

# **EXPLORING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF PLACE-BASED PROGRAM EVALUATIONS**

*Report prepared for the Policy Research Initiative*

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report explores the evaluation of nine place-based programs that have involved the federal government as a key funder or partner. It is based on a series of interviews with evaluators, federal program officers, and community representatives. The report provides insights into the evaluation frameworks, approaches, and methods that have been adopted, as well as the conditions and circumstances that influence the choices made and the overall effectiveness of place-based program evaluations. Although the report finds a number of promising practices, it suggests that the impact of place-based interventions is not best captured by traditional assessment tools. Rather, these new approaches to policy-making and partnership demand new evaluation instruments, methods, and data that are calibrated to capture so-called “soft” outputs and longer-term outcomes. Finally, place-based initiatives are complex and multi-faceted. As such, this review suggests that evaluation be taken into account early on and be integrated into the program throughout its lifespan.

## DISCLAIMER

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## INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, governments across the OECD have placed increased emphasis on collaborative programs and policy-making, and there is now recognition that all government interventions fundamentally affect people *in places* (Bradford 2008; Policy Research Initiative 2010). “Place” conditions the ways in which communities will respond to initiatives, the challenges, constraints, and opportunities that may augment or reduce a program’s effectiveness, and the ways in which the various factors will combine to affect the overall success of an intervention. In other words, local context matters.

So-called “wicked” policy problems, which are horizontal in scope and cut across jurisdictions, will manifest themselves differently depending on the communities in which they occur, the unique demographics of the citizens who are affected, and the political will and initiative of local organizations and governments. The character of poverty, homelessness, and environmental degradation, for example, is different in communities that are rural versus urban, those which are demographically diverse versus homogeneous, and those which are economically vibrant versus stagnant. Top-down, inflexible or “one-size-fits-all” approaches are ill-suited to address the range of ways that problems manifest themselves and the capacity of communities to address them. As such, even interventions aimed at addressing broad economic, social or environmental objectives must also be locally sensitive and specific. This implies cross-government collaboration and the involvement of local actors and citizens in the development, design, and delivery of interventions. It also requires policy variation and flexibility.

Although Bradford (2008, 4) characterizes Canada as somewhat of a late-comer to place-based policy-making, he notes that “the past several years have witnessed a promising interaction among new localism research, municipal and community sector advocacy, and policy experimentation at all levels of the federation.” This new emphasis has

*We are increasingly seeing policies and programs that include multiple stakeholders, a sharing of resources and responsibilities, and a desire to utilize community knowledge and assets.*

given rise to a range of policy frameworks and tools, which have included multi-level framework agreements, partnerships, joint decision-making and the co-management of shared programs.

Importantly, the precise complexities that demand a greater emphasis on place are also those that make the evaluation of place-based policies challenging. Collaborative, cross-sector, and multi-level frameworks challenge some of the traditional notions of governance and demand the development of new evaluation tools and metrics. This is particularly true in an arena where policy-makers are guided by a commitment to results-based management and fiscal accountability. These commitments demand an ability to measure results, address deficiencies, and determine whether investments are actually contributing to better policy outcomes. In the absence of appropriate evaluation mechanisms, governments are hard-pressed to do so.

That said, evaluations are not simply instruments of accountability. Rather, they can serve a learning function and are also instruments of policy design. Done well, evaluations can help policy-makers determine which interventions work best and under which conditions and to identify those innovations that should be scaled up or replicated in other communities (Shugart 2011). Evaluations can thus provide a basis for transforming promising experiments into lasting policy change. In place-based initiatives – which are often framed as local “pilot projects” – there is not only an expectation of experimentation, but also of learning and collaboration. In this model, evaluation must be viewed as integral to policy, with the results not an end-point or basis for indictment, but rather a launch-point for refinement and improved outcomes. Rather than locating evaluation *outside* of policy design and program delivery, place-based initiatives demand that it be done within and throughout the lifespan of the project.

## PROJECT OVERVIEW AND METHODOLOGY

With this as the backdrop, the Policy Research Initiative (PRI) commissioned a study that would explore place-based program evaluations involving the federal government. This study has four objectives:

- To document how a range of place-based initiatives have been evaluated;
- To assess the evaluation frameworks, approaches, and methods that have been employed as well as the conditions or circumstances associated with their use;
- To explore the strengths and limitations of approaches that the federal government has used to evaluate its participation in place-based initiatives; and
- To enumerate any best or emerging practices in the evaluation of place-based initiatives.

We look at the rationale behind the selection of particular evaluation frameworks, the factors that influence the evaluative criteria and methods that are employed, and the overall effectiveness of existing place-based program evaluations.

A case study method was adopted, which involved the selection and examination of nine place-based program evaluations; these programs are described in greater detail in the section that follows. Data were drawn primarily from 24 semi-structured qualitative interviews, which included program evaluators, federal program officials, and community partners; a list of interviewees can be found in Appendix 1. The interviews took place over the course of March and April 2011, and each was approximately 45 minutes in length. An interview guide, included in Appendix 2, was provided to informants in advance. Most interviews were conducted over the phone; all were audio-recorded and then thematically transcribed. To ensure frank and open discussion, informants’ confidentiality has been protected. Identifying details have been excluded from this report, and quotations have not been attributed directly to any one informant. To provide a more comprehensive picture, insights from the informant interviews have been supplemented with, and triangulated against, information drawn from the program evaluations and other publicly available reports.

