


Measuring Community Development Outcomes: In Search of an Analytical Framework

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Noah Dorius¹

Abstract

A consensus has evolved that the outcomes of local community development organizations are not amenable to traditional evaluation methods and that local self-learning versus knowledge production is a necessary concession. A documentary review and interviews with the principals at national grant and policy-making organizations are undertaken to deconstruct this outcome measurement impasse. Basic criteria for an analytical framework to measure community development outcomes are suggested both to clarify the current institutional mindset and suggest an alternative approach. Available empirical data from practitioner interviews and existing social theory provide the basis for a conceptual understanding and an analytical framework to guide the systematic evaluation of community development initiatives.

Keywords

community development, economic development theory, economic development administration

National intermediaries, philanthropic organizations, and government agencies all want to know the impact of the grants they make to improve the lives of people in poor communities. In receipt of these funds, local community service organizations, broadly referred to here as community development organizations (CDOs), commit themselves to a vision of social transformation. More specifically, “community change” is the expected outcome of CDO programs and projects designed to improve the housing, employment, and health outcomes for people living in poor communities.

Making sure that grant proceeds are spent on programs and projects that primarily benefit qualified low-income people used to be the only measure of the community change impact of CDOs. It was thought that by providing benefits to a critical mass of poor residents, the transformation of an entire community would eventually follow. Today, absent objective proof that community change is actually taking place, the performance bar is being raised. National grant-making institutions want CDOs to measure and report the “outcomes” of their work including long-term changes in the behavior and life status of the families they serve.

This new evaluation regime, *outcome measurement*, is more ambitious in its intent—to demonstrate how community development initiatives actually transform local communities. In practice, however, the outcome measurement movement has reached an impasse. Mainly, it is assumed that CDOs lack the capacity and the resources to adequately comprehend

and analyze the outcomes of their own work. National CDO intermediaries have attempted to make the task easier by developing self-evaluation guide books, outcome indicator kits, and financial incentives, but the level of CDO participation is irregular and the informational value of these efforts is often diffuse.

The reasons for this impasse are more complex than the analytical aptitude and resource constraints of CDOs. There is fundamental disagreement over what community development includes and how community change takes place. Making matters worse, institutional funders and policy makers are resistant to the idea of adopting a uniform conceptual framework to draw a line around which impacts should be measured. That is, what CDOs do to achieve change is considered to be unique to each community setting and each CDO, and knowing what to measure and how to compare the community impacts of one CDO to another is largely indeterminate.

The purpose of the present inquiry is to examine the origins of the outcome measurement impasse by conducting a documentary review and in-depth interviews with key actors at the

¹U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Kennebunk, ME, USA

Corresponding Author:

Noah Dorius, 121 South Main St., Providence, RI
Email: noah.dorius@hud.gov

national grant and policy-making organizations most committed to community development outcome measurement. Basic criteria to be met by an analytical framework to measure community development outcomes are introduced here to help clarify the current institutional mindset and allow a more uniform discussion to the subject. It is concluded that institutional funders and policy makers should acquire a more complete understanding of the community change objectives of CDO practitioners and then assume direct responsibility for the implementation of a more systematic analytical approach to outcome measurement.

The Outcome Measurement Impasse

Government funding agencies, national community development intermediaries, and major foundations are under pressure to justify their continuing support for local community development initiatives. The Government Performance and Results Act of 1993, for example, requires all federal agencies to identify and measure the outcomes of their programs. According to Richard Nathan, the idea of measuring outcomes represents a new period of budget and management reform in government. He says it "has become a way of viewing decisions and issues across the governmental landscape" (Nathan in Forsythe, 2001, p. 4).

In the world of private philanthropy, outcome measurement represents a new era of grant-making accountability. Do investments in social improvement programs really make a difference in people's lives, and if so, what is that difference (Hatry, VanHouten, Plantz, & Greenway, 1996)? Requiring grant recipients to measure the life outcomes of the beneficiaries of specific community development programs and projects is a current priority, and eventually, it is expected, a condition of future funding.

The problem is that institutional funders and policy makers themselves lack a common understanding of what is being measured and what outcomes are most relevant. There is no recognized epistemology that explains the nature of community development work. Indeed, there is no single theory of community development that its practitioners and its adherents recognize as an accurate conceptualization of what they do or how they do it.

