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# EVALUATING A COMMUNITY PROJECT

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# EVALUATING A COMMUNITY PROJECT



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for the

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# I INTRODUCTION

## A. Overview

This guide is intended for use by CCAC program managers and officers in their role as facilitators and catalysts of change within the marketplace. The guide contains a minimum of theory and deals with the practicalities of evaluating community projects. The contents cover the rationale, procedures and pitfalls involved in evaluation and include examples of how to deal with the important steps in the process.

## B. Use of the Guide

### 1. General

The basic questions defined in the guide are key to the analytical process of evaluation. These questions may be applied generally in evaluations of all community programs.

The case study in section III on which the examples are based, has been adapted from a real situation. As such, it contains the untidiness and useful co-incidences the officer is likely to encounter. The evaluation methods applied in the example should be adapted to the officer's own situation.

### 2. A Specific Approach for the Vulnerable Consumer Program

#### (a) Co-operative Approach

The evaluation method is designed to complement the Vulnerable Consumer Program's aim of enlisting the co-operation of community organizations to solve marketplace problems.

Under the circumstances it will be as important for the organizations to feel that they have been adequately consulted, and that they have contributed to the evaluation, as it will for them to receive a clear, objective evaluation report.

(b) **Emphasis on Qualitative Information**

Small scale, short term community projects like those envisaged by the Vulnerable Consumer Program are usually evaluated best by making use of the insights, interpretations and opinions of those involved in a project. Some numerical data will be collected but it will play a very small role in the final analysis of the project's success.

This kind of evaluation is open to the criticism that it is very subjective. However, considerable objectivity can be obtained by balancing the different points of view of those involved in a project.

(c) **Where Evaluation Fits in the Vulnerable Consumer Process**

The guide describes how evaluation fits in the following stages of the process for defining and solving marketplace problems:

- When community organizations are called together to define problems and suggest solutions.

- When concrete action plans are drawn up for the community projects which form the solutions.

- When a community project has been completed. [If the project turns out to be one which will last two or three years, evaluation should take place, at least annually, during its operation.]

## II EVALUATION - WHAT IS IT?, WHY DO IT

### A. What Evaluation Is

It's the process of examining a program carefully, thoughtfully and objectively to decide how effective it is and why.

Ideally it should be a process that everyone involved with the program concerned, can understand.

Evaluation consists of four basic stages:

1. Developing clear objectives for a program, against which its success can be measured.
2. Designing a means for collecting information which will show: (a) to what extent the objectives have been achieved; and (b) why things happened the way they did.
3. Collecting and interpreting the information.
4. Deciding how to correct problems or how to achieve improvements.

### B. What Evaluation Is Not

Program evaluation is not concerned with examining the performance or competence of individuals. It is confined to assessing the effectiveness of a program and the structural components of a program which make for success or failure.

Evaluation is not the exclusive preserve of the expert. All of us are constantly evaluating our own actions and those of others in social and job-related situations. The basic skills involved in this kind of everyday evaluation, and in project evaluation are the same.

Experts, or objective outsiders, are useful in the evaluation process. They can help define precise objectives, maintain objectivity, and help with methods for data collection and interpretation. But they aren't always necessary.

C. Why Evaluate?

1. Innovative, flexible, low cost solutions to local problems proliferate as a result of the kind of community problem solving process to be used for the Vulnerable Consumer Program. In the past some of these solutions have been adopted on a broad scale by established organizations.

   Evaluation points the way to improving on the projects which come out of this process.

2. The Project Officer benefits from evaluating projects by knowing: where to apply more and where less effort in the future; which methods to use again and which to avoid; and what parts of a problem were solved by a project and which parts were not.

3. The Vulnerable Consumer Program as a whole benefits as experiences and insights are analyzed and shared on a national scale.

4. The Community Organizations Involved. From the point of view of the organizations involved evaluation has the following uses:

   - Feedback. Organizations are able to recognize the value of their contribution to a project and measure its usefulness.

   - Information. They may gain new insights on their client group.

   - Clearing the Air. Frustrations and misunderstandings occur in any project involving a number of organizations. Evaluation provides a way for them to be aired and dealt with constructively.

   - Credibility. Conscientious evaluation will help convince the organizations involved, of the seriousness of the officer's intent. It helps pave the way for more co-operation in the future.