## DESCRIPTION OF CASE STUDIES

Nine programs were included in our study. They cross a number of issue areas, spanning the economic, social, and environmental policy fields. The selected programs involved a range of stakeholders, including non-governmental organizations, businesses, the private sector, and public sector institutions. In spite of this variation, there are at least three commonalities across the selected programs. First, they all conceived of communities as independent actors rather than mere policy targets or recipients. Second, each involved the federal government in an influential role, either as a funder or decision-maker. Third, they all had as a principal objective the desire to build local capacity, which was defined and pursued through a variety of means. In the section that follows, we provide a brief description of each of the program case studies, emphasizing key structural features and the nature of their evaluations.

### 1. Vancouver Agreement

The Vancouver Agreement was a response to poverty, crime, mental illness, high incidence of HIV/AIDs, and substance abuse in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. The Agreement was signed by the federal government, province of British Columbia and City of Vancouver in March 2000; it expired in 2010 and was not renewed. Its overall purpose was to support economic, social and community development in Vancouver, beginning with the urban inner city where the principal goals were increased economic activity, improved living conditions, decreased preventable deaths and illness, and increased community cohesion. Western Economic Diversification Canada was the lead federal department, although Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, Health Canada, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, the Public Health Agency of Canada, Service Canada, and Status of Women Canada were also partners. Initially, the Agreement was unfunded, but this changed in 2003, when the federal and provincial governments allocated fiscal resources to the project, and private-sector sponsors – notably Bell Canada – came on board. Federal funding over the span of the program totaled \$7.7 million.

A federal and provincial minister and the Mayor of Vancouver comprised the Governance Committee, with unanimous consent required for all decisions. Administration and strategic affairs were delegated to an executive-level Management Committee, while a Planning Table, Coordination Unit, and Task Teams were responsible for operations and implementation. Federal partners were involved in each of these entities. The role of community organizations was recognized in the Agreement, which identified capacity-building as an objective; consultation and engagement processes were also established. Ultimately, however, community organizations had only a limited role in strategic planning and decision-making and acted principally as implementers of the Agreement.

A formal summative evaluation of the Agreement was undertaken by the federal government in 2010. It focused on the efficiency and effectiveness of the federal government's contribution and, in particular, Western Economic Diversification Canada's investment in economic development projects through the Vancouver Agreement. Although community partners provided some input into the evaluation design, the assessment was conceptualized and carried out primarily by the federal government. Information on the Vancouver Agreement can be found at <http://www.vancouveragreement.ca/>.

## **2. Homelessness Partnering Strategy**

The Homelessness Partnering Strategy works with communities to provide supports, stability, and long-term housing in an effort to increase the autonomy and self-sufficiency of homeless Canadians. The present iteration of the HPS commenced in 2007 and is slated to run until 2014. Human Resources and Skills Development Canada is the lead federal agency, with the federal contribution totaling \$134.5 million annually; this will continue for the duration of the strategy.

There are 61 communities that currently receive funding through the HPS. This funding must be matched through other sources, and it supports priorities identified through a community planning process. Designated communities must have a comprehensive community plan, which is developed by a Community Advisory Board and identifies priorities and strategies for addressing homelessness. The Community Advisory Board also reviews proposals from community organizations and recommends those that should be funded.

Within the HPS, there are two governance models. Under the Community Entity model, an incorporated community organization, upon the recommendation of the Community Advisory Board, decides which projects will be funded. HRSDC manages the contribution agreements, and community organizations deliver the programs in consultation with Service Canada. Under the Shared Delivery model, the Community Advisory Board makes funding recommendations to HRSDC, and the Minister ultimately approves the project proposals. The contribution agreements are managed by HRSDC, and programs are delivered by community organizations in cooperation with Service Canada. Although communities are involved in the planning, development and implementation of programs in both models, decision-making rests with the community under the former model and shifts to the federal government under the latter model.

The HPS was formally evaluated by the federal government in 2008. The evaluation's objectives were to: assess the appropriateness of the funding and HPS's approach to reducing homelessness; assess the likely community impact of the HPS based on results achieved through the transitional, supportive, and longer-term housing solutions that were previously funded through the National Homelessness Initiative; and assess the extent to which the HPS has enhanced partnerships. Community partners were interviewed as part of the evaluation, but they did not play a role in its design or execution. Information on the HPS can be found at <http://www.rhdcc-hrsdc.gc.ca/eng/homelessness/index.shtml> .