A Record of Uncertainty

The "theory gap" in community development is a popular critique (Sanders, 1970; Stoecker, 1997; Voth, 1989). There have only been limited attempts to theorize about the nature of community development activity (Cary, 1989; Mott, 2005; Stoutland, 1993), and even fewer attempts to posit a specific theory of community development practice (with exception of Rubin, 1994, and Simon, 2001).

Moreover, there is a popular reluctance to put specific boundaries around the community development enterprise. Rubin (1994) says community development practitioners consciously ignore the limitations of conventional human service categories as their influence is literally enhanced by *not* fitting within stereotyped professional categories. Urban experts and university scholars embrace a multidisciplinary ethos that avoids conventional approaches to building theory and gathering empirical data within a unique field of community development study (Denise & Harris, 1989; Ferguson & Dickens, 1999; Mier & Bingham, 1993).

A record of uncertainty about the conceptual limits of community development practice is evident in nascent academic attempts to articulate the community change role of CDOs (Bloom, 1999; Emery & Flora, 2006; Fawcett et al., 1995; Matthews, 1994). The lack of a coherent conceptual framework is also at the heart of the inconclusive reports issued by institutional evaluators charged with isolating the social change impacts of community development initiatives (Auspos & Kubisch, 2004; Brown, Chaskin, Hamilton, & Richman, 2003).

Even the national intermediaries and foundations actively engaged in evaluating CDOs' initiatives generally consider local community development initiatives to be too differentiated to be grouped by category, means tested, and subjected to conventional clinical research trials (Madan, 2007). They say outcome measurement is not really concerned with proving causality or generating new knowledge (Madan, 2007; Plantz, Greenway, & Hendricks, 2007). Instead, they claim that "participatory evaluation" in which CDOs articulate and measure their own performance is essentially a strategy to enhance local success rather than to judge comparative effectiveness (Stoecker, 2005).

Not as well known are the empirical data on how community development practitioners themselves perceive their work (Dorius, 2007). Community development corporation (CDC) directors say community change is manifest in the daily strategies they employ to transform private lives and alter the way community institutions do business (Rubin, 2000). CDC directors say they do this *in the process of* implementing local development projects and programs that are intentionally designed to empower low-income individuals and alter the public agendas of local institutions (Clavel, Pitt, & Yin, 1997; Goetz & Sidney, 1995; Rubin, 1994).

To gain a more nuanced understanding of how CDCs perceive community change, I conducted my own in-depth interviews with 40 experienced CDC directors selected by state CDC association administrators in different regions of the United States. The principal finding of this study was the emergence of a specific sequence of six local empowerment themes that are consciously employed to achieve behavioral objectives in a wide range of different community development activities. I concluded from this research that change *in* the community

is not primarily the creation of new buildings and services as much as it is the use of such initiatives to build the capacity of poor people and local institutions to remediate their own social problems (Dorius, 2009a).

Although debate on the conceptual identity of community development practice is unresolved, the practical necessity to translate the community change ideals of local CDOs into concrete and measurable terms is resurgent. Institutional funders are justified in seeking the means to measure the social change impact of specific community development investments. Increased government and nonprofit accountability requires objective proof of the benefits of social improvement programs to remain in public budgets. What is needed is a greater degree of certainty about the conceptual basis of community development practice and a corresponding analytical framework to guide the systematic evaluation of community development outcomes.

Method and Data

Documentary evidence of CDO outcome measurement began to emerge in the mid-1990s (United Way of America [UWA] and NeighborWorks America [NWA]) along with the published analysis of experts affiliated with some prominent national foundations and policy institutions (The Kellogg Foundation, The Urban Institute (UI), and The Joint Center for Housing Studies at Harvard). A common interest in finding ways to assess the effectiveness of local community development initiatives in poor communities led to an initial set of shared assumptions: that CDOs employ a broad range of development strategies, that the local conditions affecting this work vary significantly, and that the application of conventional research methods is problematic.

Based on this early experience, an institutional consensus emerged that community development outcomes are not amenable to scientific methods of examination and that participatory (self) evaluation with limited predictive value from one community to the next is a necessary albeit useful alternative. It was agreed that self-evaluation would at least help those CDOs that participate make improvements in their own programs. On the other hand, the present investigation questions the veracity of this institutional consensus by taking a critical look at the documentary evidence and interviewing key institutional evaluators responsible for much of the CDO outcome measurement undertaken to date.