## III COMMUNITY PROBLEM SOLVING - A CASE STUDY

The examples used in the guide are based on the following case study.

1. The Situation

A program officer identifies an area of a city in which are concentrated large numbers of vulnerable consumers: particularly elderly people, single mothers and unemployed teenagers.

The area is near to the edge of town and has been developed within the last ten to fifteen years. It contains half a dozen high rise apartment buildings with modest rents, low-end of-market condominiums and a high proportion of subsidized housing. It is bordered on two sides by relatively recent industrial development.

The area, which is perhaps a mile and a half square is served by two shopping malls. The first on the edge of the area contains a supermarket, post office, hardware store, bank and a number of specialized retail outlets. The second in the middle of the area is occupied by a medical practice, dentist, lawyer, restaurant, a large, well stocked convenience store and a number of empty units.

Preliminary enquiries suggest the main marketplace concerns centre around service and prices in the shopping malls.

2. Organizations

The organizations concerned have been identified as: a local senior citizens' association; a tenants' association based in one of the subsidized housing developments; the boards of two condominiums; the board of a community service centre run by the local social services department, and a service club that meets in the local restaurant. Conveniently one of the owners of the smaller shopping mall is also active in the city's Board of Trade.

3. Problems Identified

The officer calls together representatives of the organizations plus the mall owner to explore marketplace concerns and the following problems are identified:

(a) Prices at the supermarket are thought to be high because the area is remote and many people don't own cars.

(b) The supermarket charges $4.00 for delivery of groceries. Taxi drivers have been charging 50¢ a bag for groceries because the trip from the store to peoples' homes is short, and takes them away from high taxi-use areas of the city.

(c) Prices at the convenience store are thought to be unreasonably high. The owner is thought to be profiteering because of the transportation difficulties in getting to the supermarket. People from the tenants' association of the subsidized housing development claim their children are short-changed and harassed by the store staff. These stories are borne out by representatives from one of the condominiums.

It turns out that a drug-store which opened briefly in the same mall was forced to close by the owner of the convenience store, whose lease allowed him exclusive rights to sell candy, snacks, stationary, newspapers and magazines among other things.

In defence of the convenience store owner it is pointed out that he has complained of problems with shop-lifting, vandalism, and customers staying away because of teenagers hanging around the lobby outside his premises.

(d) The standard of maintenance in the subsidized housing is unsatisfactory to the residents.

(e) Local bus service is not frequent enough in the evenings and on week-ends.

(f) There is a shortage of recreation, especially for teenagers in the area.

4. Choosing Solutions

It becomes clear during the course of the discussion that the Program Officer's first impressions were correct. Dissatisfaction is strongest with the supermarket and the convenience store.

With some encouragement from the program officer, the group agrees to tackle the problem with the convenience store first, for a number of reasons:

- The owner depends on local people only for his business and has a vested interest in improving things.

- There is much strong feeling about the situation among a number of organizations present.

- The problem affects three kinds of vulnerable consumer: young people, single parents and the elderly.

- The situation lends itself to a short term project and is within the capabilities of the organizations present.

- It has the most important characteristic of a first time community project. It has a strong chance of succeeding in making changes.

5. The Project

The project identified is to hold a carefully structured discussion between the owner of the convenience store, representatives of the organizations present, and the program officer, so that corrective action can be taken.

The program officer holds a preliminary meeting with all the participants except the store owner to arrange what will be discussed, the tone of the discussion, what role each participant will play, how the discussion will be recorded, and so on.

The discussion takes place. A number of grievances are aired on both sides. The mall owner and a representative from the service club play a mediating role, the program officer keeps the meeting on track. The following solutions are agreed to:

- The community organizations will alert their members to the problems of vandalism and shop-lifting and encourage them to take an active part in preventing them in a number of ways. (Keeping an eye on kids they see in the store, encouraging kids whom they know not to hang around the lobby).

- The store owner agrees to be more patient and careful in dealing with young customers. It is pointed out that if he is more friendly, his vandalism problem may decline. He decides to install two video games in the store, near the check out. This should provide entertainment for the older children and focus activity where the store owner can keep an eye on it.

- The owner argues that high overheads and a small sales volume keep his prices high. However he offers to have more "specials" on his merchandise. It is pointed out that if basic items like bread and milk were cheaper, he would sell more. He agrees to think about this but makes no promises to lower prices.