## **3. Community Futures Program**

The Community Futures Program (CFP) supports economic development activities in rural communities with a focus on economic growth, job creation, diversification, and sustainability. CFP was initiated in 1985 and is delivered by the four federal regional development agencies – the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency, Canada Economic Development for Quebec Regions, Western Economic Diversification Canada, and Federal Economic Development Initiative for Northern Ontario – which all fall under the mandate of Industry Canada. Each year, the federal government contributes approximately \$98.2 million to the CFP; the government's role is largely as a funder, although the regional development agencies do provide expertise and support to funded communities.

The CFP is delivered through 258 Community Futures Organizations (CFOs), which are generally not-for-profit organizations located outside major metropolitan areas; an exception is in Quebec where 15 CFOs are located in disadvantaged areas of the province's major cities. Funding can be used to provide repayable financing to local businesses, training and support for small- and medium-sized enterprises, strategic community planning, and support for community-based projects. Decision-making takes place at a local level through a board of directors; local volunteers and community organizations must also be involved.

A federal agency, Government Consulting Services, undertook an evaluation of the CFP in 2008, as is required by the Transfer Payment Policy and the program's Results-Based Management and Accountability Framework. It was a formal evaluation that looked at the program's relevance, design, delivery, success, cost-effectiveness, and alternatives. It relied on document review, stakeholder interviews, a survey of CFOs, a review of administrative and labour market data, and case studies.

Because the CFP involves the four regional development agencies, the evaluation included a horizontal study, as well as four individual evaluations, which were undertaken for the programs overseen by each department. Our review looked at the evaluation undertaken by the Federal Economic Initiative for Northern Ontario. In this model, a representative of each CFO sits on the Advisory Committee, which was consulted on the drafting of interview questions and interview lists; the broader community was not involved in the design of the evaluation, however. Each regional development agency also maintains a separate CFP web presence; the Community Futures Network of Canada has amalgamated these, and further information is available at: <http://www.communityfuturescanada.ca/>.

#### **4. Forest Communities Program**

The Forest Communities Program (FCP) focuses on the development of Canada's forestry sector. It aims to diversify local economies, promote integrated and multi-sectoral approaches to forest management, share best practices, and build capacity. The program was launched in 2007 and will run until 2012; it succeeds the Model Forest Program, which ran from 1992 to 2007. Although both programs emphasized local partnerships, the FCP places a much stronger focus on capacity-building. The lead federal ministry for the FCP is Natural Resources Canada, and the annual federal contribution to the FCP is approximately \$5 million.

There are 11 Forest Communities Program sites across Canada. Each FCP site is a partnership between federal, provincial and municipal governments, as well as Aboriginal organizations, businesses, educational institutions and community groups that rely on forests or the forest sector. Most span several municipalities, towns or First Nations Reserves (some are as large as 250,000 square kilometres); the definition of "community" is, thus, quite broad. Decision-making is undertaken by a Board of Directors in each site. These Boards are comprised of local partners, and most include a representative of Natural Resources Canada as a non-voting member. FCP sites outline their proposed activities in an annual plan, which includes tools, approaches, and strategies to address changes in the forest sector, such as the aging workforce, changing markets, international competition, and natural disturbances like wildfires or insect infestation.



The program is currently undergoing a formal evaluation, which is being led by Natural Resources Canada. Community partners are being interviewed as part of the evaluation process, but they are not involved in its design or planning. Information about the Forest Communities Program can be found at <http://cfs.nrcan.gc.ca/subsite/forest-communities/about>.

## 5. Models Program

The Models Program was a research-based program that replicated 21 rural community development models in more than 60 participating sites; sites typically spanned several municipalities, and there were thus more than 300 communities involved. The program's intent was to collect evidence and measure the effectiveness of these models. The Models Program was initiated in 2005 and terminated in 2008. The federal lead was the Rural and Co-operatives Secretariat, which provided funding to the initiative, as well as support to local partners. A representative of the Rural Secretariat also participated in each of the 21 models. The total federal investment was \$14 million over three years.

Each model was implemented in a site by an organization or coalition working in cooperation with the Rural Secretariat and local partners. The models varied considerably; areas of focus included encouraging immigration to rural francophone communities, strengthening rural non-profits, improving the retention of young people in rural areas, and increasing literacy rates. Community assessment, consensus-building, and celebrations were also among the models implemented.

An evaluation of the Models Program was undertaken by an external evaluation and research firm in 2009, after the program had concluded. It was a formal summative evaluation that reviewed nine of the 21 models implemented under the Models Program. It examined the contribution of a participatory approach, partnerships, and the Rural Secretariat to the success of each of the models. It also discussed best practices in rural capacity-building, which were generated through the Models Program. The evaluation relied on document analysis and key informant interviews. Information on the Models Program can be found at <http://www.rural.gc.ca/RURAL/display-afficher.do?id=1230070445151&lang=eng>.

## 6. Local Immigration Partnerships Program

The Local Immigration Partnerships Program (LIP) focuses on the settlement and integration of newcomers in communities. It works to support the coordination of mainstream and settlement services for newcomers including, language training, health, education, and labour market integration programs. This is achieved through the development and implementation of locally specific immigration and integration strategies. The LIP was initiated in 2008 and is funded by Citizenship and Immigration Canada and the Ontario Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration. The Association of Municipalities of Ontario and the City of Toronto are also partners. The federal contribution is approximately \$10 million annually. CIC also provides advice and support and sits on a number of the local partnership councils. Typically, the partnership councils' lead organizations are municipalities, mainstream agencies, and settlement service providers.

