2010; Federal Family, 2008). PBAs can integrate local knowledge into federal policy processes and enable better communication about federal roles; both lead to improved relationships between government and citizens. Further, once local "experiments" have been evaluated, innovative practices and lessons learned can be communicated and adapted by other communities if appropriate, thus contributing to new knowledge, innovation, and further action on priority areas across the country.

Increasingly, PBAs are being adopted in a variety of policy fields[4] in Canada: health, public health, poverty alleviation, public safety, economic development, Aboriginal community planning, child and seniors services, and homelessness to name a few. Thousands of place-based processes have been identified in the realm of environmental stewardship alone (Nolan cited in Cantin, 2010). Internationally, the United Kingdom and New Zealand are leading adopters.[5] Citing the “transformative impact” of leveraging federal investments (Douglas, 2010), the United States recently renewed its place-based policy using an interagency framework (RGI, 2010).

> “The danger is that, without good evaluation, the laudable policy objectives of place or community renewal may be subverted by spending too much money, spending money on projects that are actually making things worse, or failing to back alternative projects that may be more effective.”
>
> - Stewart-Weeks (2002: 1) (Australia)

The emergence of PBAs has been attributed to the failure of other options, policy gridlock, and an increased need for public participation in policy-making processes (Bradford and Chouinard, 2010; Koontz and Thomas, 2006). The proliferation of participatory and empowerment methods in consultation and evaluation has also been credited to changes in societal mechanisms due to “glocalization,” which has shifted decision making away from national governments to transnational, regional, or local networks (Arnkil et al., 2002). PBAs are only one mechanism in the public policy toolbox, and much of the literature on PBAs makes the point that they should not be viewed as a panacea, but carefully chosen based on the issue, context, and cost effectiveness.[6] The

[3] See, for example, Frame et al. (2004:76).
[4] See, for example, Alderson-Gill & Associates (2005); HRSDC (2009); Leviten-Reid (2009); Potvin and McQueen (2008).
[5] See, for example, Sridharan and Lopez (2004).
[6] See, for example, Koontz and Thomas (2006); Orszag et al. (2009); Stewart-Weeks (2002).

policy decision whether to use a PBA in any given situation requires an effective learning environment to both improve place-based implementation and to evaluate when, where, and if it will be an effective policy instrument.

## 3. Challenges in Evaluating Place-Based Approaches

It has been argued that many of the characteristics PBAs hold in common are difficult to capture in evaluations (Kubisch et al., 2010; Sridharan and Lopez, 2004). Many public policy initiatives face challenges in evaluation – often because they share one or more of the characteristics of PBAs discussed here. However, PBAs have a common set of characteristics and, as a result, face a common set of evaluation challenges. It has been argued that an effective learning environment within PBAs is impeded by these challenges and the lack of effective evaluation approaches and methods to overcome them (Bradford and Chouinard, 2010). Exploring these characteristics and challenges may lead to a different understanding of how to implement place-based evaluation, particularly within the public policy context.

Members of the evaluation community will recognize the following evaluation challenges faced by PBAs, as they are frequently discussed in communities of practice under the rubrics of open systems,[7] collaborative process, and participatory evaluation.

**A Common Set of Evaluation Challenges**

- Capturing long-term outcomes and durable change (Foley, 2010; Koontz and Thomas, 2006; Levitan Reid, 2009)
- Attribution of outcomes in open systems, as well as attribution of systems change (Bradford & Chouinard, 2010; Koontz and Thomas, 2006)
- Attribution and accountability within collaborative governance due to intertwined funding and decision making (Kubisch et al, 2010; Mayne, 1999)
- Accommodating evolving, multiple, and diverse objectives
- Measuring capacity building, participation, relationships, and behaviour change (Whaley and Weaver, 2010)
- Data gaps or logistical challenges in gathering data (Gardner et al., 2010; Koontz and Thomas, 2006)
- Competing evaluation philosophies: “objective” external process versus “experience-based” community process (Bradford and Chouinard, 2010; Potvin and McQueen, 2008)

This paper explores these challenges in more depth. In addition to reviewing the place-based academic literature on evaluation challenges, we reviewed evaluations of the following federal, placed-based programs to capture a flavour of federal approaches to evaluating place-based initiatives: the Urban Aboriginal Strategy (UAS), the EcoAction Program, the Homelessness Partnership Strategy (HPS), and the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency (ACOA). It should be noted that although these evaluations are all relatively recent, they were conducted before the implementation of the federal government’s 2009 Policy on Evaluation (TBS, 2009).

[7] Open systems became the topic of a joint conference by the Canadian Evaluation Society and American Evaluation Society in 2005, resulting in *Systems Concepts in Evaluation: An Expert Anthology* edited by Bob Williams and Imraj Imam in 2007.

### Place-Based Initiatives as Open Systems

Place-based initiatives operate as open systems – those that are in a constant state of interaction with their environment. Open systems are also discussed in the literature as complex adaptive systems, and flow from concepts rooted in the physical sciences. Open systems are described as "massively entangled" (Williams and Imam, 2007) with an unknowable number of interdependent variables. As a result of its entanglement with the environment, adaptation of change in an open system is emergent and non-linear, which leads to uncertainty of outcomes that increases over time (Patton, 2011). From an evaluation perspective, this can lead to unclear program theory, compounding challenges for traditional approaches to evaluation (Sridharan and Lopez, 2004). As discussed below, some evaluation approaches seek to address this by allowing for the theory of the program to emerge over time.

