Evaluating Coalitions and Networks: Frameworks, Needs, and Opportunities

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INTRODUCTION

Coalitions, networks, and collaborations more generally have grown steadily in number and importance across all fields of human endeavor, with examples as far afield as business, health-care services, philanthropy, and military and nuclear weapons complex sites.[1] In the nonprofit realm, this development is attributed to "in part…the realization that they have more impact and work better, and foundations and others have played a real role in encouraging, nudging along people to work more collaboratively."[2] Although more slowly, work to understand and assess the health and impact of collaborations of all kinds too has grown, particularly in the past decade.

Evaluators have developed an impressive array of approaches, frameworks, and tools to support both coalitions/networks and their funders. This review explores these developments, and points to challenges and opportunities that remain in efforts to assess their effectiveness and impact.[3]

This review is for coalitions and networks that are considering embarking on evaluation. It begins with what makes coalitions and networks different from standalone organizations, and the implications for evaluation. It then reviews five selected evaluation frameworks, highlighting their advantages, limitations, and applicability. Finally, it offers a set of lessons and opportunities related to coalition/network evaluation based on real-life experiences, along with insights for funders on how best to support evaluation of the coalitions/networks they support.

Findings are based on a broad review of evaluation materials, along with 17 interviews with evaluators, funders, and coalition/network practitioners (see Appendix 1). Direct quotes from these interviews are integrated throughout to highlight findings and firsthand experiences.

COALITIONS AND NETWORKS: What Makes Them Tick

There are nearly as many definitions of coalitions and networks as there are reports about why they are important and worthy of study. Two examples follow:

Coalitions	Networks
"'[A]n organization or organizations whose members commit to an agreed-on purpose and shared decision making to influence an external institution or target, while each member organization maintains its own autonomy.'"	"[S]ocial arrangements made up of individuals and representatives of institutions based on establishing and building relationships, sharing tasks and working on mutual or joint activities, enabling new learning and mobilizing alternative action."

[1] See, for example, Butterfield et al.

[2] Interview, Tom Novick, M+R, 5 May 2016.

[3] I gratefully acknowledge for their thoughtful reviews and suggestions Jackie W. Kaye, Director of Research and Evaluation at Wellspring Advisors; Julia Coffman, Director of the Center for Evaluation Innovation; Veena Pankaj, Director of Innovation Network; and Jared Raynor, Director of Evaluation at the TCC Group.

Differences between coalitions and networks are largely ones of degree. Generally speaking, however, networks:

- **Are more expansive than coalitions**: A small network is almost an oxymoron. In contrast, a small coalition is often a strategic choice.
- **Are looser than coalitions:** Because networks are more expansive, they are invariably looser. A loose coalition would raise questions about its strength.
- **Feature more decentralization than coalitions:** Centralized planning and decision-making in an expansive and loose collaboration is futile if not counter-productive. Instead, networks are "loosely organized and non-hierarchical, with authority and responsibility flowing from and around autonomous members."[4]
- **Have a periphery to attend to:** By virtue of their expansiveness and decentralization, networks have "edges" that extend well beyond those of most coalitions, where defining features become increasingly less distinct.[5]
- **Require less from members than coalitions**: Much less can be asked of and expected from an expansive, loose, and decentralized membership.

These differences have implications for nearly every aspect of operations, including how quickly the collaboration can act, what it is likely to achieve, and how it might evaluate its effectiveness and "ensure that evaluation learnings are disseminated and utilized."[6]

Differences notwithstanding, coalitions and networks share a critical feature that sets them apart from standalone organizations: They are both associations of autonomous organizations, each of which comes with particular expectations, priorities, and visions. This relational feature suggests a more consequential distinction between evaluations of individual organizations and evaluations of collaborations.

How coalitions and networks differ from single organizations, and the implications for evaluation

The literature is replete with discussions of the ways in which coalitions and networks, or collaborative efforts more generally, differ from individual organizations, even large, complex, global entities. Authors variably distinguish standalone organizations from collaboratives on the basis of the amount of time they require to organize and demonstrate results;[7] the need to understand both "parts" and the "whole"[8] and "unplanned and

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[4] Wilson-Grau and Nuñez, p. 2.

[5] Malinsky and Lubelsky, p. 42. They further note that "The expansive and emergent properties of networks suggested the need for tools that could circulate information from the edges to the core, and which would be sufficiently nuanced and flexible to capture unanticipated outcomes" (p. 46).

[6] iScale and Keystone, p. 29.

[7] Network Impact and Center for Evaluation Innovation, "Framing Paper," p. 5.

[8] iScale and Keystone, "Next Generation Network Evaluation," p. 28.

unintended positive changes;"[9] among others.[10] These and many other differences that distinguish individual organizations from collaboratives also are largely ones of degree: the need for a long view, understanding both parts/whole, and grappling with unexpected outcomes and dynamics also apply to individual organizations.

However, certain features of coalitions/networks do complicate the application of conventional evaluations and tools used for single organizations:

- **Autonomous organizations versus staff/employees:** The nature of relationships among autonomous organizations differs markedly from among individuals in a single organization. The difference is pronounced in the area of decision-making. "In a single organization, there's one person or team of decision-makers, [whereas] in coalitions [and networks] this is not the case."[11] The implications for evaluation are many: "Who has decision making authority over the planning and implementation of the evaluation? Do [individual member organizations] have veto authority over dissemination [of evaluation findings] externally? How to deal with reporting and who is told what and when? How do you refer to speakers and their perspectives? Do opinions represent individuals or organizations? [And, what about the] ability of an individual to represent the whole organization?"[12]
- **Multiple organizational perspectives versus one:** Individual organizations actively promote a single vision and set of values, priorities, and goals. In contrast, coalitions and networks must accept that each member organization comes with its own perspectives, including very different assessments of the collaboration's effectiveness, health, and impact.[13] "One member's experience may be very different from another's. Our instincts are to construct consensus from our findings in evaluation; to produce a singular narrative and overarching set of findings. This approach is simply ill-suited to network evaluation."[14]
- **Long versus short "chain of impact":** All organizations seek impact, and most seek it on multiple levels and in several areas. For coalitions and networks the "chain of impact" is multiplied as it includes the "impact on its members, the members' impacts on their local environments, and the members' combined impact on their broader environment."[15] This complicates evaluations, as those "designed to examine

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[9] Ibid., p. 29.