There are 45 LIPs in Ontario, where the program is presently being piloted. Thirty of these are in communities outside of Toronto, while 15 are in Toronto neighbourhoods. Three of the province's Francophone Immigration Networks complement these partnerships. The LIP requires the establishment of a local partnership council and accompanying terms of reference.

In cooperation with local partners, the council must research and develop a local settlement strategy that will be implemented over a three-year timeframe. Strategies vary but must seek to achieve three related goals: improve access to and coordination of immigrant integration services; improve labour market outcomes for immigrants; and strengthen local awareness and the capacity to successfully integrate immigrants. Partnership councils must submit an annual action plan that outlines priorities for the coming year and reports on the strategy's implementation to date.

Although the LIP initiative is still in its infancy and has not yet been formally evaluated, the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration, in March 2010, pointed to the program as an example of a best practice and recommended that CIC explore an extension of the pilot beyond Ontario. Similar conclusions with respect to the program's promise are supported by an initial assessment of the LIP, which was conducted by the Welcoming Communities Initiative. Even in this early stage, a number of LIPs have initiated community learning events, and the Welcoming Communities Initiative has commenced an Outcome Measurement Project that includes the collection of baseline data against which to measure eventual outcomes. Information on the LIP can be found at [http://www.welcomingcommunities.ca/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=42&Itemid=49](http://www.welcomingcommunities.ca/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=42&Itemid=49).

## **7. Aboriginal Leadership Strategy: Ahp-cii-uk**

The Aboriginal Leadership Strategy, or Ahp-cii-uk (AHP), focused on social and economic development in First Nations Communities. It aimed to increase the capacity of external organizations to partner effectively with First Nations communities and worked with these communities to plan and implement locally tailored projects that would improve community well-being. The development of relationships, respect, and trust was an explicit objective of the project. AHP was initiated in the Fall of 2007, with the federal government contributing a total of \$702,000 between 2007 and 2010. Health Canada was the lead federal agency, although Indian and Northern Affairs Canada and the department of Fisheries and Oceans also participated at the community level. The British Columbia Ministry of Aboriginal Relations and Reconciliation provided funding, as did community partners.

The project was carried out in three Nuu-chah-nulth communities on the west coast of Vancouver Island; these were Ahousaht, Ehattesaht, and Tseshaht. The Nuu-chah-nulth Tribal Council coordinated community involvement and provided administrative support. Local projects were selected at the community level with the support of external partners. Although the project initially identified the launching of social and economic projects and the training of Aboriginal leaders as its principal objectives, it became evident that leadership training alone was insufficient. The communities also required training to assist them in implementing the projects, and this was undertaken.

An external organization, the New Economy Development Group, was contracted to develop an evaluation framework for the AHP beginning in 2008, shortly after the initiation of the project. The Initiating Partners Group, of which Health Canada was a member, provided input into the evaluation framework, as did the participating communities. The framework emphasized community engagement and learning, rather than formal, program impacts. On this basis, evaluation reports were prepared at the end of 2009 and 2010. The evaluations documented

lessons learned, including the strategies used by communities, their engagement and attitudes, and the forging of trust and relationships with other partners. Based on early evaluation findings, an explicit theory of change was also constructed. Information on AHP can be found at <http://www.weavingrelationships.org/>.

## **8. Action for Neighbourhood Change**

Action for Neighbourhood Change (ANC) grew out of the recognition that responses to homelessness often require interventions to address other issues including, for example, literacy and essential skills deficits, substance abuse, poverty, and community safety. ANC was initiated in the Spring of 2005 and ran formally for two years, although work continues in a variety of guises in each of the targeted communities. The project was led by the United Way of Canada, which was the national convening partner. It was joined by the Caledon Institute of Social Policy, Tamarack and, in 2005, the National Film Board, as well as the local United Ways in the five partner communities: Halifax, Thunder Bay, Toronto, Regina and Surrey. Federal involvement was led by Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, which was joined by Health Canada and Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Canada. The federal contribution to the project totaled \$7 million between 2005 and 2007.

Federal funding largely supported the work of the National Convening Organization, which implemented and managed the ANC and oversaw consultations with government partners and key community organizations. The National Convening Organization selected a distressed neighbourhood in each of the five participating communities and identified and supported a Local Enabler, who was funded through federal contribution agreements. Local Enablers worked with community residents and key stakeholders to develop a Community Vision that outlined community objectives, priorities, assets and gaps that would guide partners in the development and implementation of a neighbourhood renewal strategy.

Each neighbourhood had considerable latitude, and the Community Visions identified a broad range of goals, engagement approaches and strategies, although each included processes for bringing together residents and neighbourhood stakeholders. The ANC was conceived of as an experiment or pilot, and Local Enablers were expected to inform the learning and assessment framework and policy dialogue, as well as disseminating knowledge through local and regional networks; this was supported by the national partners. The aim of the ANC was, on the one hand, to increase capacity at the family and neighbourhood level and, on the other, to strengthen neighbourhood responsiveness to identified problems including, in particular, those tied to the mandate of the federal government.