Further challenges are found in evaluating PBAs in that the unit of analysis becomes whole places, each with its own unique system(s) and sets of intervening factors that interact openly with the systems around them. This means that control groups and counter-factual comparisons are frequently not feasible (Sridharan and Lopez, 2004; Stewart-Weeks, 2002). As a result, evaluation approaches that seek incontrovertible proofs are stymied by questions of attribution. It is in this context, that the solutions put forward by PBAs are described as "not verifiably right or wrong, but rather better or worse, or good enough" (Australian Public Service Commission, 2007: 4).

While open systems and the resulting emergent nature of PBAs pose some challenges, it is these characteristics that offer potential value. PBAs and open systems are seen to be more than the sum of their parts, because change begets further change of system components (Sridharan and Lopez, 2004). For instance, collaborations can create unforeseen partnerships and opportunities – often with positive externalities that can remain undocumented in evaluations. The work of PBAs can lead to new legislation, policy change, behaviour change, or enduring relationships that change the system as a whole. This is the goal of many place-based initiatives, but proves difficult to attribute (Tamarack, 2010). This means that, while forming an understanding of components of a place-based initiative is helpful, it does not necessarily lead to an understanding of the system as a whole and vice versa (Williams and Imam, 2007: 8).

**Accommodating Long-Term Objectives**

The long-term objectives and outcomes characteristic of wickedly complex problems – often 10 to 20 years or longer – are seen to lie outside the time frame of many government programs and their evaluation processes (Bellamy et al., 2001; Bradford and Chouinard, 2010; Gardner et al., 2010; Koontz and Thomas, 2006). Although first initiated in 1999 under the Supporting Community Partnerships Initiative (SCPI) banner, the Canadian government's Homelessness Partnership Strategy's (HPS) evaluations were limited to the results of its specific funding periods. The changes to the program resulted in shorter-term evaluations, which were unable to draw conclusions regarding long-term success. For instance, the 2009 HPS evaluation was for the period of 2006-08. The evaluation noted this short time period as a limitation in measuring success, but nonetheless it could not be adapted to the reality of the longer-term activity by the federal government on homelessness. This resulted in a lost opportunity to evaluate over the longer term a program that has maintained many consistent elements since its 1999 inception. A theory of change approach could offer the ability to draw conclusions across program iterations. (See below for more information on this approach.)

The shorter time frames of evaluations can lead to a tension between process and impact evaluation. On the one hand, formative (or process) evaluation can sometimes be used as a proxy for outcome evaluation (Bradford and Chouinard, 2010), leading to an insufficient understanding of program impacts. On the other hand, short time frames can lead to an overly narrow impact evaluation (in time or scope) that may miss important benefits or underestimate costs (Bellamy et al., 2001). Importantly, this tension can discourage the ambitions and innovative capacity of place-based processes by shortening the time horizons of projects or eliminating program elements that are needed for long-term sustainability, particularly after government funding sunsets (Bradford and Chouinard, 2010).

> "[S]ocial systems are self-determined and can only change themselves, this cannot be done by an intervener, no matter what resources, power, etc, are applied (at least not in the long run and in a sustainable manner). Ultimately every system decides on its own - and according to its own logic. Due to these pre-conditions, interventions in social systems cannot be linear or directive, their outcome is uncertain and they bear certain risks."
>
> - Hummelbrunner (2007)

For instance, capacity building is a component of most place-based initiatives as an important element of strengthening the ability of communities to develop their own solutions for complex social, economic, and environmental problems. "Building community capacity can influence community health, the sustainability of community initiatives and communities' ability to respond to emerging health issues. Capacity building has emerged as a key strategy for enabling communities to address priority health issues across many Public Health Agency Canada-funding programs" (MacLellan-Wright et al., 2007: 2). Nonetheless, capacity building has sometimes been perceived as extraneous to shorter-term objectives and has struggled to maintain its place within programs (MacLellan-Wright, 2010). For this reason, it is sometimes suggested that these types of critical elements of program

success should be built into the logic model as short-term or intermediate outcomes. (Measuring capacity building is discussed in additional detail below.)

### Accountability of the Collaborative Stakeholder Process

The characteristics of collaborative processes challenge some fundamental elements of evaluations.[8] These include shared accountability and divergent evaluation needs of partners. PBAs endeavour to leverage resources through empowerment and shared community ownership, which means pooled resources and entangled accountabilities. This can lead to confusion regarding who is responsible for what, and raises questions about which results individual funding partners can claim for their evaluations. Mayne (1999) argued that without the ability to assign attribution, accountability for results will never take hold within the public service. He further argued that, in a realm where certainty in attribution is rarely possible, government should seek to improve the understanding of the contribution a program has made in addressing a problem, including both data and qualitative tools, with the expectation that uncertainty in attribution can be reduced, but it cannot be eliminated (Mayne, 1999).

### Evolving, Multiple and Diverse Outcomes

While place-based initiatives embrace differences in each place, evaluations do not do so readily. Shared ownership sometimes means that objectives are part of an emergent human process. Outcomes may change over time, driven by stakeholder interests, deliberation, and local opportunities (Gardner et al., 2010). Funding partners also want to achieve their own objectives, and may want distinct outcomes for their contribution, which may align less or more closely with the original ones.