To bring an element of rigor to this inquiry, I introduced three basic criteria that I felt should be addressed by any analytical framework that might be used to evaluate the social change outcomes of community development initiatives:

1. The articulation of a specific concept of community-driven social change
2. The identification of a particular class of community-driven social change outcomes to be measured

3. An estimation of the general knowledge value of the community-driven social change outcome data to be produced

These basic criteria were first applied as a template to survey what is being said in the outcome measurement guidebooks prepared by two national CDO intermediaries and related articles about CDO outcome measurement systems published by interested urban policy institutions (a broader reference to all community-based service organizations [CBO] was used for the purposes of this survey). I reviewed these documents to see if they articulate a specific concept of community change, if they identify the types of outcomes being measured, and what they say about the knowledge value of the data produced.

The second step in this analysis was to seek input from the principals directly responsible for conducting evaluations for the two national CDO intermediaries as well as evaluation experts at interested urban policy institutions. A total of nine in-depth interviews were conducted with six different institutional evaluators from July to November 2009. In the first seven interviews, the three basic criteria were presented as essential components of any outcome measurement model, and follow-up questions were asked to elicit the subject's own views relative to the feasibility of each criterion. The final two interviews were conducted with seasoned evaluation experts familiar with, but not subject to, the potential bias of administering an existing institutional measurement system. They were presented with the initial results and conclusions drawn from the first seven interviews and asked to comment on the institutional consensus that CDO outcomes are not amenable to scientific examination.

In the first seven interviews, two probative questions were asked to prompt specific responses to each of the three analytical criteria. With regard to Criterion 1 (a concept of community-driven social change), subjects were asked two questions: "Is the (*name of organization*) outcome measurement system based on a specific conception of community-driven social change?" and "How does __ know if a CBO is making a difference in their community?" With regard to Criterion 2 (a particular class of social change outcomes), subjects were asked: "How does __ know if CBOs are measuring outcomes?" and "On what basis does __ compare the outcome measures of one CBO vs. another CBO?" And finally, with regard to Criterion 3 (the kind of social change data to be produced), subjects were asked: "How does __ use the CBO outcome measurement data that is produced?" and "Can the CBO outcome measurement data that are produced be used to create new knowledge?"

The limits of this research include a purposive sampling technique intended to represent the views of principal evaluators and research administrators from a self-selected group of institutions that have published guidebooks and articles on measuring community development outcomes. Also, predetermined criteria for a basic analytical framework to evaluate

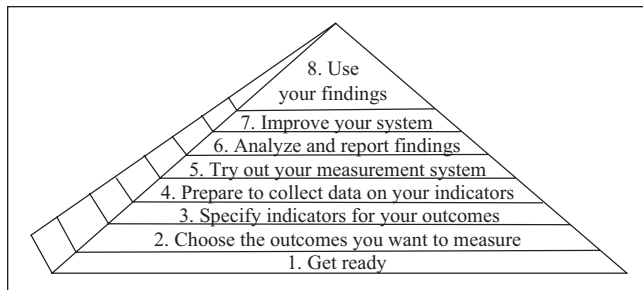


Figure 1. Measuring program outcomes: Eight steps to success

the outcomes of community development initiatives were used to select relevant passages for discussion in published documents. In all cases, the analytical criteria along with the probative follow-up questions described here were disclosed to the interview subjects in advance of the interviews.

Outcome Measurement for Self-Improvement

A closer examination of the thinking behind the existing institutional consensus requires us to examine what has been written and what institutional evaluators have to say about basic criteria to be met by an analytical framework to measure CDO outcomes. At the present time, the measurement systems in use by two of the largest national CDO intermediaries do not articulate a specific theory of community-driven social change or identify any particular class of development outcomes to be measured. They acknowledge that the outcome data produced by this approach has limited predictive value in comparing the results of one CDO with another and that arriving at general observations that can be tested and modified to create new knowledge is not a priority.

Outcome Measurement Does Not Determine Which Outcomes to Measure

In 1996, UWA published a guidebook, *Measuring Program Outcomes*, that provides an eight-step approach to measuring program outcomes (Figure 1). The authors of this text (Hatry et al., 1996) offer the following observations on the epistemological limits of this approach to outcome measurement. They say that although outcome measurement provides a feasible and inexpensive means for CDO managers to track participant outcomes, “it does not prove that the program, and the program alone, caused the outcomes” nor do they “show where the problem lies or what is needed to fix it.” Additionally, they caution, this approach does not reveal “whether the outcomes being measured are the right ones for a particular program—the ones that best reflect meaningful change in the status of participants” (p. 21).