In addition to interim reflection papers and a collection of community stories that used a developmental evaluation methodology, the ANC underwent a formal summative evaluation at the end of the project. Developed by the national partners in collaboration with the federal government, it was conducted by an external evaluator and assessed the achievement of results, including the project's implementation, short-term impacts, and progress toward the outcomes identified in the results-based management accountability framework. The local United Ways and five participating communities had key roles in shaping the evaluation. Although ANCs continue to exist in several communities, the evaluation was undertaken at the end of the federal funding cycle. It focused largely on program impact and accountability. Information on ANC can be found at <http://www.anccommunity.ca/>.

## 9. Vibrant Communities Initiative

The Vibrant Communities Initiative (VC) employs an asset-based partnership model and is aimed at reducing poverty and increasing community capacity. VC began in 2002 and is scheduled to wrap-up in 2011. The project is led by Tamarack, the Caledon Institute of Social Policy, and the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation. Other funding partners include the Maytree Foundation, the Hamilton Community Foundation, RBC Financial Group, and the Ontario Trillium Foundation. The only federal partner is Human Resources and Skills Development Canada which, beginning in 2006, contributed \$2.5 million over five years to the VC. HRSDC is primarily a funder and is not actively involved in the VC's governance or decision-making structures.

There are 12 participating communities: Abbotsford, Calgary, Edmonton, Hamilton, Montreal, Saint John, St. John's, Surrey, Trois-Rivières, Victoria, the Waterloo Region, and Winnipeg. Participating communities are required to develop their own poverty reduction strategies, which include: (1) setting a numerical poverty reduction target; (2) developing a comprehensive poverty reduction plan; (3) establishing a multi-sectoral leadership group; (4) participating in the Initiative's pan-Canadian learning group; (5) leveraging additional financial and in-kind support; and (6) reporting on results using a VC-generated framework.

There is considerable local autonomy, and the partnerships, local convening bodies, and strategies that have been pursued by participating communities vary widely. Nonetheless, interventions fall into two broad categories. On the one hand are programmatic interventions that help people generate and build individual-level assets; examples include addictions counseling or job training. On the other hand are more macro-level interventions aimed at altering systemic features and policies that affect life chances; examples include labour market reforms, changes to school curriculum, and an emphasis on community-based health care.

VC describes its approach to evaluation as developmental evaluation. It notes that "at the local level, this means reflecting on the theory of change underlying a group's work and upgrading it as required to better achieve desired outcomes, respond to a changing environment, and capture the emerging insights and questions of participants. At the national level, it is about mining the on-the-ground experience of communities for patterns and themes that help us understand the value of this approach to reducing poverty" (Vibrant Communities 2010, online). Consistent with this, the VC has pursued a variety of evaluation strategies including bi-annual statistical reports from each community, "reflection reports" prepared by one of the lead organizations, mid-term project summaries intended for learning and sharing, two external evaluations assessing the impact of national-level supports, and a two-phase end-of-campaign evaluation that will be conducted by an external organization. Information on the Vibrant Communities Initiative can be found at <http://www.vibrantcommunities.ca/>.

## FINDINGS

In general, our informants were broadly supportive of the place-based initiatives that were the subject of our review. There was an acknowledgement that locally sensitive programs are desirable, that partnerships and horizontality are needed to address so-called "wicked problems", and that there are benefits to be gained from working with communities. Our review has also found, however, that place-based initiatives vary considerably, and there is enormous

range in terms of policy objectives, approaches, instruments, and implementation strategies. Moreover, the nature of the partnerships between the federal government and community partners varied from arrangements that were largely based on funding and oversight to arrangements that saw the endeavour as the building of a relationship with shared decision-making, responsibility, and trust. These differences are not merely descriptive, but also influence the principles, scope, design, and dissemination strategies that shape the evaluations.

## Evaluation Principles

Although the evaluations we examined differed a great deal, they all sought to assess the success of the project, the match between stated objectives and overall outcomes, and the extent to which some benefit was derived from the investments that were made. Five principles stand out as important: partnerships; local and community solutions; capacity-building; sustainability; and effectiveness. We will look at each of these in turn. We should, however, note that while most informants discussed these ideas in one form or another, the language was sometimes imprecise, the assumptions unstated, and not all employed the same conceptual definitions. A number of informants had divergent understandings of these foundational principles – sometimes even within the same project – and this had consequences for the evaluations that were undertaken.

**Partnerships.** Informants provided differing perspectives not just on the value of partnerships, but on what precisely “partnership” entails. Some programs conceived of partnership primarily as a fiscal arrangement between funders and recipients. Other programs saw partnership as an actual relationship, where interaction, engagement, and collaboration were important. In a few of the programs, the federal government appeared to be more of an observer – intentionally so – in that it provided funding, but wanted to see what communities would do “on their own.” Because of these differing conceptions, the evaluations dealt with partnership in a variety of ways. Some thought of partnership in terms of dollars leveraged or the number of entities involved in project governance. Others were more interested in trust, participation, and engagement. Some community informants lamented the absence of a consistent federal presence in the project, as well as the dearth of federal representatives knowledgeable about local conditions. One informant characterized the government’s approach to partnership in rather minimal terms, suggesting they “give the money, then vanish,” while others thought relationship in-roads had been made.