For national programs, success in place-based initiatives will mean something different in each place it is implemented. This can lead to multiple and divergent objectives and definitions of success (Bellamy, 2001), resulting in difficulties in establishing comparative data. For instance, the federal EcoAction evaluation concluded that full assessment of program success was undermined by the variability in indicators of success from each location. In this program, communities were asked to choose target outcome(s) for their project, making a selection from among 56 social, economic, and environmental indicators (Environment Canada, 2009). Place-based proponents would see this flexibility as a positive attribute of the program design as it brings definitions of success closer to the community. However, from a traditional evaluation perspective, it was seen as a weakness because there were too few projects using any one of the possible 56 indicators to provide a

> "[C]urrent modes of evaluation and performance measurement serve primarily as management tools for decision-making and accountability purposes. They fall short of capturing the full range of policy issues, local perspectives, and learning processes at play when governments seek to enable bottom-up community development."
>
> - Bradford and Chouinard (2010: 58)

[8] Fredericks et al., 2001; Guzman and Feria, 2002; Hughes and Traynor, 2000 as cited in Bradford and Chouinard (2010).

valid outcome measures that could be compared across sites (Environment Canada, 2009). The weakness was compounded by the lack of baseline data for the many indicators, which would have provided an alternate methodology.

This pattern of difficulty in dealing with multiple and diverse outcomes was also echoed in the HPS evaluation. The HPS evaluation accommodated this by placing greater emphasis on measuring the extent to which partnerships had been created at the community level, with the hypothesis that the success of community-based partnerships would be a precursor to sustainable change in the community.

The ACOA evaluation took a pan-Canadian approach by linking individual evaluation reports from different sites to create recommendations to assist program learning at the national level. This process required additional analysis of success beyond that reflected in the individual reports. The evaluation process started at the community level and built up to a national vision. The ACOA evaluation notes the challenges of ensuring consistency, establishing a core common methodology, and aggregating the individual regional-based evaluation results into a national report (CES, 2009).

These evaluations demonstrate the challenges of reconciling community objectives with national definitions of success. In practice, the divergence, or multiplication of objectives and expected outcomes muddies the waters for traditional evaluation as it makes it more difficult to connect the original objectives with the final outcomes.

### Measurement Challenges

Measurement challenges include measuring partnerships, capacity building, and participation – all common objectives of PBAs. Defining these elements is one challenge; measurement is another. While simple metrics are possible, they are often considered insufficient to capture true community change. For instance, some evaluations use the extent of leveraging program funds at the community level as a measure of partnership formation. The HPS evaluation used such an indicator, as did the ACOA evaluation. It is relatively easy to put a dollar value on the extent of leveraging. The HPS evaluation provided the information in table format detailing the contribution from each partner, making comparisons between each place. This presentation makes it appear as if a direct relationship exists between dollars leveraged and the level of participation by partners; however, this is unlikely to capture real community partnerships.

Measuring community capacity building in particular has been the subject of much discussion in the evaluation literature, and although it has eluded consistent treatment, many suggestions for measuring it are being explored. Capacity building was a key objective of the pilot projects of the Urban Aboriginal Strategy (UAS). In the formative evaluation, capacity building is described as building "organizational capacity within urban Aboriginal organizations, groups and communities at the local level in order to enhance community leadership" (Alderson-Gill & Associates, 2005: 4). For the EcoAction Community Funding Program, capacity building is defined as an "increase in knowledge and skills or behavioural changes within a group or community that allows it to do the

necessary planning and organizational work that would lead to taking action on environmental issues" (Environment Canada, 2009: 22).

Both the UAS and EcoAction evaluations found measuring success of community capacity building a challenge, and measurement was confounded by the different types of capacity. For instance, in the UAS evaluation, capacity building was broken down into different components or aspects, such as the creation of decision-making structures that reflect community consultations, the building of skills and expertise among community members, and the development of community assets. The program did not have a measurement strategy for any one of these components nor a methodology for making comparisons between them. The evaluation noted as a limitation this inability to compare among aspects of capacity building or compare like results in capacity building from site to site. The evaluation relied on qualitative statements from stakeholder interviews and identified this reliance as a limitation in determining success. It further noted that stakeholder interviews and case studies "capture perceptions that can be influenced by many factors, and do not represent a reliable source of objective information about what has transpired…it is preferable to have additional supportive sources of information" (Alderson-Gill & Associates, 2005: 16). The UAS has since adopted the Community Capacity Building Tool to track dimensions of community capacity in each community to provide a measurement strategy. This tool is described below.

The EcoAction Program evaluation also relied on community reports of capacity building impacts, and noted such differing types as building awareness of environmental issues and helping to create a more sustainable community (Environment Canada, 2009). The presence of any one of these capacity-building impacts, with no assessment of the extent of the impact, was used to indicate success. While there might appear to be a continuum of capacity-building extent implied when moving from awareness to actual changes in sustainability, the evaluation had no way of measuring this difference.