[10] Even Raynor notes that "[b]esides articulating the Goal, which all groups need to do, they also have to articulate the value proposition – because it takes time and resources to do an inter-organizational relationship." Arguably, however, the need to articulate effectively or compellingly the "value proposition" of an organization's approach, even the need for its (continued) existence, applies equally to individual organizations, and where many falter. (Raynor, "Good Practices," webinar)

[11] Interview, Veena Pankaj, Director, Innovation Network, 9 May 2016.

[12] Interview, Ben Kerman, Head, Strategic Learning and Evaluation, Atlantic Philanthropies, 25 May 2016.

[13] See Malinsky and Lubelsky, pp. 22-23.

[14] Ibid., p. 23. (authors' emphasis)

[15] Network Impact and Center for Evaluation Innovation, "Framing Paper," p. 6.

impact must understand the relationship between these three and be clear about where their focus lies."[16]

- **Collaboration as both means and ends:** All its benefits notwithstanding, "joining a coalition or network it is not a decision to pursue lightly. Once pursued, however, its relational feature also becomes an end in itself. Networks…are both a means and an end."[17]
- **Participation as essential versus desirable:** Collaboration without participation is a non-starter. "Participation is at the core of what makes a network different to other organisational-process forms."[18] Evaluations, too, must be "participatory…to ensure buy-in; [member organizations] must see how it will be used, that it addresses questions of importance to them; and they see that they will gain from it in some way."[19] The challenge is to ensure this across several organizations, and not merely the core but also the periphery.
- **Contribution and credit:** Collaboratives add the complication of how to handle documenting the contributions of the collective versus individual members.[20] The challenge becomes particularly acute when funding is involved as the "whole issue of competition between individual organization members competing with the secretariat for funding is a major headache."[21]

EVALUATING COALITIONS AND NETWORKS: A Wealth of Options

Over the past 15 years, evaluations of nonprofit collaborations have evolved in a number of important respects that include greater recognition of:

- The need for flexibility and that no single evaluation approach can serve all evaluation purposes or collaborative entities.
- The need to zero in on what really matters, due to organizations' finite time and resources: "You can't—and don't need to—evaluate everything! Focus on what you need to know."[22]
- The importance of participation by coalition/network members at every stage of an evaluation, including in the selection of evaluation questions and methodology to ensure "buy-in in order to have evidence that is respected," otherwise members can reject the outcome based on their rejection of the methodology.[23]

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[16] Ibid.

[17] Wilson-Grau and Nuñez, p. 10.

[18] Church et al., p. 7R.

[19] Interview, Madeline Church, Head of Organisational Development Unit, Saferworld (UK), 23 May 2016.

[20] Interview, Jared Raynor.

[21] Interview, Madeline Church.

[22] Innovation Network, p. 4.

[23] Interview, Ben Kerman.

It would be an overstatement to say there is consensus among evaluators on these matters. It also cannot be claimed that they are being fully implemented even by those who agree in principle. Nevertheless, there are increasing efforts devoted to developing accessible, manageable, focused, and participatory approaches to evaluations of coalitions and networks.

There are a variety of ways to categorize the evaluation approaches featured in what is now an expansive literature.[24] Although each approach offers some important insight or perspective, most propose similar things in somewhat different language.

Choices related to evaluation design typically are presented in binary terms, including those in Table 1, with different approaches either implicitly or explicitly favoring one or another, or some combination.[25]

Each of these elements allows for certain information and involves tradeoffs, as is evident in the review of select evaluation frameworks for coalitions and networks that follows.

Table 1: Commonly Contrasted Evaluation Elements
←→

Member driven	Funder driven
Subjective	Objective
Linear	Interactive
Center	Periphery
SC / Secretariat	Members
Focused	Comprehensive
Process	Outcomes
Informal	Formal
Single moment	Over time
As needed	Ongoing
Self-administered	Professionally administered
Simplified	Complex
Remains internal	Made public

EVALUATION FRAMEWORKS

From a review of about 15 approaches, five were selected to demonstrate the range of evaluation frameworks and tools available for collaboratives.[26] Three frameworks are explicitly designed for evaluating coalitions/networks (Core Capacity Framework, an example of an "organic" evaluation, and IPARL); one can be used by all types of organizations, even projects (Outcome

[24] For example, see iScale and Keystone, pp. 5-12. Church et al. provides another excellent review.

[25] Many dichotomies characteristic of early debates on evaluations (and social sciences more generally) largely have receded. For example, rather than selecting between quantitative and qualitative methods, internal and external assessments, or top-down and bottom-up approaches, more evaluations explore what each contributes, with many now pursuing a combination. And at least one dichotomy—subjective and objective—is arguably a false one.

[26] Several of the 15 approaches reviewed are included in Appendix 2.

Harvesting); and one is an approach to collaboration that requires members to commit to regular and ongoing evaluation and use of specific measurement tools (Collective Impact).

Their distinctiveness notwithstanding, the five approaches agree on a number of significant dimensions, including the requirement that evaluation:

- Serve the needs of the organization being evaluated as the organization defines those
- Correspond to the stage of development of the organization[27]
- Consider the context in which the organization operates
- Tap multiple perspectives or stakeholder views, both internal and external
- Combine quantitative and qualitative data and collection methods
- Promote learning rather than judging, or "improving rather than proving"[28]
- Assess both process and outcome (although with differing emphases)
- Replace search for "attribution" with "contribution"

The following provides brief descriptions of each approach, including their advantages, limitations, and applications. For this overview, the descriptions are oversimplified, but the general principles undergirding each framework provide a guide for thinking about their applicability. A table summarizing the five approaches' key components, questions, applications, advantages, and limitations is in Appendix 3.