**Local and community solutions.** Although all informants characterized their programs as aimed at finding local solutions to identified problems, terms like “local” and “community” were used in different ways. In some programs, the targeted population or geography was at a neighbourhood level, while in others the intervention site spanned several municipalities or encompassed an entire region of a province and, in some cases, two provinces. Further, definitions of “community” sometimes included any entity that was not a funder of the project or, conversely, any non-governmental entity. Private-sector organizations – particularly corporations – often occupied some grey area, particularly in cases where they provided financial resources to a project. Very rarely does it appear that these terms were explicitly defined, thus making it difficult to compare findings across evaluations. There are also implications for how we define place-based initiatives, in general. The co-involvement of federal and “other” entities in programs or projects with a potential geographic impact would seem to

constitute a necessary but not sufficient condition for the initiative to be deemed “place-based.” Clearly, a tighter definition is needed.

**Capacity-building.** Capacity-building tended to be emphasized and evaluated more explicitly by community partners or in cases where local entities were more involved in project governance, planning or decision-making. Although most informants identified capacity-building as important, several found it difficult to define or to specify the ways in which it was to be evaluated or measured. Those programs that were more community-led or which emphasized learning tended to integrate capacity-building and its measurement more fully into the evaluations. That being said, definitions of capacity-building varied, with some seeing capacity in more fiscal terms with an emphasis on economic development, while others defined it more in relational terms with an emphasis on leadership and trust. Some community informants suggested that they struggled to reconcile their notion of capacity-building with measures and policy outcomes that could be understood by federal funders, in particular.

**Sustainability.** Informants were also asked if and how the evaluation treated sustainability. Responses fell into at least three broad categories. The first group viewed sustainability as the extent to which a program met its intermediate or longer-term outcomes. The second group saw sustainability as the extent to which a program or its infrastructure would be able to exist even if federal funding were removed. The third and final group defined sustainability much more broadly as the extent to which a program contributed to the long-term growth, prosperity, and resiliency of the community. In all cases, it is worth emphasizing, there was a sense that for a program to be regarded as successful, “dollars expended” was not the appropriate measure. As one informant noted, “If these things simply die when we leave the community, we are wasting our time.”

**Effectiveness.** Given the variability in understandings of sustainability, definitions of “effectiveness” also varied, with some viewing a program’s success in terms of the match between stated objectives and overall impact, while others looked at community change and development, increased engagement, and the ability of local partners to plan and implement local solutions. One informant noted that while the “theories of change” approach is “very big right now,” it had not translated into specific measures or indicators. The diversity of understandings multiplied as additional programs were included in our review and, again, even within the same evaluation framework, informants provided different interpretations of what “success” would look like. This suggests that there is a wide range of views on what place-based programs should be trying to achieve which, in turn, has implications for evaluation.

## Evaluation Scope

Although all of the programs emphasized partnerships, local solutions, and community development, their evaluations varied in scope, reach, and overall objectives. Nonetheless two approaches stand out. On the one hand were evaluations that principally examined issues related to accountability, while on the other were those that framed the evaluation as an opportunity to learn, improve the program, and strengthen partner relations. By looking at an evaluation’s relative emphasis on accountability versus learning, we can predict, with some accuracy, the objectives of the assessment, the role of the community and the federal government, the evaluation’s design and methods, and the dissemination techniques. We chart these findings in Table 1 and use the sections that follow to provide additional detail.

Those evaluations that focused more explicitly on **accountability** tended to emphasize the match between departmental mandate and program objectives, the achievement of identified outcomes, the cost-effectiveness of the investment, and the potential of meeting program goals through other means or avenues. Evaluations in this category were typically framed as a program requirement, and they were often undertaken at the end of a program's mandate. The federal government tended to have a more central role as a decision-maker and funder in these projects, and the evaluations were often undertaken by the lead department or another government representative. Community partners were often not involved in the framing or conduct of these evaluations, although they were generally interviewed as part of the data-gathering exercise. Monetary and quantitative indicators were a common source of data, and the evaluators tended to rely on traditional tools, such as document analysis and informant interviews. Although most of the informants indicated that auxiliary objectives, such as capacity-building, sustainability or networks were important, in many cases, these were deemed too difficult to measure, or they were assessed using numerical measures, such as fiscal leveraging, the number of partners or contacts engaged, and the extension of federal funding beyond the original mandate. The emphasis in these evaluations was the effectiveness, efficiency, and appropriateness of federal spending to achieve identified outcomes.