### Data

Place-based initiatives have also reported difficulty with availability of data (Koontz and Thomas, 2006; PRI, 2010b). The lack of data and information at the appropriate scale is often an issue (Cantin, 2010). For instance, census tract boundaries often do not align with geographic boundaries of initiatives (Kubisch et al., 2010), and data transparency and privacy continue to be issues (PRI, 2010b). Having multiple funders, each with its own objectives and ideas for intended outcomes leads to multiple demands for measurement and, potentially, conflicting ideas of what to measure and how to measure it. Data provided by one partner may not match the needs of other partners in the initiative due to scale, compatibility, quality, and currency (PRI, 2010b). As a result, initiatives can experience difficulties in establishing baseline data. For instance, the EcoAction evaluation noted challenges in the lack of baseline data for outcomes (Environment Canada, 2009).

The HPS evaluation showed the limitations on effectively measuring partnerships and making comparisons in success between communities. The capacity of the community to develop planning tools under HPS was used as a way of assessing partnership strength, one of the key indicators of success. The evaluation question asked if the HPS had "contributed to enhancing partnerships within communities" (HRSDC, 2009: 41). The response showed that communities reporting strong existing partnerships before HPS implementation reported smaller results attributable to HPS; this seemed to imply low success in partnership building. This finding highlights the importance of being able to make context-specific definitions of success based on the starting point in each community.

## 4. The Canadian Federal Paradigm

Some have argued that the overall evaluation challenges we have documented have been amplified within the public sector due, in part, to an historic focus on performance management and the advent of results-based management. As a major funder, the federal model has significant influence over evaluation approaches in Canada more generally (Mason, 2010). The federal government approach is the result of a complex mixture of history, central policy, evaluation resources, and varying departmental cultures and interpretations of policy. The Treasury Board Secretariat, departmental heads of evaluation, the Auditor General, program managers, and community practitioners in receipt of federal grants and contributions all play a role in shaping the federal evaluation paradigm.

> "Recently, a growing chorus of scepticism, among public sector and nonprofit managers and executives as well as academics, is challenging the claims made by advocates for performance measurement."
>
> \- McDavid (2010: 7)

The federal government's historic focus on performance management and audit (Shepherd, 2010) and the introduction of results-based management have both been identified as contributing to the current public sector paradigm, which is seen by some as incompatible with the longer-term objectives of PBAs (Federal Family, 2008). Mayne noted that prior to results-based management in Canada, managers were held accountable for processes, inputs, and outputs. With the shift toward results-based management and the focus on accountability for outcomes, attribution in situations of multiple partners has become more problematic. Mayne (1999: 2) noted that "to encourage and support managing for results we need a new view of accountability that acknowledges this more complex management world."

One critique of the Canadian evaluation paradigm argues that it has historically focused on performance management at the expense of evaluation for accountability (i.e., understanding program efficiency at the expense of understanding impacts) (Barrington, 2010; McDavid, 2010), with impact evaluations tending to be under-resourced (Malatest, 2010). Several authors further argue that evaluation and performance

management in the federal context have become conflated (Bradford and Chouinard, 2010; Shepherd, 2010). This has resulted, among other things, "in the loss of evaluation as an instrument for strategic learning and capacity building" within the federal context (Bradford and Chouinard, 2010: 56).

Performance measurement is one key aspect of performance management. The strength of performance measurement is in providing managers with "important short-term, quick turn-around information for tracking progress against stated goals" (Blalock, 1999 cited in Bradford and Chouinard, 2010: 56). While the literature converges on the importance of performance measurement (Bradford and Chouinard, 2010; Mayne, 2009; Nolan, 2010), it also indicates that performance measurement does not play the same role as evaluation, which seeks to understand and explain what is happening within an initiative (Nolan, 2010). It has also been argued that "deeply entrenched forms of accountability and performance measurement continue to reinforce hierarchical relations and departmental silos" within government (Bradford and Chouinard, 2010: 68). Another risk identified in the literature in relying on evaluation as a performance measurement tool is creating an environment of fear (Patton, 2011), which can lead to overly positive evaluations that do not effectively contribute to adaptive learning or accountability.

A second critique argues that evaluative approaches – both in Canada and the United States – have focused on evaluation for accountability at the expense of evaluation for learning (i.e., understanding efficiency and impact at the expense of program improvement). This is what the Kellogg Foundation has called the need to balance "the call to prove with the need to improve" (1998: 6). The Kellogg Foundation points to a "dominant paradigm" of evaluation in the United States which focuses on program impact with the intent to prove whether the program works and to allocate scarce government resources (Kellogg Foundation, 1998: 4). While government machinery seeks quantifiable results and attribution (Coote, 2004), community participants and program managers tend to prefer case study storytelling, emphasizing lessons learned to support program improvement.

The use of top-down evaluative approaches is identified across a number of policy fields as being incompatible with, and detrimental to, the underlying empowerment theory of place-based processes (Potvin and McQueen, 2008; Stewart-Weeks, 2002). For example, government funding and evaluation approaches were identified by some as constraining innovation within the Action for Neighbourhood Change program (Bradford and Chouinard, 2010). Place-based theory would support furthering the collaborative nature of place-based approaches through the evaluation process, which would mean that community participants would be engaged in structuring the approach and design of the evaluation. The school of utilization-focused evaluation for instance, argues that everyone has a stake in the research agenda due to the joint ownership of the initiative (Potvin and McQueen, 2008; Moore-Kubo, 2010). This school addresses the effectiveness of evaluations by suggesting the creation of a "strategic conversation

between stakeholders" (Sridharan and Lopez, 2004: 131) to ensure evaluations speak to those who would implement the recommendations. Top-down approaches are seen to limit the use of community knowledge that improves the authenticity of evaluations and can therefore adversely affect their utility (Patton, 2011). Several federal departments have implemented participatory evaluations, with the Voluntary Sector Initiative being one example. However, there remains a tension between participatory approaches and the public sector focus on the objectivity that results from a professionalized evaluation function as the means to achieve credibility of evaluations (TBS, 2005). This tension represents two very different views of how to achieve accuracy and reliability of evaluations, as well as different concepts of the intended audience of accountability reporting.