1. CORE CAPACITY FRAMEWORK

The Core Capacity Framework is a deliberately simplified approach that focuses on three dimensions of capacity to assess coalitions' effectiveness:

- Capacity of organizations to be good coalition members
- Capacity of the coalition
- Outcomes/impact of coalition work[29]

This approach begins with an expectation of member organizations: "coalition members must be able to articulate the value that they bring to the table—what is it that makes them an important part of the coalition" as well as being able "to express what they want/need from the table and what their limitations are."[30] Organizations have more difficulty articulating the latter, but "when done

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[27] Some examples are Raynor's seven stages (mobilization, establishing organizational structure, building capacity for action, planning for action, implementation, refinement, and institutionalization) ("What Makes an Effective Coalition?," p. 13); Network Impact and Center for Evaluation Innovation's five stages (catalyzing, launching, organizing, performing and adapting, transitioning or transforming) ("Framing Paper," pp. 10-11); and IPARL's four stages of life-cycle (catalyzing, launching, enhancing and expanding, and transforming or transitioning) (iScale and Keystone, pp. 34-36).

[28] Innovation Network, "Evaluation Plan Workbook," p. 3.

[29] Raynor, What Makes an Effective Coalition? Evidence-Based Indicators of Success, p. 15.

[30] Ibid., p. 16.

deliberately and transparently, [doing so] enhances the longer-term viability of the coalition."[31] Similarly, the starting point in assessing the capacity of the coalition itself is the articulation of both the "goal destination" or "their desired results," and their "value proposition" or "why they are the right vehicle for current or potential members that might otherwise join another group or remain unaffiliated."[32]

Accompanying this framework are straightforward tools in the form of self-administered checklists for both sets of capacity assessments. One checklist can be used by a coalition to gauge its members' capacities,[33] and the other to assess the collective's capacity in five areas—leadership, adaptive, management, technical, and cultural.[34] The tools enable organizations to "take a quick pulse on their performance" using a 5-point rating scale (excellent, better than average, average, needs improvement, non-existent in our coalition) and to stimulate thinking and reflection by coalition members around these critical areas of capacity.[35]

Advantages: This approach is a distillation of extensive experience that directs attention where it is considered to be most fruitful to look. Organizations with limited time and resources will appreciate the accessibility of this approach, and the self-administered tool is easy to use to launch deeper conversations. The framework also points to insightful distinctions, such as between members' "wants" and "needs," and the coalition's "goal destination" and "value proposition." Further, it addresses challenging areas, like "organizational culture," that are generally neglected because of how difficult they are to take on.[36] Evaluations of this kind can be carried out either with an external evaluator "to report back as neutral party or read between the lines," or without, as coalition leaders may well be "adept at leading their coalitions through the process."[37]

Core Capacity Framework

ADVANTAGES

- Simplified
- Focused
- Self-administered
- Accessible

LIMITATIONS

- Partial
- No checklist to assess outcome/impact
- Assumes learning structures and systems

Limitations: By revealing interesting findings, checklists may help generate thought-provoking discussions around areas identified as needing attention or work. Though great starting points for those important discussions,

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[31] Ibid.

[32] Ibid., pp. 20-21.

[33] Ibid., p. 17.

[34] Ibid., Appendix A, pp. 41-42.

[35] Ibid., Appendix A, p. 41.

[36] Organizational culture is assessed via the extent to which trust, respect, safe dissent, unity, sensitivity to power differentials characterize relationships among members. Ibid., pp. 34-35.

[37] Interview, Jared Raynor, TCC Group, 10 May 2016.

checklists rely on skillful facilitation to move the discussions from areas that need improvement to *how* they can be improved. That requires structured conversations beyond what a checklist provides.[38] Further, as with closed-ended survey questions more generally, the same response to a question, e.g., better than average, may not have the same meaning to different respondents. Similarly, a list of criteria for assessing capacity endows each criterion on the list the same weight. Further, many of the most important areas that coalitions/networks want to understand, such as impact, are not amenable to checklists.

Applicability: This approach can be used with coalitions of "many various types…with the understanding that every coalition will need to carefully examine the framework in light of their own unique context and adapt it accordingly."[39] As the framework's creator considers coalitions to be "networks in action mode," this suggests applicability of the approach to networks, as well.

2. ORGANIC EVALUATION

Genuinely organic evaluations are necessarily unique in each instance, making them difficult to capture as a "framework." The evaluation that the Center for Social Innovation conducted with a Canadian network, however, offers an exemplar of this approach. It documents the highly participatory and organic process that produced and used a series of exercises to evaluate the network.[40]

The team embarked on the assessment without the benefit of preset tools and chose instead to design the tools in the course of discovering what they needed. That undertaking yielded three "distinct but interdependent arenas worthy of consideration in network evaluation":

- Ecosystem
- Processes
- Outcomes

For each arena, the authors fleshed out a number of characteristics and designed two exercises: one that is descriptive, "intended to ground the evaluation," and another that is evaluative, "intended to encourage deep reflection and exploration."[41]

The evaluation moved away from what *should be* to focus instead on what *is*. Evaluators noted at the start of the process that "networks have contradictory aspects, such as being open or closed, individual or organizational, formal

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[38] The Monitor Institute's somewhat similar Network Effectives "diagnostic and development tool" combines a checklist and rating with a column for "reflection on next steps," including possible actions to improve areas that are rated low, and another for "potential actions" to strengthen or develop those areas. The combination of quantitative and qualitative input is valuable but requires more work. The tool also starts by distinguishing between networks that are "bounded" (with clear boundaries and whose participants are known) and "unbounded" (with fuzzy boundaries and whose participants are not all known). Diana Scearce, Monitor Institute, May 2010.

[39] Raynor, "What Makes an Effective Coalition?," p. 5.

[40] Eli Malinsky and Chad Lubelsky, Network Evaluation: Cultivating Healthy Networks for Social Change, Centre for Social Innovation and Canada Millennium Scholarship Fund, 2010. (Interviewees received pp. 47-103.)