Indeed, the UWA guidebook makes a point of differentiating outcome measurement from “program impact research,” which relies on the random assignment of subjects, control groups, and “sophisticated statistical methods” to separate program influences from other factors affecting participant behavior. In this way, it appears that the data produced from this approach to outcome measurement are not expected to produce new knowledge about the community development field in general.

In a 2007 assessment of the lessons learned from the implementation of UWA measurement systems, Plantz et al. (2007) confirm this perspective. They acknowledge that although funders are more interested in long-term outcomes, the primary value of outcome measurement in the nonprofit sector is short-term learning and service improvement. They caution that outcome findings generated in this way “will not make the allocation decision easier,” because the issue of alignment of funder priorities with local program outcomes “is separate from that of program effectiveness” (p. 9).

Among the things the UWA approach to outcome measurement does not accomplish, this 2007 assessment lists the following: it does not tell CDOs if they are measuring the right outcomes, it does not prove a program caused a particular outcome, it does not explain why a program may have achieved that outcome or how to improve it, and it does not help determine if program resources should be invested in this outcome. With regard to the future, the authors state that although reviewers lack common criteria to judge the soundness of local outcome measurement plans, “dictating common outcomes for programs dealing with common issues is counterproductive.”

With respect to the three basic analytical criteria proposed here, the UWA approach to outcome measurement is resistant to the idea of promoting a common definition of community change. The UWA system does not identify a particular set of outcomes to be measured, but instead, it encourages its affiliates to generate their own list of outcomes by relying on multiple sources both inside and outside of the agency, and then arranging them into a “logic model diagram” that theoretically describes how the program works. Finally, consistent with these limiting factors, any estimation of the general knowledge value of the data being produced by its local affiliates is avoided.

In 2005, NWA published a guidebook, *Success Measures: Transforming Outcome Measurement*, that also recommends a “participatory” approach to outcome measurement. According to the guidebook, NWA also shares the view that it is not acceptable to impose a specific concept of community change or to expect a particular class of outcomes to be measured by its affiliates. On the other hand, *Success Measures* does prescribe the use of 44 preselected outcome indicators, and it provides a “web-based suite” of data collection tools designed to measure change at the individual, community, and organizational levels (Figure 2).

With regard to the expected general knowledge value of the data collected by NWA (2005) affiliates, the guidebook

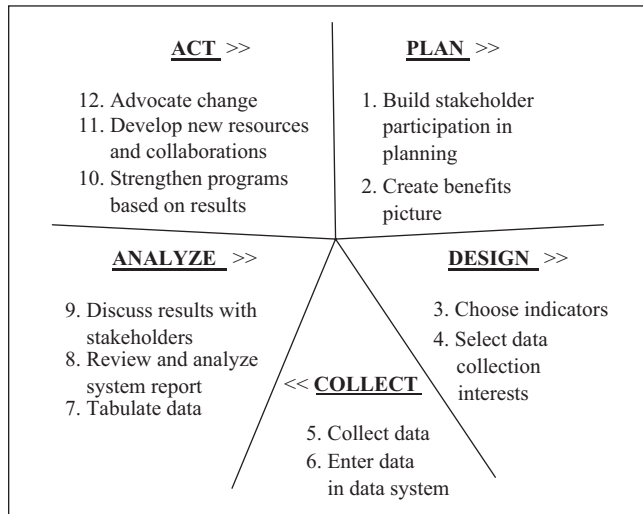


Figure 2. Success measures evaluation process

claims the Success Measures Data System is “the only national effort of its kind that is systematically supporting the collection and voluntary pooling of primary level organizational effectiveness data” (p. 1). Additionally, it states that the computer-based Success Measures Data System allows its affiliates to tabulate and share data so that “intermediaries, funders or large organizations with multiple locations, can easily aggregate data across programs to monitor large networks of impact” (pp. 5-6).

A subsequent article published through NWA and the Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University (Madan, 2007) provides more specific insight into the expected knowledge value of the data being gathered by NeighborWorks. This article begins with the declaration that although outcome measurement is considered to be a way to produce evidence about long-term outcomes, it “does not aim to meet the standards of academic research” (p. iii). In a section titled Traditional Evaluation vs. Outcome Measurement, this point is made emphatically—unlike outcome measurement, which is performed by local CDOs with guidance from national measurement systems, “traditional evaluation is generally performed by an academic or consultant who follows rigorous methods.” (p. 6)

Another indication that national CDO intermediaries do not believe that community development outcome measurement lends itself to scientific methods is offered by Madan (2007) in a discussion about the perceived conflict between the outcome information needs of funders, researchers, and policy makers versus those of CDOs. The concern raised is that if funders require measures of standardized outcomes or researchers and policy makers ask for secondary data, CDOs may neglect the outcomes they really intend to achieve or they may not be able to focus on collecting primary level data and

reporting secondary level data at the same time. Madan reasons that CDOs should be “allowed to choose outcome goals freely” to ensure that they are being true to their mission and their community rather than the accountability goals of funders or the data aggregation needs of researchers and policy makers.