> "Just as different stakeholders want different things from evidence, they want different things from the evaluation process. For example politicians favour quick wins, while senior civil servants seek clear results that satisfy ministers. Researchers, meanwhile, prefer to pursue academic credibility and profile, and practitioners in the field want to secure funding and get help with improving local practice."
>
> - Coote et al (2004) (United Kingdom)

Fundamentally public sector evaluations have been asking the question "is this program working" while community program managers have preferred to answer the question "how do we make the program work better." In fact, both are of value. Patton has said that much of public sector evaluation is tailored for simple interventions, and has encouraged governments make an R&D investment into developing innovative approaches for evaluation of complex interventions (Tamarack, 2010). There is some discussion within the evaluation community as to whether it is possible for evaluations to address accountability and learning simultaneously (Sridharan, 2011). The implication that evaluation for learning and evaluation for accountability might need to be conducted separately raises the image of siloed evaluations. Developing a model where evaluation for accountability and evaluation for learning can inform each other would be a critical component to this approach. Creating layered or nested approaches might be one way to address this. Chelimsky however, notes that the same evaluation can have elements of both accountability and learning within it (Chelimsky, 2010).

In 2009, the Treasury Board of Canada issued a new evaluation policy. Departments are to assess effectiveness using the core issues outlined in the directive.

- **Continued Need for the Program:** Assessment of the extent to which the program continues to address a demonstrable need and is responsive to the needs of Canadians.

- **Alignment with Government Priorities:** Assessment of the linkages between program objectives and (i) federal government priorities and (ii) departmental strategic outcomes.

- **Alignment with Federal Roles and Responsibilities:** Assessment of the role and responsibilities for the federal government in delivering the program.

- **Achievement of Expected Outcomes:** Assessment of progress toward expected outcomes (including immediate, intermediate, and ultimate outcomes) with reference to performance targets and program reach, and program design, including the linkage and contribution of outputs to outcomes.

- **Demonstration of Efficiency and Economy:** Assessment of resource utilization in relation to the production of outputs and progress toward the expected outcomes.

The policy has a four year roll-out period, and evaluations released in 2011 will begin to reflect the changed policy. The new Treasury Board policy now requires that all spending have a formal evaluation every five years, with the ability to cluster individual programs for evaluation. Evaluation is to provide "the systematic collection and analysis of evidence on the outcomes of programs to make judgments about their relevance, performance and alternative ways to deliver them or to achieve the same results" (TBS, 2009: 3.1). Evaluation is to be used as a management accountability and decision-making tool, with program improvement and learning as an objective. In the assessment of performance, programs are tested for the extent to which effectiveness, efficiency, and economy are achieved (TBS, 2009). It "articulates a vision of evaluation as an evidence-based, neutral and objective mechanism designed to provide outcome – and results-based information on program performance" (Bradford and Chouinard, 2010: 55). This new policy is intended to provide flexibility of the evaluation process while maintaining standard reporting on specific issues, and TBS is encouraging departments to use more innovative approaches. Departments such as Human Resources and Skills Development Canada and the Canadian International Development Agency are engaged in pilot projects using the Theory of Change evaluation.

## 5. Effectiveness of Place-Based Approaches

Answering the question "how do we know if PBAs are effective" requires addressing the evidence base of these initiatives; it also has a methodological component. This means addressing the conceptual issues we have discussed thus far, and finding relevant evaluation approaches, methods, and tools. This has been echoed in the academic and community literature, as well as government reports internationally, where the need to find new and specialized ways to measure and evaluate PBAs has been identified (Bradford and Chouinard, 2010; Sridharan and Lopez, 2004; Stewart-Weeks, 2002).

One of the first issues in establishing an evidence base for PBAs is coming to an understanding of how to prove success. Here, there is a significant debate around the nature of credible evidence, with disagreement focused on the relative credibility of

quantitative and qualitative data, and experimental and quasi-experimental[9] versus other research designs (Sridharan and Lopez, 2004). In the search for evidence-based policy, some favour rationality rooted in evidence from experimental design, but others have warned against an overreliance on its use (Abma, 2005; O'Connor, 1998), citing cost and contextual relevance, as well as the difficulty in generalizing results (Sanderson, 2000). In the case of PBAs, the barriers to experimental design (such as the lack of control groups) have necessitated the use of other approaches, landing the evaluation of PBAs squarely into this debate, which is often seen as rooted in disciplinary standards of evidence. But, this is not always the case. For example, even within the medical field, the credibility of randomized control trials has been called into question, particularly in cases that have been described as "complex"[10] (Schorr, 2009).