[41] Malinsky and Lubelsky, pp. 50-51.

or informal, etc."[42] that "were often the source of challenges or choices which were hard, if not impossible, to resolve."[43] Therefore, rather than seeking to define the features of effective networks, which would have required them to select from among a range of "competing tensions or paradoxes" or "either/or choices," they opted instead to frame them "as pairs of complementary tendencies" and discovered in the course of designing the approach that "dealing with these paradoxes was not about choosing between them but rather seeing what emerges from the dynamic."[44]

Although many evaluation approaches value objective input and assessments considerably more than the subjective input of members, this approach privileges the subjective as "network experiences are subjective; you can't make a statement about a network experience that is true for all; … it's always subjective."[45]

Advantages: Terms such as participatory, holistic, and organic have become buzzwords in some areas of the evaluation literature. However, these features are inherent to the design and implementation of this evaluation approach. Importantly, it begins by contextualizing the assessment in the "ecosystem" in which the network operates. It is also genuinely creative, particularly in the range of exercises, including drawing, that stimulate important and penetrating conversations aimed at enhancing understanding of one's own and others' contributions to the network as a whole. Combining descriptive and evaluative exercises also is creative and yields valuable insights.

Organic Evaluation

ADVANTAGES

- Holistic
- Highly participatory
- Creative
- Assesses "what is" rather than "what should be"

LIMITATIONS

- Lengthy process
- Difficult to replicate

Limitations: This was a product of a particular network's quest for an evaluation approach that would serve their particular needs. While successful, the process was extremely labor- and time-intensive and required an entire year to develop and compile the findings. These two features together make replicating the approach difficult. Further, the lead evaluator acknowledged several complications for "getting buy-in to use it," including that many "people aren't comfortable thinking this way," among them funders.

Applicability: The authors note that "While the lessons contained herein could be well used by network participants, academics or funders, the focus would be on practitioners who generally assume responsibility for the network," network stewards or hub

[42] The other pairs they addressed are: order or chaos, learning or teaching, stewardship or agency, organization or individual, network (structure) or networking (activity), formal or informal, heterogeneous or homogenous. Ibid., pp. 30-36.

[43] Ibid., p. 29.

[44] Ibid.

[45] Interview, Eli Malinsky, Associate Director, Aspen Institute Business & Society Program (formerly Centre for Social Innovation), 6 May 2016.

organizations.[46] However, the questions they tackled and the tools they developed can be adjusted for use by coalitions and other collaboratives.

3. COLLECTIVE IMPACT

Collective Impact (CI) is a framework for collaboration that, in marked contrast to the preceding approach, has a particular conception regarding the "core conditions" for successful collaborations:

1. Common agenda
2. Shared measurement
3. Mutually reinforcing activities
4. Continuous communication
5. Backbone support[47]

These features, which include that members agree on the measurement tools that will be used as well as "[using] data to continuously learn, adapt, and improve,"[48] are built into all CI collaborations. Indeed, "Collecting data and measuring results consistently across all participants ensures that efforts remain aligned and participants hold each other accountable."[49] They also require a "backbone organization"[50] that assumes responsibility for ensuring that "participating organisations shift from acting alone to acting in concert."[51]

Although CI is not an evaluation framework, per se, it posits that successful collaborations require agreement on and the use of "a common set of measures to monitor performance, track progress toward goals, and learn what is or is not working."[52] Challenges involved are many and include "[c]ompeting priorities among stakeholders and fears about being judged as underperforming … [Further], [o]rganizations have few resources with which to measure their own performance, let alone develop and maintain a shared measurement system among multiple organizations."[53] However, shared measurement is considered "essential, and collaborative efforts will remain superficial without it. Having a small but comprehensive set of indicators establishes a common language that supports the action framework, measures progress along the common agenda, enables greater alignment among the goals of different organizations, encourages more collaborative problem-solving, and becomes the platform for an ongoing learning community that gradually increases the effectiveness of all participants."[54]

Advantages: CI practitioners are well placed to require ongoing and robust evaluations of

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[46] Malinsky and Lubelsky, p. 14.

[47] Turner et al., p. 2.

[48] https://collectiveimpactforum.org/resources/collective-impact-principles-practice

[49] Preskill et al., "Guide to Evaluating Collective Impact: Supplement," p. 14.

[50] The role of backbone organizations is to: "guide vision and strategy; support aligned activities; establish shared measurement practices; build public will; advance policy; and mobilize funding." (Turner et al.)

[51] http://www.collaborationforimpact.com/collective-impact/

[52] Hanleybrown et al., p. 5.

[53] Ibid.

[54] Ibid.

Collective Impact

ADVANTAGES

- Focus on collaboration for impact
- Familiar language, concepts, concerns
- Integrates evaluation fully into work

LIMITATIONS

- Assumptions on effective collaboration
- Difficulty in gaining cross-collaboration agreement on measurement tools
- Assumptions on need for centralization and "backbone organization"

members, given that they are so explicitly focused on all collaborations' two primary challenges: acting together and impact. With evaluation embedded so fully in the collaboration, even as a condition for membership, practitioners can be expected to develop and improve evaluation skills and capacities as well as learning across the membership over time.

Limitations: CI requires a high level of commitment that is not always possible or even desirable, particularly for loose networks. The benefits of centralized infrastructure and the need for and role of a "backbone organization" are debated. Gaining agreement on shared measurement tools is challenging, particularly when member organizations differ in capacities and experience.

Applicability: All collaborations that are prepared to embrace CI fundamentals.

4. OUTCOME HARVESTING

Whereas CI directs attention to the objective of collaborations—impact—and evaluations assess whether partners are on track to achieving it, Outcome Harvesting begins at the destination and works backward. "Outcome Harvesting does not measure progress towards predetermined outcomes or objectives, but rather collects evidence of what has been achieved, and works backward to determine whether and how the project or intervention contributed to the change."[55] It is geared to assessing outcomes in complex and interactive settings where cause and effect cannot be easily captured or understood.[56] This approach is posited as more sensible and fruitful given the inescapable complexities of social realities, the limited value of multi-year planning for an unknown and unknowable future, and the inevitable unplanned outcomes of all kinds.

Outcome Harvesting can be used by organizations, including coalitions and networks, at various stages of their development, either as a comprehensive evaluation approach in its own right or in combination with others. It involves the following iterative steps:

1. Design the Outcome Harvest
2. Review documentation and draft outcome descriptions
3. Engage with informants in formulating outcome descriptions
4. Substantiate

[55] Wilson-Grau and Britt, p. 1.

[56] Saferworld, p. 4.