Evaluations that placed a stronger emphasis on **learning** tended to more carefully enumerate best practices and focused more explicitly on the sharing of knowledge, the development of leadership and assessment capacity at the community level, the building of trust, and the ability to grow the program with or without resources from the federal

*“There are really interesting and creative ways to evaluate, but when all you are hearing is ‘We want hard, quantitative evidence of results and outcomes,’ it stifles creativity.”*

government. Evaluations in this category were typically framed as an opportunity to improve and strengthen the program. Assessment tended to be on-going, rather than summative, with various evaluation instruments used at different stages. The programs characterized by this approach tended to include a number of national partners and, in most cases, the federal government was not the only or primary funder. Relatedly, decision-making tended to be diffused among several organizations, and evaluations for these types of programs were most commonly undertaken by an external organization or evaluator. Often, these evaluators were selected because of their experience in community-based action research or participatory approaches to evaluation, attributes that tended to be emphasized by non-federal partners. This not only tended to alter the role of the community in the evaluation, but also the extent to which assessment was confined to aspects that were largely of interest to federal funders. In this model, community partners often played a more active role both in framing and contributing to the evaluation, with several informants noting that this was one component of capacity-building. A variety of indicators were used, and the traditional evaluation tools tended to be supplemented by more in-depth community interviews or focus groups. Neighbourhood- or community-level data were often employed, although most programs encountered some difficulty securing the information they sought. Nonetheless, in this category of evaluations, there appeared to be a more concerted effort to gather data at an appropriate level of analysis early on and throughout the lifespan of the program and to use this to continuously refine and update project activities.

**Table 1. Learning versus accountability in place-based program evaluations**

	<b>Learning</b>	<b>Accountability</b>
<b>Objectives</b>	Capacity building; partnerships; community resiliency; longer-term outcomes and systemic / institutional change; refinement of project objectives and partner behaviour	Program effectiveness; value for dollar; appropriateness of interventions and conformity with federal mandate; outputs and achievement of stated goals
<b>Evaluator</b>	Evaluation typically conducted by external organization	Evaluation typically conducted by federal government
<b>Role of federal government</b>	Funder and typically some consultative role; one partner among many	Funder and often the agenda-setter; typically the “lead” organization
<b>Role of community</b>	Typically an active partner; often involved in the design, planning and execution of the evaluation	More a recipient of the evaluation; often not involved in the evaluation with the exception of providing informant interviews
<b>Evaluation design and methods</b>	Developmental, collaborative, action research; often used more experimental methods like network analysis or community involvement in data collection	Formal with a reliance on “traditional” evaluation tools including informant interviews, document review, and quantitative data collection
<b>Dissemination</b>	Often on-going or interim; greater emphasis placed on knowledge sharing and the identification of best practices; techniques frequently include face-to-face meetings or discussions	Typically final or summative; outward-looking knowledge sharing strategy less evident; frequently the evaluation is simply posted on the website of the federal funders and not actively distributed to community partners
<b>Identified challenges</b>	Finding evidence to support achievement of stated outcomes; obtaining partner buy-in for models and theories of change; satisfying federal accountability requirements; compiling data on hard-to-measure objectives	Mismatch between evaluation timelines and delivery of program; adapting traditional evaluation methods to non-traditional programs; community disenchantment with evaluation process; getting appropriate data
<b>Examples</b>	Vibrant Communities Initiative; Action for Neighbourhood Change; Ahp-cii-uk. Local Immigration Partnership Program and Models Program also demonstrate some features of this approach.	Vancouver Agreement; Homelessness Partnering Strategy; Community Futures Program. Forest Communities Program demonstrates features consistent with this approach.

**Source:** Informant interviews and analysis of relevant program evaluations

Although no evaluation fell squarely in either category, all tended to lean in one direction or the other. Many of the informants noted the tension between these two approaches. One characterized the divide along funder and community partner lines, with the former being most concerned about the achievement of stated goals within an established timeframe, and the latter looking more toward longer community outcomes. More specifically, there was a sense that it is difficult to combine new place-based approaches to policy with traditional evaluation tools. Although there was often a recognition that evaluation of place-based initiatives must be



“done differently”, there was a sense among informants that existing instruments, available data, timelines, and resource constraints render this next to impossible. These challenges are particularly crucial in place-based initiatives, which are typically cast as trial runs, pilot projects, or case studies. In this context, it is necessary to know which experiments worked and which did not, but this is jeopardized by an inability to appropriately measure and assess the impact of various interventions. The result is that evaluation drives design through what it does not measure, rather than what it does, a situation that stifles policy and program creativity.

## **Relationship Between the Federal Government and Community Partners**

The federal government’s role in each of the programs and its relationship to community partners varied. Some reported positive working relationships, while others suggested the interaction was transient, superficial, or little more than an exchange of funds. Many informants noted an appetite for increased government involvement and suggested that this was viewed by the community as desirable. With respect to factors that influenced the precise relationships between funders and partners, we discuss a number below. The key variables seem to be the relative importance or influence of the federal government in the project, including the nature of the funding or governance arrangements, as well as the geographic proximity between funders and communities.