Another institutional approach to outcome measurement is The UI’s National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership. Its director, Thomas Kingsley, is working in a limited number of cities to develop sophisticated, computer-based systems to record indicator data on changing neighborhood conditions. Kingsley (1998) says that “indicators tell you in what areas, and to what extent, things are getting better or worse, and presumably tip you off as to where policy changes and new action programs may be needed” (p. 5). As before, the question of what concept of community-driven social change is at issue and which societal outcomes are relevant to measure is left to local stakeholders to determine on a case-by-case basis. Similarly, although the GIS software being used is capable of aggregating data, Kingsley and Petit (2004) believe the first priority is for its partners to use indicator data to advocate for local policy reform and neighborhood improvements, and “not just to create data and research for their own sake.” (p. 2)

Other national policy organizations with interest in how to evaluate the effectiveness of local community development initiatives appear to share similar assumptions about the limitations of existing institutional outcome measurement systems. A collaboration between The Independent Sector and The UI (Morley, Vinson, & Hatry, 2001) reports that outcome measurement is an effective way for local program managers to identify their own outcomes in order to generate feedback to improve their services. The report says if causality can be determined “at all,” in-depth program evaluations “are generally expensive and will seldom be feasible for most service organizations.” (p. 5)

The Kellogg Foundation (2007) proposes a CDO evaluation framework based on systems concepts that examine larger initiative patterns not evident in a single CDO program or project. The Kellogg Foundation claims that traditional evaluation methods fail to capture the “big picture” and the subtle changes in relationships and resources that lead to big change in the community. Like the UWA and NWA models, this systems approach is intended to be flexible enough to work with multiple theories of change without relying on a common definition of social change, outcomes peculiar to CDO practice, or producing knowledge that can be attributed to a distinct field of community development study.

“CDCs Think They Are Different!”

It turns out that the hands-off approach to outcome measurement favored by CDO intermediaries and national public policy organizations—letting community organizations determine their own theories of change and program outcomes

on a case-by-case basis—is the core principle underlying institutional CDO measurement systems. In talking to the administrators and expert evaluators connected with these institutional initiatives, however, it is not so much a lack of interest in undertaking more rigorous methods to aggregate and compare CDO-specific outcomes as it is the perception that “flexibility” is a necessary concession to the idiosyncrasies of CDOs themselves.

In my interview with the Director of Success Measures for NeighborWorks, she began with the salient observation that “the practical reality is that CDCs (community development corporations) think they’re different,” and because of this, you cannot use “an off-the-shelf theory of how things work.” She reasons that with a network of 250 organizations you “can’t have one social change theory that makes sense.” Likewise, the Manager of Community Impact Leadership at UWA acknowledges that although its mission is “to improve the lives of specific groups of people through changes in the community,” it never defined a concept of social change. He asserts, “Our role is not to dictate to our affiliates what to measure.”

The senior research associate responsible for CDO evaluation at The UI states that, unlike the academic community, UI’s goal “is to serve the policy needs of CDOs versus bringing a construct of (social) change to bare.” According to a principal evaluation consultant to Kellogg and current Dean of the School of Hawaiian Knowledge, the foundation did not articulate a specific theory of social change at the beginning of its outcome measurement initiative. Thus, it is by design that none of these institutional outcome measurement systems advocate a specific concept of community-driven social change that might delimit where to look for evidence of the longer-term social change impact of CDOs.

Given the lack any particular conceptual footing in CDO practice, the question of what criteria these institutions are using to determine if CDOs are actually making a difference in their community is difficult to answer. In a tautological moment, the NWA program administrator says that we know they are accomplishing social change “because they measure it using tested tools.” Similarly, UWA’s manager responds that it sees change in that “agencies are talking to each other about the results of measuring.” UI says that it collaborated with other philanthropic organizations to posit community change indicators in 14 issue areas (to help UI make judgments about whether CDOs are making a difference). Similarly, Kellogg devised a four-stage/four-element iterative process to guide community participants in making judgments about when change takes place (Table 1).