5. Analyze and interpret
6. Support use of findings[57]

More specifically, Outcome Harvesting collects evidence to identify:

1. *"Outcome*: *Who* has the change agent influenced to change, *what*, *when*, and *where* was it changed? What is the observable, verifiable change that can be seen in the individual, group, community, organization, or institution? What is being done differently that is significant?

2. *Contribution*: *How* did the change agent contribute to this change? Concretely, what did she, he, or they do that influenced the change?"[58]

The information thus "harvested" is then "winnowed" down and "validated or substantiated by comparing it to information collected from knowledgeable, independent sources."[59] As noted, the approach actively captures unintended consequences and even negative outcomes. "If only positive outcomes are reported, one of two interpretations may be assumed: (1) the claims are not credible, or (2) the change agent is not taking enough risks."[60]

Advantages: This approach directs attention precisely where most organizations have the most difficulty: assessing their impact. Verified outcomes are invaluable. Starting at the end is an innovative approach that promotes openness to seeing beyond what an organization set out to achieve. The process is highly participatory and values engagement around the outcomes and verification of data as a way of strengthening relations among members.

Outcome Harvesting

ADVANTAGES

- Focus on impact
- Verifies outcomes
- Open to unexpected results
- Highly participatory, strengthening relationships among partners

LIMITATIONS

- Entails a paradigm shift
- Requires training in new skill
- Requires participation of independent informants
- Can be labor- and time-intensive

Limitations: The approach entails a paradigm shift and requires training in a new skill. It also requires the participation of independent informants who are knowledgeable about the outcomes and the organization's contribution, which often is difficult to secure. Depending on the precise outcomes being assessed and over what timeframe, this approach can require a lot of time. Managing the subjectivity

[57] http://betterevaluation.org/plan/approach/outcome_harvesting

[58] Ibid., p. 7.

[59] Ibid.

[60] Ibid., p. 14.

of stakeholders requires particular astuteness. This approach may also undermine confidence in multi-year planning.

Applicability: This approach can be applied to all types of organizations—NGOs, government agencies, funding agencies, community-based organizations, research institutes and university programs—as well as coalitions and networks (e.g., The Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict).

5. IPARL (IMPACT PLANNING, ASSESSMENT, REPORTING, AND LEARNING)

Of the five frameworks, IPARL is by far the most ambitious attempt to systematize a highly complex evaluation process. IPARL was designed to fill a gap, where "At the macro level, there are few comprehensive frameworks for developing network monitoring and evaluation systems that include both periodic evaluation, monitoring and tracking and explicit feedback loops to promote utilization, learning, adaptation and improvement."[61] The "holistic" evaluation approach "cohesively tie[s] together a range of activities including: planning, data gathering and monitoring, data analysis and evaluation, action learning and reporting," hence the label.[62]

The starting point is a distinction between "[t]he theory of change (at the collective network level) and the theories of action (at the actor/initiative level)." [63] Together these serve as the foundation of IPARL's "integrated assessment framework," and "ensures that the data collected, evaluations and lessons learned that are generated are relevant, useful, and utilized."[64] The evaluation approach is embedded in the framework as follows:

1. A clearly articulated theory of change and theories of action
2. An integrated M&E framework composed of
    a. A set of network metrics
    b. A set of network tools
    c. Periodic evaluation–including impact evaluation
3. Stakeholder, public, and donor reporting
4. Continuous improvement and learning mechanisms[65]

IPARL proposes considerably more than assessing the health of a network or even its impact after the fact. It is "a basis for strategic planning and can inform future programs and investments"[66] and "serves as an internal *and* external improvement and accountability mechanism across a range of stakeholders."[67]

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[61] iScale and Keystone, "Next Generation," p. 24.

[62] iScale, "Impact Planning," p. 1.

[63] Ibid., p. 32.

[64] Ibid.

[65] Ibid., p. 31.

[66] iScale, "Impact Planning," p. 1.

[67] Ibid. (authors' emphasis)

IPARL

ADVANTAGES

- Comprehensive
- Multi-layered and multi-faceted
- Begins with theory of change

LIMITATIONS

- Exceedingly complicated
- Designers have ceased work on framework

Advantages: In view of the pervasive use of logic models in planning by nonprofits, most organizations will have some familiarity with the concepts and logic of this approach. Its comprehensiveness is also appealing as covering all bases suggests that nothing has been missed. Integrating evaluation into planning is good practice and increases likely learning and the incorporation of what is learned. Equally important is starting with an explicit articulation of a network theory of change, as a lack of a clear and shared understanding of *how* the change that is sought is expected to play out can trip up the best of efforts.

Limitations: The comprehensive nature of this approach is also its primary disadvantage. It is exceedingly elaborate, multi-layered, multi-dimensional, and potentially daunting. As such, it will likely be a hard sell for under-resourced and under-staffed collaboratives.[68] Although familiar to many organizations, resistance to logic models is common among nonprofits. The challenge of applying logic models to collaborations, including coalitions but particularly networks, lies in the assumption of centralized planning. As the dominant approach to evaluations it has attracted criticisms, including for its linearity; "encourag[ing] strategists to focus too narrowly on the hoped-for results of a strategy, ignoring the diverse ripple effects;"[69] and easily slipping into judgment when comparing actual outcomes to expected outcomes.

Applicability: IPARL has been applied to partnerships (e.g., The Global Knowledge Partnership), coalitions (e.g., International Land Coalitions), and campaigns (e.g., Oxfam Climate Change Campaign).

SPEAKING FROM EXPERIENCE: Lessons about Evaluating Coalitions/Networks

The coalitions and networks that have grappled firsthand with evaluation complexities revealed much about their experiences. Interviewees represented a spectrum of evaluation experience, from internal reviews and surveys of members, to complex, multi-year external evaluations. Only three have a robust monitoring and evaluation (M&E) system in place and conduct evaluations of their coalitions/networks in a "regular and ongoing" manner, including with member organizations.

All do some assessment with their members in conjunction with strategic planning or annual work plans, and following particular events or moments (e.g., success/failure of a campaign). Several indicated that while they lack M&E systems, they nevertheless approach their

[68] Ibid., see p. 36.

[69] Cabaj, p.117.

work with an “evaluative mindset” or “evaluation frame of mind.”