6. The Benefits

- There is an immediate improvement in the treatment of children and teenagers in the store. The video games appear and are a success with both the kids and the owner.

- Adults do make an effort to control shop-lifting and keep an eye on young people in the mall lobby as they pass through.

- The owner keeps his promise on "specials" but the price of basic items stays high.

- Relationships between the owner and the community are generally improved. It is noticed that he responds to requests for new product lines. Previously his attitude had been unfriendly and some people were surprised that he agreed to attend the discussion session at all.

- An unexpected consequence is that tenants in the subsidized housing area form a co-op buying club for basic groceries, which they operate from a local community building.

- A similar discussion session is planned with the manager of the local supermarket.

## IV OBJECTIVE SETTING

Objectives are a series of precise formal statements about what a program aims to achieve. A program's objectives should include both broad statements of intent, and more specific statements which define the ways in which these will be put into action.

### 1. Types of Objectives

The process of objective setting has its own jargon in which a variety of different types of objectives are identified. For the purposes of this guide it is important only to distinguish between "content" and "process" objectives.

"Content" objectives deal with the end products of a project eg. To lower prices for basic groceries in the convenience store.

"Process" objectives deal with the interaction which takes place between people involved in a project. Process objectives in the case study might include: "To build links between organizations concerned with marketplace problems in the locality"; and "To improve the negotiating skills of the vulnerable consumers involved in the project."

### 2. Advantages of Setting Objectives

Defining objectives is essential to the evaluation process. Objectives set the targets for success against which a project can be measured.

However setting objectives for a community project has some additional advantages:

(a) It provides the organizations involved with a common definition of precisely what the project is intended to achieve.

(b) It helps build consensus and commitment amongst those involved in the process.

(c) It provides a basis for planning action.

## A. Rules for Setting Objectives

1. The group of organizations responsible for setting up and organizing a project should define the objectives of the project at their first meeting.

   The process could be quick and simple or need much discussion, depending on the complexity of the project. (Defining objectives for the project in the case study would probably be fairly easy and quick.)

   Once set the objectives should answer the basic questions:

   What will the project aim to achieve?
   Why?
   How?
   When?

   A project's organizing committee will probably already include members of the client group (ie. those intended to benefit from the project). If it does not, it is important that efforts be made to include client representatives before the objectives are pinned down.

   When the purposes of the session and the definition of objectives have been clarified, most groups will be able to proceed intuitively. If there are problems, the following procedure may be used.

2. A Basic Method

   (a) Have each member of the group in turn make

      (i) two statements in relation to the changes he wishes the project to make for the client group.

      (ii) a statement about any benefits he would like his organization to derive.

   (b) List the statements as they are made, so that they can be read by the group as a whole.

   (c) List any supplementary statements which the group feels need covering.

(d) Ensure everyone understands the meaning of all statements and eliminate any duplication.

(e) The list should now contain some very general statements and some more specific ones. It will also contain statements pertaining to different subjects. The next steps are to sort the statements into groups under subject headings, and then to arrange them from the general down to the specific within each group.

(f) Check for any omissions.

(g) Eliminate any objectives which clearly can not be fulfilled given the resources available.

(h) Put the objectives in priority order if necessary.

An example of step (e) is given on the following page.

B. A Sample List of Objectives

1. Prices

(a) To obtain fair prices in the local convenience store.

(b) To obtain lower prices (at least 10% lower) on basic commodities ie. bread and milk.

(c) To obtain more specials (at least 10% reductions) on commonly used items.

(d) To meet with the store owner to discuss solutions within three weeks.

2. Service

(a) To obtain better service for children.

(b) To improve the store owners attitude to younger customers.

(c) To eliminate the perceived problem of short-changing children.

(d) See (d) above.

3. Community/Store Owner Relations

(a) To build a more constructive relationship between the store owner and the community served.

(b) To discuss problems with the present relationship, to find solutions based on co-operative effort.

(c) To hold the discussion in a constructive way, so that co-operative initiatives will follow.

(d) To plan the meeting carefully so that discussion will be constructive.

(e) To ensure that neutral mediators who are respected by both sides are present at the meeting.

4. General

   (a) To ensure that solutions proposed at the meeting with the store owner are followed up.