> "Local practitioners often say that they are too busy 'getting things done' to reflect and learn, and that they lack opportunities to learn from policy-makers, researchers or other experts, or from their own peers."
>
> - Coote et al. (2004) (United Kingdom)

Realist evaluation argues that rather than comparing groups that have undergone a program with those that have not (experimental design), program evaluation should compare mechanisms and outcomes within programs to draw conclusions about the impact that context has on the change mechanism of the program. For instance, evaluations could explore if, how, and why a program works differently in different places or for different participants (Pawson and Tilley, 1997). The Aspen Institute's work on place-based evaluation points to the public sector mandate in the United States for quantitative and experimental design as contributing to the lack of evidence for PBAs, because "evaluators had little reason to develop and gain scientific legitimacy for qualitative, process-oriented, and theory-based methods that would be more appropriate for evaluating community-based initiatives" (O'Connor, 1998: 32).

A closely aligned discussion centres on the role of the evaluator. This is also contested, with some authors advocating the evaluator as an objective third party and others as a trusted enabler embedded within the organization.[11] In its discussion of the Gray Area programs,[12] the Aspen Institute observed that evaluations that become "conversations between insiders" can result in an inability to accept critical perspectives and overlooked lessons (O'Connor, 1998: 37). Here again, value may be perceived in layered or nested evaluations, with an evaluator close to the project conducting an evaluation for the learning process, and a separate evaluator fulfilling a challenge function, drawing on both internal and external expertise.

[9] Experimental and quasi-experimental designs are used to assign subjects to an intervention. In experimental design, subjects are randomly chosen to undergo the intervention while a second group does not, acting as a control group to isolate the impact of the intervention. Quasi-experimental design is similar, but does not have random assignment of subjects (Babbie and Benaquisto, 2002).
[10] Complexity in the medical context is described as patients with multiple, interacting conditions.
[11] See, for example, Patton (2011); Powell et al. (2006).
[12] The Gray Area programs were implemented in the United States in 1961 to create new community-based mechanisms to address new inner-city minority communities with issues of poverty and juvenile delinquency (O'Connor, 1998).

The evaluation challenges discussed in this paper have led to the acknowledgment that the evidence base for place-based initiatives is still being built. Notwithstanding the increasing adoption of PBAs internationally, there is consensus that their impact evaluation has been limited (Cantin, 2010; Koontz and Thomas, 2006; Stewart-Weeks, 2002). An Australian review of U.S., Australian, and U.K. evaluations concluded that place-based evaluation internationally is "patchy and sometimes non-existent" (Stewart-Weeks, 2002: 1). Authors cite lack of expertise, time and resources (Coote et al., 2004), as well as the contextual nature of PBAs, which limits the ability to form generalizations from case studies (Kubisch et al., 2010). However, researchers also point to increasing activity in this area, including the increase of quasi-experimental design (Foley, 2010). Beierle and Cayfords, for example, conducted a comprehensive meta analysis of 239 U.S. cases of public involvement in environmental decision making over 30 years (as cited in Abelson, 2006). Koontz and Thomas (2006) also conducted a review, distinguishing between empirical literature that evaluates process, output, and outcomes, and finding examples of each within the environmental literature. They noted that the measurement of trust and social capital are the most frequently measured outcomes[13] and called for more outcomes-focused evaluation approaches. In the domain of comprehensive community initiatives, Vibrant Communities is in the process of conducting a 10-year summative evaluation. This follows a 25-year review of comprehensive community initiatives in the United States by the Aspen Institute. Foley (2010) reviewed economic development initiatives in the United Kingdom, noting the increased attention to evaluation. These examples point to increasing activity within the field of place-based evaluation, indicating a growing empirical evidence base across disciplines that could be effectively mined to assist in better understanding both the strengths and weaknesses of PBAs.

## 6. Current and Emerging Approaches to Place-Based Evaluation

In Canada, a "case-by-case" approach (Federal Family, 2008; PRI, 2010b) has led to a call for new evaluation frameworks for place-based initiatives that are in an exploratory process (Bradford and Chouinard, 2010). The discussion in the literature has prompted what Arnkil et al. (2002: 1) referred to as a "proliferation of dialogic, participatory and empowering approaches" to evaluation. This includes an emerging body of approaches, frameworks, methodologies, and tools aimed at capturing the impacts of place-based initiatives,[14] a sample of which are presented here to illustrate the range of activity.

### a) Approaches

#### *Theory of Change*

Popularized by Carol Weiss, Theory of Change addresses the concern that the underlying assumptions of program change mechanisms are not adequately understood or

[13] Leach and Sabatier, 2005a; Lubell, 2005, as cited in Koontz and Thomas (2006: 177).
[14] See, for example, Bellamy et al (2001); Ellis et al. (2010); Patton (2011).

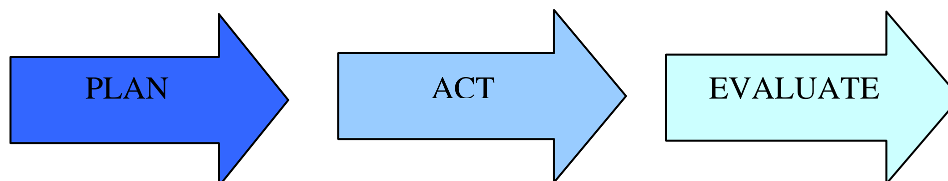
articulated at the outset of a program. Theory of Change encourages program managers to articulate the immediate, intermediate, and long-term outcomes, as well as the assumptions and change mechanisms along the way. This includes identifying the necessary preconditions for long-term outcomes, which becomes the basis of evaluation planning. By testing the theorized pathways of change, evaluations can mitigate the need for control groups and counter-factual comparisons by creating evidence for the change mechanism itself. It can also address issues associated with documenting long-term results, even with programs that change over time, by establishing validity of cause and effect between immediate, intermediate, and long-term outcomes. This may be particularly helpful in a policy environment where changes to programs can be expected.