Many of their observations and concerns apply to evaluations generally, including:

- challenges posed by donor-driven evaluations
- questionable cost-benefit of some evaluations
- focusing on an organization’s own goals rather than an abstract ideal of success
- lack of time, resources, and “headspace” for evaluation
- promoting evaluations as learning rather than punishment

Other benefits, lessons, concerns, and recommendations that are either unique to or magnified in evaluations of coalitions and networks also emerged from their experiences and this overall review.

ABOUT THE EVALUATION APPROACH

There is no one way to do this properly, and no single way that will work for all. Each approach has advantages as well as limitations, allows for some insights but not others, and results in some lessons but not others. Sometimes balance is the operative word, for example balance between collecting all information and some information; funder and grantee needs; external and internal perspectives; process and outcome; or objective and subjective input. Flexibility is essential with every approach and with every evaluation.

Evaluation should be manageable and flexible. At some point, all interviewees expressed something along the lines of “You’ve got to keep it simple and easy” regarding the kinds of tools they would find helpful. Equally desirable are tools that are “flexible and adaptable by those who use it.” These requirements are necessitated by coalition/network members’ inexperience (“useful to the secretariat but challenging for the members to use tools”), limited capacity (“it would be unfair for the smaller [member] organizations that don’t have resources”), and need to be careful about overburdening members with demands when their participation is voluntary.

While for many coalitions/networks the first foray into evaluation is funder mandated, they learn to value M&E for what it can contribute. Committed to improving their effectiveness, they want to know what is really going on, to have their claims and achievements corroborated, and to have “someone outside be a mirror to you, to say ‘This is what you look like, you may not like it, but….’” People ask what is it that you do? What is it that you have impact on? I’d like to have a tool that would help us understand how we make an impact.”

To maximize the utility of evaluations, the coalition/network, the evaluator, and the funder need to be as clear and precise as possible regarding the questions they need answered, why they need them answered, and how they will use the answers. In the best of practices, these also are made transparent to all. Besides eliminating waste of both of time and resources collecting data that will not be used, targeting specific questions with a clear understanding of how answers can serve the coalition/network and its members will increase the evaluation's use and value.

About Evaluation Focus

Evaluations of a coalition and network must include both the relational nature of the entity and the goals it has set out to achieve. The form and content must align. Understanding the form—the bases of the relationship among members, the division of labor, their responsibilities, whether these are met, how they are met, how far they extend, and more—is the challenge. Some evaluation approaches build those things into the very formation of the collaboration to maximize goal attainment (e.g., Collective Impact), while others concentrate on bringing members together to look collectively at what they have accomplished (e.g., Outcome Harvesting). Other approaches use as their point of reference the original plan that members agreed to and assess how well it was implemented and what it delivered (e.g., IPARL). And approaches that take being holistic, organic, and participatory as their point of departure learn from the moment, from what *is,* rather than *what should be* (e.g., the "Organic" approach reviewed above).

Coalitions/networks want evaluations to reflect the nature of the relationship among members. They must understand and address the nature, basis, and terms of that relationship, including the specific ends they are committed to achieving together. All assumptions regarding effective coalitions/networks need to be considered in light of their purpose and role. For example, "continued growth" should not be assumed as inherently desirable, as it may impede rather than facilitate the achievement of some collaborations' objectives.

Clarity on how to handle individual members' contributions and credit also is important. Evaluations must grapple with how to distinguish between what a member organization does in the course of its regular work and what it contributes as a member of the coalition/network. Interviewees spoke thoughtfully about this from experience: "I continuously initiate conversations with the members about why they are part of the network, what keeps them going when they could easily leave if it's not worth their time, [whether] they're seeing their work as part of the network's objectives…There's that saying 'success has many fathers, but failure has none.' So actually, fighting for credit is a sign of things going well."

Evaluation should include a focus on context. "You have to work with external actors to influence change, so how do you get them into the picture, and extend network building with outsiders." Echoing this view, another interviewee noted that besides internal tools, "the other piece for us is where the world is, so [we] also [need to capture] the external challenges facing us and what is effective to moving that. It's partly where we are positioned but also analyzing openings and possibilities in the world where we could push things, where we can advance that."

About Evaluation Capacity

For coalitions/networks an external evaluator's perspective has added significance. It mediates among the members' different perspectives on the collaboration's effectiveness and success: "We are a passionate group of folks, and folks are very passionate about [our network], and have a fierce sense of protecting it, and if we want to get beyond opinions and emotions, that external view is important."

At the same time, there is a desire to build in-house M&E capacity. Setting up proper M&E is a challenge for the nonprofit sector's under-resourced and under-staffed organizations. Two organizations interviewed volunteered that they have a half-time staff member dedicated to M&E. While others expressed interest in staffing such a position, they wonder whether this is an optimal approach: "If we had resources to hire an evaluation person that would be great to help our partners and to help us. But, when you have someone do something, then the rest will feel off the hook. It's double edged." And when an evaluation is done, there is another capacity question: "But then so you have the data and information, what do you do with it? Particularly when a transition takes place, and the new people are not as invested in what was learned."

A culture of evaluation is critical. A supportive culture and readiness for change is necessary for an organization to make full use of a range of evaluation tools: "Ultimately though, tools like this have to be accompanied by a culture of evaluation; an organization that does not embrace a culture of evaluation, it's going to be hard to have it consumed by staff." Even before starting, "have an analysis of what you want to know and what you want to learn. … Do we have agreement on how much change we are willing to absorb?" In the absence of openness to using what is learned, which generally means change, even the best and most appropriate evaluation tools will not go far.

About Gaps in the Field

A number of gaps and challenges remain that if addressed would make it easier for coalitions and networks to introduce and sustain M&E. Notwithstanding the important conceptual and methodological advances in evaluations of coalitions and networks, these gaps include:

- **Time required:** To enable generally over-extended and under-staffed organizations to make informed decisions when selecting from among various evaluation approaches, they need more information about how much time they can expect an evaluation to require, or at least guidance on how to estimate the amount of time that will be involved. The time element is particularly critical in the context of the rapidly changing environment in which social change and advocacy coalitions/networks operate. The value of such information is noted from a set of case studies that include both time and cost.[70]
- **Cost involved:** Similarly, organizations can benefit from guidance on how to

[70] Network Impact and Center for Evaluation Innovation, "Evaluating Networks."

assess the likely costs of various approaches, or how they can estimate these. A W.K. Kellogg Foundation report indicates that evaluation costs are generally between 5 and 7 percent of a project's total budget.[71] Something similar for evaluations of coalitions/ networks would be helpful for organizations that need to raise the funds and make sure the amounts are adequate.