Considering that these institutional measurement systems intentionally choose not to identify a particular class of outcomes to be measured by CDOs, I asked how these institutions know if CDOs are actually measuring outcomes. NeighborWorks assures me that trained evaluators work with

Table 1. Four-Stage/Four-Element Community Change Framework

Stages	Elements
1. Building trust	1. Knowing your community
2. Strategic planning	2. Building a strong team
3. Acting together	3. Developing the individual
4. Making it a way of life	4. Making the change

its affiliate organizations to make sure they are measuring outcomes, although, she added, “We haven’t really thought about what an outcome is, existentially.” UWA states that because outcome measurement is less for funder accountability than the self-learning of member agencies, “what’s really important is that agencies think their improving.”

The UI evaluator says it is focusing on a particular class of outcomes in that it is planning to develop measurement standards that can be used in 10-year longitudinal studies. In the meantime, she explained, it is training CDOs to use logic models to predict short- and long-term outcome types. Kellogg acknowledges that although funders wanted to see long-term outcomes in organizational policy and behavior, the foundation realized that “incremental” changes at the individual and relational level could also be measured by asking questions related to the four-stage/four-element model so that CDOs would be able to identify the incremental changes that precipitate long-term change.

Finally, given that no particular class of outcomes is currently being targeted by these institutional measurement systems, I asked on what basis they compare the outcome measures of one CDO to another. NWA says it realized it could not compare results without a common theory of change. UWA asks participating agencies to “compare themselves to themselves” in order to assess its own success. Kellogg says it is now experimenting with longitudinal methods to compare the results of different CDOs over time. Finally, although UI does not compare the outcomes of different CDOs to each other, it is hypothesized that if the way you measure outcomes in different circumstance is “reasonably similar,” then maybe you can compare these results.

In lieu of a specific theory of community-driven social change and any particular class of outcomes to target, there appears to be a shared institutional notion that providing CDOs with a list of potential indicators, a package of tested measurement tools, or a prescriptive logic model will empower them to identify the outcomes that should be measured to explain the social change impact of their programs and projects. In summary, this approach presumes that by providing the proper evaluation software, the capacity of CDOs to translate their missions into conceptual terms (i.e., theories of change and corresponding outcomes) will somehow be enhanced.

“It Is Not Evaluation!”

UWA’s manager says it *does* set national outcome goals it hopes local agencies will meet, but its primary concern is that its affiliates have the data they need to learn and improve their own results first. He summarized his remarks saying, “We don’t have an outcome dictionary, we want our affiliates to phase this in their own way . . . It’s not evaluation!” NeighborWorks was hopeful that a current pilot project of 10 affiliate organizations using the same package of tools and templates provided by NWA will eventually produce “meaningful data.” Yet she cautioned, “This only happens when affiliates are ready, not at first . . . evaluation is intimidating.”

UI’s evaluator was also ever mindful of the individuality of CDOs and the difficulty “right now” of introducing standardization into the field. The evaluator said, “Without parameters to put around the discussion, it’s difficult to say what (data) is unique and what is comparable.” Although Kellogg is looking to CDOs to identify the relevant outcomes, they have been aggressive in introducing data collection methods (i.e., social network analysis, storytelling, meta-analysis) from other social disciplines to help accomplish this task. Indeed, its principal evaluator believes that the veracity of its data collection process is to be found “in the success of applying other evaluation models to the (community development) process.”

My last two expert interviews were conducted with CDO evaluators in a position to be more objective about the limitations and/or the potential of existing institutional outcome measurement systems. They were somewhat more optimistic about the future possibility of using conventional evaluation methods to create general knowledge about the community development field. At the same time, they also expressed deference to the localized nature of CDO development activities, and this raised concerns about the conceptual difficulties involved in this undertaking.

The former director of CDO outcome evaluation at the Kellogg Foundation points out that national foundations have a different interpretation of social change (compared with CDO intermediaries) in that they think “some communities are ready to undertake the work” relative to their level of sophistication (i.e., operational structure, political leadership, track record, community support). On the conceptual side, however, she acknowledged that although theories such as “social capital” are commonly used to interpret international community development initiatives, “work domestically tends to draw attention to the local instead of the macro level,” making this approach difficult.

The current director of the Public Management Program at The UI sees promise in the potential applicability of meta-analysis and the randomized control trials being used in juvenile delinquency outcome research. But with respect to undertaking outcome measurement in the CDC world, he

made these cautionary remarks: “it’s hard for outside (independent) organizations to do evaluation of local CDC activity” and “interviews will pick up what they (CDCs) think is working” but this is not the same thing as evidenced-based data.