### *Developmental Evaluation*

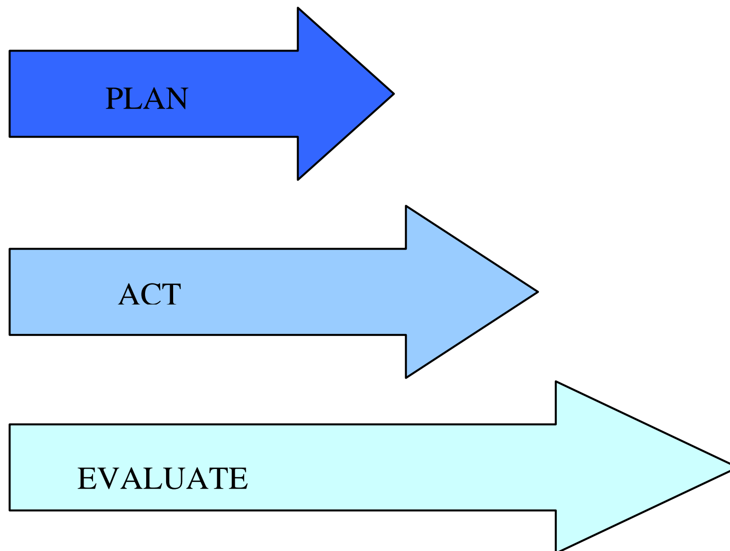
An example of a theory-based approach gaining momentum in Canada is developmental evaluation popularized by Michael Quinn Patton (2011). Developmental evaluation was created in response to the needs of complex systems and is used to support social innovation in the early stages of program development, such as when general principles are applied to a new context or in cases where experimentation is part of the ongoing program model (Patton, 2011). Developmental evaluation highlights the need for continuous and simultaneous evaluation, rather than a “study paradigm” where evaluations occur as a stage within the policy development and implementation process. In developmental evaluation, the evaluation is iterative and develops alongside the program. This provides space for emergent program theory, which is particularly relevant to the iterative nature of PBAs.

Developmental evaluation is being advocated in Canada by the McConnell Foundation, particularly in the context of comprehensive community initiatives, and is the methodology being used in the Vibrant Communities evaluation. While we have chosen to highlight developmental evaluation, several similarly inspired methodologies exist, including emergent evaluation (Arnkil et al., 2002) realist evaluation (Pawson and Tilley, 1997), utilization-focused evaluation, and participatory evaluation.

### *Traditional Evaluation*



*Developmental Evaluation*




*Contribution Analysis*

John Mayne – formerly with the Canadian Office of the Auditor General – puts forward contribution analysis as a performance management strategy in situations of complexity and uncertain attribution. In cases where experimental or quasi-experimental design is not feasible or practical, contribution analysis assesses the extent to which a program contributes to outcomes by verifying the theory of change through multiple lines of evidence. In addition, it seeks to establish contribution by probing alternate explanations for outcomes, and leading to plausible association: whether "a reasonable person, knowing what has occurred in the program and that the intended outcomes actually occurred, agrees that the program contributed to these outcomes" (Hendricks cited in Mayne, 1999: 7). This provides a way to address the wide range of intervening factors in an open system by shifting the evaluation question from: "to what extent has the program caused the outcome" to a more managerial question such as "is it reasonable to conclude that the program has made a difference to the problem?" (Mayne 2008: 1)

**b) Frameworks**

*Environmental Planning Systems*

Ellis et al. (2010) are developing a framework[15] to evaluate environmental planning systems incorporating social, economic, and environmental indicators for both outcome and process evaluations. The initial phase of this research focused on the process evaluation of the environmental pillar using eight criteria:

- comprehensive goals with measurable targets

[15] While this represents a recent sustainable development evaluation framework, it is by no means the only one. See also Bellamy et al. (2001); Powell et al. (2006).

- effective strategy
- integration, monitoring, accountability
- leadership
- adoptive management
- stakeholder collaboration
- legal framework

These criteria are rated on a numerical scale: fully met, largely met, partially met, and not met.

**c) Methodologies**

***Anticipated Time Line of Change***

In their evaluation of a comprehensive strategy for juvenile offenders, Sridharan and Lopez (2004) used a time line of change process to develop a stakeholder-driven expectation of change for the initiative. This process enables an understanding of the process of systems change, and establishes a realistic expectation of when attributable results might be observed. Each site co-ordinator for the comprehensive strategy was asked to brainstorm possible outcomes, prioritize them, and identify the earliest anticipated impact for each. Alternate approaches can survey multiple categories of stakeholders, gathering a range of perspectives. This approach lets the evaluator know if attributable results are realistic during the time frame of the evaluation. It also provides a time frame for revisiting the validity of the program's theory of change in the absence of achieving results.