- **Cost-benefit:** Although most of the evaluation literature mentions the importance of considering the implications of the time and cost involved in evaluations, and weighing these against the benefits, none offer a way of assessing the likely cost-benefit associated with various approaches. Building on the evaluations of coalitions and networks carried out in the past decade, it is time to develop a way of capturing this.
- **Skills and training:** Organizations would benefit from having a sense of the skills or training needed to pursue various approaches, particularly if they are to build their capacity to carry out ongoing M&E and learning.
- **The connective tissue**: How does it all come together? Who brings it all together? Some approaches are explicit about this, but most do not address it. A discussion of this is needed for all approaches to evaluations.

Filling these information gaps will go far in enabling organizations to make informed decisions regarding the approach or combination of approaches that best serve their needs, capacities, and interests.

FUNDING EVALUATIONS: How Funders Can Help

As awareness of the value of better collaboration has grown, so, too, has the desire to know the factors responsible for effective coalitions/networks. Funders have become more sensitive to the challenges of collaboration and have gained a better understanding of what is involved in their success.

Funders can help to support coalition/ network success and learning even more through their evaluation investments. Suggestions to enhance funding for evaluations of coalition/network grantees include:

Size matters: In the amounts they allocate for an evaluation, funders should cover the full costs but never signal that the evaluation is more important than the work being evaluated. The scope and cost of an evaluation should be commensurate with the size of the organization's project or operating grant.

> ***"If it's a $100K coalition, is putting $100K on evaluation sensible?" (Evaluator)***

Time and timeliness matter: Time constraints keep organizations from pursuing more or more regular evaluations. If the potential benefits of

[71] W.K. Kellogg, p. 54.

an evaluation do not clearly outweigh the costs, both financial and in staff time, then the evaluation itself needs to be evaluated. Moreover, the inherently dynamic nature of their work gives evaluation findings a "short life-span," making it imperative that evaluations are timely.

> *"What you learn now may not even be helpful in a year from now; organizations change and conditions change, too." (Funder)*

Focus on what will be used: Valuing comprehensiveness, too, often evaluations produce information that will not or cannot be used, because of lack of capacity, time, or knowing how to use what is learned. Zeroing in on the information that will be used will improve the likelihood that grantees welcome evaluations in the future.

> *"One of the worst things I see about foundations or donors who ask for evaluations, they rarely use the information. Even if it's an internal evaluation, they don't adhere to asking the organization if they're using what was learned, to use that expensive evaluation that was done, to use it in real time to move forward. It goes into a desk drawer. Or worse, they get a new president or staff and they never look at it again." (Funder)*

Metrics are useful but not everything: While making use of what can be learned via metrics, funders should not lose sight of the fact that some of the most critical dimensions of collaboration are not easily captured or measured. In addition, ever aware and sensitive to what funders value, nonprofits learn what funders want to see from the evaluations they require or fund. Therefore, funders should pursue metrics responsibly.

> *"[S]ometimes there is a tendency to program to what can be measured quantitatively, and that's worrisome. I love the trend of evaluations becoming more important but you don't want to program to what can be measured only." (Funder)*

Evaluate to improve, not punish: By emphasizing evaluation for learning, rather than judging, funders can help promote a culture of evaluation and attention to adaptation that sustains over time.

> *"People always worry about evaluation … that it is a critique of their work, and if it isn't good, then they are less likely to get funding. That's still a barrier … [although] I see this less in my work." (Evaluator)*

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1: INTERVIEWS CONDUCTED

Evaluation Professionals

1. Madeline Church, Head of Organisational Development Unit, Saferworld (UK), 23 May 2016
2. Eli Malinsky, Associate Director, Aspen Institute Business & Society Program (formerly Centre for Social Innovation), 6 May 2016
3. Tom Novick, Principal, M+R, 5 May 2016
4. Veena Pankaj, Director, and Kat Athanasiades, Senior Associate, Innovation Network, 9 May 2016
5. Jared Raynor, Director of Evaluation, TCC Group, 10 May 2016
6. Ricardo Wilson-Grau, international evaluator and organizational development consultant (Brazil), 27 and 29 April 2016 (written responses to written questions)

Funders

1. Ben Kerman, Head, Strategic Learning and Evaluation, Atlantic Philanthropies, 25 May 2016
2. Anita Khashu, Executive Director, Four Freedoms Fund, 24 May 2016
3. Geri Manion, Program Director, U.S. Democracy and Special Opportunities Fund, Carnegie Corporation, 7 June 2016

Coalitions and Networks

Interviews were conducted with eight NGOs:

- A New York-based international human rights organization devoted to preventing atrocities.
- A Washington, D.C.-based national children's anti-poverty organization.
- A Washington, D.C.-based national civil society organization devoted to citizen engagement.
- A Tanzania-based national organization devoted to civil society engagement in influencing national policies.
- A New York-based national education organization.
- A Washington, D.C.-based national organization devoted to reproductive rights.
- A Boston-based national organization devoted to health-care access and coverage.
- A New York-based international organization devoted to advancing economic, social and cultural rights.