Thus, it can be concluded from this exercise that a shared commitment to treating CDOs as unique, self-determining entities effectively assures that existing institutional outcome measurement systems are not likely to produce data that are amenable to the creation of general knowledge in the community development field. In the absence of a general explanation or theory on what CDOs do and how they do it, these national institutions seem to have concluded that the advance of evidence-based research must either wait for the accumulation of primary data by self-motivated CDOs or that introducing CDO practitioners to evaluation methods from other fields of study may eventually yield the relevant outcomes and measures to pursue.

Outcome Measurement to Produce New Knowledge

The impasse reached in the current CDO outcome measurement movement is sustained by the widely held notion that what CDOs do and how they do it is a black box of ideas and strategies unique to each community and its situational context. Unfortunately, this popular notion has diminished the institutional will to find a basic analytical framework to collect, aggregate, and compare CDO outcome data, and the advance of general knowledge about community development initiatives appears to be on hold.

Nevertheless, established fields of knowledge development are built on a body of theory that provides the conceptual foundation on which empirical research is designed and appropriate methods of data gathering are conducted. Without a collective opinion on what makes community development similar to or different than other social disciplines and what evidence to look for, no conceptual basis exists for creating an analytical framework to systematically evaluate community development outcomes.

The institutional evaluators I spoke to were not satisfied with the status quo in CDO outcome measurement. At The UI, it was acknowledged that current measures are not adequate and that to generate “useful data for general knowledge purposes,” national intermediary organizations and funders have to reach agreement on what is important to measure. These interviews indicate that despite well-intentioned efforts to attach analytical integrity to the evaluation of community development outcomes, the central problem of how to conceptualize what CDOs do and how they do it continues to prevent the advance of our knowledge about community development.

It is argued here that a more deliberate approach to resolve this outcome measurement impasse is required, and the shared perspective held by CDC directors, with regard to how they

achieve social change in their daily work, is the most coherent explanation available. If an institutional consensus is formed around the behavioral objectives of CDC practitioners and the outcomes most relevant to their work, this could become the theoretical basis on which a basic analytical framework and standard outcome categories can be identified and more rigorous institutional evaluation systems designed.

The Theory Within Practitioner Perspectives on Community Change

The social behavior perspective held by CDC directors has roots that can be traced back to classical 19th-century sociology (Tonnies, Durkheim, and Weber), which predicted the ongoing assault of urban forces on community life and the necessity of local (grassroots) efforts to maintain human networks of support and self-sufficiency to counteract it. This interpretation was embraced again in the mid-20th century by Addams, Follet, and Dewey, who regarded community as a vital life force to be preserved and protected through local community action (Bender, 1978).

The CDC practitioner social change perspective also corresponds with today's citizen-led change explanation underlying the new social movements of the Post-World War II era (Fisher & Kling, 1993). For example, Hirst (1994) predicts a gradual redirecting of the social order through citizen-led initiatives to conduct local affairs in a way that produce better social outcomes for the poor and excluded, and Sirianni and Friedland (2001) specifically cite community-based development as an example of a worldwide trend toward community-based responses to urban problems.

An explicit community-driven social change interpretation of community development is contained in Warren's 1963 book, *The Community in America*. Warren says community should be understood in terms of the tension between the vertical (bureaucratic) patterns of urbanization and the horizontal (ad hoc) patterns concerned with preserving the social fabric of local communities. In this regard, community development is not a method for building new playgrounds but rather "a deliberate and sustained attempt to strengthen the horizontal pattern of a community" (p. 324).

Ironically, Warren says his motive in proposing a sociological theory of community development is to respond to the crying need for a simple model that permits "meaningful analysis and testable research hypotheses" (p. ix). Relying on Warren's definition of community, a theory of community development practice can thus be formed around the CDC practitioner perspective that *community change is the struggle to sustain self-reliant behavior and inspire the will to undertake collective action in order to mitigate social problems* (Dorius, 2009b).

A phenomenological definition of community development work would focus primary attention on the community-building behavior of individuals and community institutions, and it would lead to normative theories about the local conditions

necessary to foster resident engagement and skill-building and the collective action required of community institutions. It is within such a theoretical context that the effectiveness of specific CDO programs and projects could then be measured in terms of poor citizens gaining the skills and confidence required to overcome social barriers to economic success, and community institutions making policy decisions and resource commitments that help sustain such success-seeking behavior.