**d) Tools**

***Capacity Building***

An example of a tool that addresses a measurement challenge within place-based initiatives is the Community Capacity Building Tool developed for the Public Health Agency of Canada (MacLellan-Wright et al, 2007). It uses self-assessment of progress on 26 questions under nine domains asking respondents to map each domain on a scale ranging from "just started" or "on the road" to "nearly there" or "we're there." The domains used are participation; leadership; community structures; role of external supports; "asking why" (a community process to explore root causes of public health issues); obtaining resources; skills, knowledge and learning; linking with others; and sense of community. Each domain includes a definition of the core concept being measured as well as specific criteria that describe each level of the ranking to limit subjectivity. The tool has been found valid and reliable through testing.

This review provides a small window on activities within the field of evaluation that are relevant to PBAs, demonstrating two important points. First, each author reviewed above identified the need for new ways to capture effectively the type of complexity that typifies PBAs. Second, it indicates an emerging body of work that could be more fully explored. It has been observed that while evaluators in Canada are generally

becoming more aware of a wider range of evaluation approaches, there is a relatively low level of adoption of alternative techniques (Malatest, 2010). So, while some of these approaches are not new, they have not yet been widely adopted. A better understanding of why this is the case would be important in moving forward.

Canada is not the only country experiencing the evaluation challenges outlined in this paper. The Australian government has questioned whether its accountability framework is flexible enough to address complex issues with long-term horizons, and whether "tightly prescribed" outputs and outcomes are useful in addressing complex issues (Australian Public Service Commission, 2007: 23). Observers in the United Kingdom have called for "a sustained investment in developing a wider range of evaluation techniques and working out the best ways to effectively combine multiple methods" in the context of comprehensive community initiatives (Coote et al, 2004: 5). As governments around the world seek to enable social innovation, they are seeing the need to adapt government structures to enable the use of community assets.

## 7. Conclusion: Questions for Further Research

Place-based approaches are by no means the only types of programs that struggle with achieving effective evaluation. However, the challenge of evaluating PBAs has been a recurring theme in the literature, and voices are converging on the need for more effective ways to evaluate these initiatives. Some government officials have identified the need for more evidence on the effectiveness of PBAs; academics are calling for governments to develop place-based evaluation frameworks; and the new White House place-based policy is rooted in evaluation, with observers noting that "the need for effective place-based evaluation has never been more important" (PRI, 2010b: 5). According to the literature, those implementing a PBA can except to face a common set of evaluation challenges and the Canadian government evaluations we reviewed reiterated some of these challenges. It has been suggested that in Canada an emphasis on evaluation for accountability may impede the ability of the public sector to engage in systems thinking (Bradford and Chouinard, 2010). The emerging and existing approaches and tools discussed in this paper, such as theory of change, developmental evaluation, and the 2009 TBS Evaluation Policy hold promise for establishing the impacts of PBAs. However, a potential hurdle exists if evaluation approaches are siloed, such that performance management, evaluation for accountability, and evaluation for learning do not inform one another.

This paper has responded to the question "how do we know whether PBAs are working" seeking to establish a foundation for issues surrounding this issue and to invite further discussion. We documented some of the challenges to place-based evaluation and reviewed recent evaluation activity, including the nature of the existing evidence base and a sample of emerging approaches, frameworks, methodologies, and tools that respond to the unique nature of PBAs. In so doing, we can pose some questions for

more focused research in the two areas we have set out in this paper.

1. What have existing evaluations shown that PBAs have (or have not) achieved?
    - What conclusions have been drawn about the effectiveness of PBAs in different contexts?
    - How does this evidence inform when and where PBAs should be used, and the contextual success factors?
    - What is known about the cost effectiveness of PBAs compared with other policy tools?
    - Can conclusions be drawn regarding the most effective role for the federal government?
    - What can be learned from evaluations to improve place-based approaches?

2. What emerging frameworks, methodologies, and tools are being developed for place-based evaluations?
    - What is being developed and would they be more effective in evaluating PBAs?
    - What should performance management and evaluation for PBAs look like? Which actors are best placed to do which types of performance management and evaluation?
    - Would a federal government framework for PBAs result in more relevant evaluation and enhance learning across policy areas?
    - Should performance management, evaluation for accountability, and evaluation for learning inform one another? Would a layered or nested approach to evaluation be effective, or, should evaluations strive to integrate accountability and learning?

The Policy Horizons Canada will continue to explore these questions by inviting further research by domain experts.

1. Emerging methods and tools to evaluate place-based approaches by Sanjeev Sridharan.

2. Exploring the federal government experience in implementing and evaluating place-based approaches: Key informant interviews by Meyer Burstein and Erin Tolley.

3. Exploring effectiveness of place-based approaches within the three domains of sustainability:
    - Economic development: Aboriginal initiatives by Robert Shepherd.
    - Social: crime prevention and public safety by Jim Ellsworth.
    - Environment: integrated management by Livia Bizikova, Darren Swanson and Dimple Roy.

It is our belief that continued research that draws on PBAs across policy areas holds promise for an improved learning environment and an expanded evidence base. It would also move toward integration of economic, environmental, and social goals within PBAs. Effective evaluation is critical to support policy learning at the individual, community, institutional, and policy levels (Bellamy et al., 2001). With regard to PBAs, the learning requirements are multi-faceted and include performance management, evaluation for accountability, and evaluation for learning for multiple partners with different perspectives and needs.

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## Appendix One: Acknowledgements

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