5. Process

   (a) To help representatives of the tenants' association and the condominium boards improve their negotiating skills.

   (b) To achieve the above by:

      (i) assisting these people in planning the meeting.

      (ii) assisting in practice role-playing in advance of the meeting.

C. Pitfalls in Objective Setting

People undertaking an evaluation or an objective setting exercise for the first time, often make two basic mistakes. The first has serious consequences for the evaluation process later on, the second causes needless frustration for the group involved in the exercise.

(a) **Pitfall No. 1**

Not being specific enough in the objectives: Objectives which are too general are often not measurable at all. Objectives which are not worded carefully can lead to evaluation of the quantity of work done, rather than its effectiveness.

For example an objective might read:

"To obtain more "specials" in the store."

This statement makes no requirement of the specials to be at what the group considers "fair" prices and is of little use for measuring success. Two cents in the dollar reductions on low turnover items like clothes pins might be judged to constitute success in meeting this objective.

(b) **Pitfall No. 2**

The objective setting process described above is simply a set of guidelines. Sometimes groups which use this process become so involved in following its rules that they lose track of the reason for doing it. The result is time-consuming and frustrating discussion about fine definitions of words, or about the precise ordering of objective statements.

The important point is that the process is a means and not an end in itself. Problems of definition can be overcome by making a simple arbitrary decision. i.e. "For the purpose of this program word X will be understood to mean the following ____________________."

## V DATA COLLECTION

### A. Useful Types of Information

Regardless of the complexity of his data collection method, an evaluator should look for three types of information:

1. Quantitative Information - which tells how many people used a program, how many were positively or negatively affected, and how-many were unaffected. This kind of information is usually obtained from program records, or as the outcome of surveys of the target group.

2. Qualitative Information - which tells the circumstances under which people were affected or unaffected. Best obtained through written questionnaires or through interviews.

3. Interpretive Information - people's opinions as to why things happened the way they did. Best obtained through interviews (face to face or by telephone), with clients, project organizers and other resource persons in the community who have been in a position to observe the project or its results.

The last two kinds of information can also be obtained through group discussions. Where the information is not confidential a group discussion can often spark useful analysis of the reasons behind success or failure.

B. Which Information to Collect and How

Deciding which information to collect and how, involves balancing the desirable against the practical. It means juggling with the answers to four questions.

1. What kinds of information would indicate success or failure and the reasons behind either?

2. Which of these is it practical to collect, and how?

3. How much information is needed to ensure that the conclusions reached are valid? (i.e. what size of sample is needed?)

4. How much information, once collected, could be processed with the resources available?

These questions should be applied for each of the program's objectives.

When this exercise is completed, it ensures that measures of success are sought for all a project's objectives.

It also sorts out which information will be collected in which records, questionnaires or group discussion and defines when each of these things should be happening.

If the project is a complex one it helps to list the results of this exercise in a simple table, like that on the following page. The table deals with a partial listing of the objectives developed for the case study on page 12 of this guide.

C. A Data Collection Design Guide

| Objectives | Information Needed | Indicator | Collection Method |
|---|---|---|---|
| To obtain fair prices in the convenience store | Estimate of "fair" prices<br>Comparison of store prices to above | Comparison with nearby convenience stores. | Consumer group survey |
| To obtain lower prices on basic commodities. (10% reduction on bread and milk) | Before and after price comparison | Average price difference over one month period | Consumer group survey |
| To obtain more specials, etc. | As above | As above | As above |
| To meet with store owner within three weeks to discuss solutions | Did the meeting occur?<br>Was the meeting productive? | Opinions of those present | Officers observation.<br>Group evaluation by those present. |
| To obtain better service for children.<br>To improve store owners attitude to younger customers.<br>To eliminate the short changing problems. | Measure of treatment of children before and after. | Children's impressions.<br>Adult customers' observations. | Observation of members of the organizing committee.<br>Discussion between organizing committee members and key community informants known to them. |
| To help representatives improve their negotiating skills by<br>i) assistance in meeting planning<br>ii) practice role playing | Measure of improvement in skill level | Self evaluation by representatives concerned of their learning | Simple written questionnaire designed by officer. |

## D. The Data Collection Process

The responsibility for ensuring that data is collected rests with the program officer. However as in the example on the previous page it will probably be appropriate for the organizations involved to provide much of the information.