Implications for Evaluation Research

The hands-off approach of national CDO intermediaries and policy institutions with regard to establishing a standardized outcome measurement framework is self-imposed. CDOs themselves have a common language to describe *how* they do what they do and the social theory exists to articulate the conceptual integrity of this perspective. CDOs apply different development strategies to common issues of social advancement found in poor communities. How CDOs go about this work distinguishes community development from conventional economic development intervention programs, and it is the basis on which to advance evidence-based research in a field of community development study.

When the central problem of how to conceptualize what CDOs do and how they do it is addressed, basic criteria for a feasible analytical framework to measure the social change outcomes of CDO initiatives can be met as follows:

1. *The articulation of a specific concept of community-driven social change.* Community-driven social change is a sociological concept that describes the contemporary struggle to sustain self-reliant behavior and inspire collective action to mitigate problems of social advancement at the local level.
2. *The identification of a particular class of social change outcomes to be measured.* The behavioral objectives identified by practitioners include changes in the actions of individuals and community institutions that can be classified into discrete outcome categories. CDOs can identify specific outcomes within these predetermined categories allowing the results of behavioral achievements in similar initiative areas to be aggregated and compared across different organizations.
3. *An estimation of the kind of social change outcome data to be produced.* National intermediary and interested policy-making institutions can gather and compare data for evidence-based trials by taking a systematic approach to asking how behavioral outcomes are being achieved in similar CDO programs and projects. (Table 2 is an example of assessing the potential of a neighborhood loan fund to change the behavior of community institutions using a template to ask strategic questions relative to each of the six empowerment themes in Table 3.)

Table 2. Measuring Impacts on Community Institutions

Behavioral Objectives	Old Hill Home Loan Fund
1. Bringing people together	How does this initiative involve private businesses from the community? (How often and in what capacity?)
2. Decision making with dignity	Are private institutions represented on the governing board or committees of the community organization? (Describe)
3. Changing attitudes	Have public and/or private institutions changed their role in the operation/funding of the loan fund over time? (How)
4. Setting common goals	Do public/private institutions participate in policy making to oversee the loan fund program? (How)
5. Building self-confidence	Has involvement in the loan fund initiative led to other forms of institutional participation in the projects and programs of the community organization? (Describe)
6. Achieving economic self-sufficiency	How has the participation of public/private institutions led to improvements in the financial stability of the loan fund?

Table 3. CDC Practitioner Empowerment Themes

1. Bringing people together
2. Communicating/decision making with dignity/respect
3. Changing attitudes/mindsets and overcoming barriers
4. Recognizing common goals and creating a vision
5. Building individual/community self-confidence
6. Achieving economic self-sufficiency

Note. CDC = community development corporation.

Conclusion

National intermediaries, philanthropic grantmakers, and public policy institutions have reached an impasse on how to measure the outcomes of CDOs. An institutional consensus has evolved that CDO initiatives are not amenable to conventional evaluation research methods because CDO programs and projects are unique to each community and no common explanation of what CDOs do is available. In the alternative, national institutions encourage CDO self-learning in hopes that empirical knowledge can eventually be achieved by introducing analytical concepts and research methods from other disciplines; however, little progress is being made in the production of general knowledge about the community development field.

What is required to move beyond this impasse is agreement about the conceptual nature of community development practice and a corresponding analytical framework to guide the systematic evaluation of community development

outcomes. Insight gained from asking CDC directors how they achieve community change along with existing social theory indicates that community development can be understood as a sociological concept informed by the discrete behavioral objectives of CDO programs and projects. Measuring the increased capacity of low-income individuals to gain practical skills and achieve economic self-reliance along with the demonstrated willingness of community institutions to promote such success-seeking behavior meets basic criteria for a coherent analytical approach to outcome measurement.

National grant and policy-making institutions need to develop a theoretical understanding of the community change objectives of CDO practitioners within the boundaries of a phenomenological interpretation of community-driven social change. Having first established an epistemology of community development practice, national institutions can then proceed with confidence to undertake a more systematic analytical approach to CDO outcome measurement to identify the discrete individual and local institutional transformations attributable to their work.

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Bio

Noah Dorius has a PhD in community economic development and more than 30 years of experience as the director of nonprofit community development corporations and municipal planning and community development agencies. His work has previously been published in the *Journal of the American Planning Association*, the *Journal of the Community Development Society*, and the *Journal of Urban Affairs*. His current research interests include sociological theory of community-driven social change and measuring community development outcomes.