Appendix 2: Types of Evaluations and Examples

TYPES	EXAMPLES
By Type of Network	• Connectivity Network, Alignment Network and Production Network[72] • Different types of Learning Networks: communities of practice; e-learning networks; web-discussion for a, learning communities, thematic groups[73] • Knowledge Networks[74] • Social Networks[75] • Collective Impact: Developmental, Formative, Summative[76]
By Type of Evaluation	• Process Evaluation, Impact Evaluation, Outcome Evaluation[77] • Process Evaluation, Outcome Evaluation, Impact Evaluation[78] • Implementation Evaluation, Outcomes Evaluation[79] • Monitoring, Formative, Developmental, Summative[80] • Feasibility evaluation, Process evaluation, Outcome evaluation, and Self-interest evaluation[81] • Cluster Evaluation[82]
By Evaluative Focus	Capacity: • Capacity of Organizations to be Good Coalition Members; Capacity of the Coalition; and Outcomes/Impact of Coalition Work[83] • Functioning and Structure; Ability to Cultivate and Develop Champions; Coalition Leadership; Ability to Develop Allies and Partnerships; Reputation and Visibility; Ability to Learn and Improve; and Sustainability[84] Outcomes/Impact: • "Chains of impact": network's impact on members, members' impacts on local environments, and members' combined impact on broader environment[85] • Operational outputs, Organic outcomes, Political outcomes, and Impact[86] • Levels of Outcome: Community; Coalition/Network; [participating] Organization; and [participating] Individuals[87] Multiple and varied components: • Effectiveness, Structure and Governance, Efficiency, Resources and Sustainability, Life-Cycle[88] • Internal Coalition Hierarchy (ICOH) sequential constructs for success: (1) social vision, (2) efficient practices, (3) knowledge and training, (4) relationships, (5) participation, (6) activities, and (7) resources[89] • Levels of evaluation: (1) Coalition Infrastructure, Function, and Processes, (2) Coalition Programs and Interventions, (3) Health and Community Change Outcomes[90] • Dimensions critical to coalition success: coalition readiness, intentionality, structure and organizational capacity, taking action, membership, leadership, dollars and resources, relationships, and technical assistance[91]

72 Plastrik and Taylor, pp. 6, 33.
73 James, p. 2.
74 Creech and Ramji.
75 Holley, 2007.
76 Preskill et al., Table 5, p. 21
77 Butterfoss and Francisco.
78 Wolff, "A Practical Approach," p. 61.
79 Innovation Network, pp. 6-7.
80 Wilson-Grau and Britt, p. 2.
81 Taylor-Powell and Rossing, p. 5.
82 W.K. Kellogg Foundation, "Evaluation Handbook," p. 17.
83 Raynor, "What Makes an Effective Coalition?," pp. 12-33.
84 Pankaj et al., p. 2.
85 Network Impact and Center for Evaluation Innovation, "Framing Paper," p. 6.
86 Wilson-Grau and Nuñez, p. 10.
87 Raynor, "Good Practices" (webinar).
88 Creech et al., p. 2.
89 Nichols et al., (online).
90 Butterfoss and Francisco, p. 110.
91 Wolff, "A Practitioner's Guide."

Appendix 3: Evaluation Frameworks: Summary of Key Features

FRAMEWORK	EVALUATION COMPONENTS	KEY QUESTIONS	APPLICABILITY	ADVANTAGES	LIMITATIONS
Core Capacity	• Capacity of Organizations to be Good Coalition Members • Capacity of the Coalition • Outcomes/Impact of Coalition Work.[1]	• What is it that makes them an important part of the coalition? What do they want/need from the table and what are their limitations? • What are their "goal destination" and "value proposition"? • To what extent are they making progress on goal destination (issue)? To what extent are they still the right vehicle (value proposition or legitimacy and relevance)?	• Coalitions	• Simplified • Focused • Self-administered • Accessible	• Partial • No checklist to assess Outcome/Impact • Assumes learning structures and systems
"Organic" Evaluation	• Distinct but interdependent "arenas": • Ecosystem (environment) • Processes (operations) • Outcomes (impact)	• How do we capture the variety of interpretations of a given network's health or impact? • Are the goals maintaining their relevance? Is there sufficient room for new goals to emerge? • To what degree are the activities supporting the network's goals? Are the current roles serving the network effectively? Are they changing? • What has been produced by the network? How successful have the outputs been in serving the goals of the network?	• Networks • Coalitions • Collaboration more broadly	• Holistic • Highly participatory • Creative • Assesses "what is" rather than "what should be"	• Lengthy process • Difficult to replicate
Collective Impact	• Embrace a strategic learning • Accept the value of multiple designs for multiple evaluation users • Be thoughtful and cautious about shared measurement • Assertively seek out unanticipated effects • Make contribution analysis a central part of evaluation strategy.[2]	• (Early to Middle Years): What needs to happen? • (Middle Years): How well is working? • (Late Years): What difference did it make?[3]	• Coalitions • Networks • Collaborations more generally that embrace CI "core conditions"	• Focus on collaboration for impact • Familiar language, concepts, concerns • Integrates evaluation fully into work	• Assumptions on effective collaboration • Difficulty in gaining cross-collaboration agreement on measurement tools • Assumptions on need for centralization and "backbone organization"

Outcome Harvesting	Outcome (impact) and Contribution (role) 1. Design the harvest 2. Review documentation and draft outcomes 3. Engage with informants 4. Substantiate 5. Analyze, interpret 6. Support use of findings	• What happened? • Who did it (or contributed to it)? • How do we know this? Is there corroborating evidence? • Why is this important? • What do we do with what we found out?[4]	• Organizations of all kinds	• Focus on impact • Verifies outcomes • Open to unexpected results • Highly participatory, strengthening relationships among partners	• Entails a paradigm shift • Requires training in new skill • Requires participation of independent informants • Can be labor- and time-intensive
IPARL (Impact Planning, Assessment, Reporting, and Learning)	• Examining network effectiveness requires attention to three, broad, overlapping categories: • Vibrancy (health) • Connectivity (relationships) • Effects (impact)	• How healthy is the network (participation, network form, leadership, capacity, etc.)? • What is the nature of relationships within the network? Is everyone connected who needs to be? What is the quality of these connections? • What progress is the network making on identifying and achieving its outputs, outcomes and impact?[5]	• Networks • Partnerships • Coalitions • Campaigns	• Comprehensive • Multi-layered and multi-faceted • Begins with theory of change	• Exceedingly complicated • Designers have ceased work on this framework

[1] Raynor, "What Makes an Effective Coalition?," pp. 12-33.
[2] Cabaj, "Evaluating Collective Impact: Five Simple Rules," p. 121.
[3] Preskill et al., "Evaluating Collective Impact: Assessing Progress," p. 11.
[4] Wilson-Grau and Britt, p. 1.
[5] iScale and Keystone, "Next Generation Network Evaluation," p. 4.