The example also makes clear why the data collection process must be established at the beginning of a project. Some of the information in the example involves before and after comparisons. In other projects it will be necessary to record the number of clients and perhaps their reactions to the project as they are served by it.

The officer will clearly need to adapt data collection methods to the peculiarities of each project. However some basic guidelines are provided below.

### 1. Quantitative Information

The most important information is likely to be the number of people affected by a project and whether they reacted positively or negatively to it.

Where a project provides a direct service, the number of users can be recorded relatively easily. While their positive and negative responses can be totalled from simple evaluation questionnaires given to them when they have completed their use of the service.

Where no direct service is provided it may be necessary to make a reasonable estimate of the number of people involved.

### 2. Qualitative Information and Interpretive Information

This kind of information may be legitimately collected in four ways.

(a) Informal discussions with key individuals who are known to be thoughtful, reliable in their opinions and in contact with those involved in or affected by the project. These people might be community leaders, or professionals in contact with the client group (e.g. teachers, social workers, public health nurses, doctors, recreation workers.) Though the discussion setting may be informal, the three or four key questions to be covered should be carefully thought out in advance.

(b) Interviews with or written testimonials from members of the target group, who have been particularly strongly affected by the project. These people often have stories to tell which give important insights into a projects' effect.

(c) Questionnaires administered to those involved with, or affected by the project. These may be completed through interviews or self-administered.

(d) Group discussion in which all those involved with, or affected by the project are represented.

The group discussion method is likely to be particularly useful, for the following reasons.

(i) It condenses the bulk of the evaluation data collection and analysis into one meeting.

(ii) It provides for interchange of ideas and more penetrating analysis than do individual interviews.

(iii) It provides those involved with the project with an opportunity to balance their perspectives against those of others.

(iv) It can provide a springboard for further action.

The method is described in more detail below.

3. <u>The Group Discussion Method</u>

(a) **Attendance**

The following people should attend: members of the projects organizing committee; project staff (if this applies); key members of the target group; and interested professional staff of other organizations involved with the target group. Each will contribute an important and slightly different perspective.

(b) **Length**

The discussion should be planned to last a half day or full day depending on the availability of the participants.

(c) **Questions to be Covered**

To prepare themselves for the discussion participants should be asked to structure their thinking around the following basic questions.

(i) Did the project solve the problem? How? How not?

(ii) What aspects of the project have worked well and why?

(iii) What aspects should be improved and why?

(d) **Discussion Leader**

The program officer may wish to lead the discussion or to find a discussion animator who has not been involved in the project, to leave him/herself free to participate in the discussion.

## VI INTERPRETING THE INFORMATION - APPLYING THE RESULTS

### A. Interpretation

Fundamental to the process of interpreting information for an evaluation, or any research, is the approach of testing expectations ("hypotheses" in the jargon of research).

The basic questions to ask in using this approach are:

"What would I expect (in advance) the findings of this evaluation to be?"
"Does the information confirm my expectations?"
"Where does it differ from what I would expect?" Why?
"What explanations does the information offer for any differences?"

In applying these questions, the reasons for gathering quantitative, qualitative and interpretive information from a variety of sources become clear.

Patterns which emerge in the quantitative data will likely be re-inforced and explained in the other information types.

There will also be contradictions in the information, arising from the different perspectives of those whose opinions were sought. Thinking carefully through the possible reasons for the contradictions and paradoxes which appear in the data, can provide some of the most important clues to why a project worked or didn't work.

### B. Application

1. Significant learning usually occurs in every community project undertaken. This is often directly applicable to follow up projects

For example subsequent analysis of the project to improve service at the convenience store, revealed that the key to its success was the presence in the discussion of the mall owner and a member of the service club that met in the mall restaurant. Neither said very much in the meeting but both held the respect of the convenience store owner, because they had important business contacts in common.

This lesson proved valuable in dealing with the manager of the nearby supermarket in a follow-up project.

2. In the case where the evaluation process makes use of a group discussion, it is particularly important that the discussion ends by planning follow-up action.

The meeting should end with everyone feeling good about the program and each other. This is the best psychological moment to set things in motion for future projects. It is advisable to timetable some next steps, and identify individuals who will take responsibility for them, before the momentum is lost.