With respect to the federal government’s role, on some of the projects, the federal government was the primary initiator and played a key funding and decision-making role; this is particularly evident in the Vancouver Agreement, the Homelessness Partnering Strategy, the Community Futures Program, and the Forest Communities Program. On other projects, the federal government came to the table much later in the process and provided only a portion of the funding, playing either a consultative role or sharing decision-making jointly with other partners. The Vibrant Communities Initiative is the most obvious example of this approach. In the latter case, partners – whether from government or elsewhere – were positioned as equals, while in the former case, there was a more traditional funder-recipient relationship.

Funding and governance arrangements also affected the federal government’s control or influence over the agenda. Tellingly, the federal “stamp” was much more apparent in those programs – and, by extension, their evaluations – where the government had a lead role. This model also seems to be correlated with less local agency over projects and evaluations characterized by a more explicit concern with accountability and the identification of a link between the mandate or priorities of the federal funders and overall outcomes. Some informants noted the inconsistency between an initial conceptualization of the program as one aimed at developing partnerships and synergies, and a summative evaluation that seemed only to inform the work and mandate of one of the partners. In this sense, “place-based” and “partnership” referred only to the programs and not their evaluations, with assessment focused primarily on whether federal funding should be continued or terminated, rather than on the knowledge that had been generated and the refinements that could be made to improve overall outcomes.

The geographic proximity between government representatives and participating communities appears to also be important. Some informants suggested that the absence of locally engaged government staff made it difficult to effectively engage and build relationships; staff turnover was also identified as a challenge. Informants who provided the most positive assessment of the

relationship between government funders and community partners tended to have been involved in programs where there was a consistent federal representative who was involved in consultation activities and resided within the community or was familiar with local issues.

Participatory approaches to decision-making characterized some of the programs and evaluations, but certainly not all of them. Moreover, the degree of oversight provided by the federal government varied. In some programs, federal officials played an active or principal role in the approval of the community plans and projects, while in other programs the federal role was characterized as much more “hands-off,” with representatives setting broad parameters or objectives, but then playing only a limited role in determining how these would be achieved.

It should be noted that regardless of the arrangement, we encountered some informants who were dissatisfied. On projects where the federal government was more involved, some thought communities should have had a bigger role and more flexibility. On projects where the federal presence was more limited, some informants expressed a desire to have greater engagement and contact. Moreover, a number of informants noted that the relationship between the federal government and community partners evolved over time. Sometimes, this was a result of shared learning, negotiation or compromise; other times, it was a result of new personnel or changes at the political level, which altered priorities.

It is also apparent that personality matters. A number of informants suggested that success was partly a function of the individuals who were involved in the project, either because they embraced collaborative processes, were strong facilitators, or credible leaders. It is thus difficult to say what an “ideal” relationship would look like; this applies not just to the programs, but also to evaluations, a subject that we take up more fully in the section that follows. Although communities all played some role in the programs we examined, they did not always have an active role in the evaluations, nor was this necessarily sought by them or encouraged by the federal partners.

## **Evaluation Designs**

Evaluations for some programs were formal and summative, while others were designed with a view towards knowledge sharing, best practices or ongoing feedback with multiple input stages. Some evaluations took place once and at the end of the project, while others integrated ongoing assessment and feedback; one informant characterized this latter approach as a continuous improvement cycle. Moreover, as is evident in Table 1, we can plot community involvement in the evaluations along a spectrum. On one end are programs that involved the communities actively in the development of the evaluation framework, questionnaires, and instruments, with opportunities for consultation, “sense-making,” and review of the findings. On the other end are evaluations that were more closed, with greater control exercised by the federal government and less community involvement in the implementation of the evaluation. In all cases, community-specific data were gathered and communities were involved as evaluation interviewees. Nonetheless, in the more community-led model, a greater emphasis was placed on the involvement of communities in the design, planning and execution of the evaluation, with community members playing a role not simply as informants, but also as assessors and evaluators. There was also a stronger feedback loop between the funders and communities, with clearer dissemination strategies and avenues for learning. In the more closed model, the evaluators typically decided the parameters of the evaluation, the aspects that would be

measured, and how the results would be interpreted, with findings shared only after the report had been completed; less attention was given to community dissemination or learning. Some critiqued this approach as too external to the communities, arguing that “broadly based community input into the process is the key to place-based initiatives.”

Although all of the evaluations looked, to some degree, at the link between program interventions and overall outcomes, some adopted more formal logic models that attempted to trace the causal link between the injection of federal funding and the achievement of stated objectives. The

*“Broadly based community input into the process is the key to place-based initiatives.”*

Vancouver Agreement is perhaps the best example of this approach. Others took a more holistic or ecological approach and sought to understand disparate connections, multiple causes, and the unintended consequences of the program. This is evident in the evaluations for the Vibrant Communities Initiative, Action for Neighbourhood Change, and Ahp-cii-uk; the Local Immigration Partnership Program also provides some early evidence of this approach. Regardless of the specific direction taken, however, most informants identified attribution as a challenge, with few being able to definitively say that “Investment X caused Outcome Y.” One program informant noted that the message they gave to evaluators was essentially, “We struggled with how to attribute change; we couldn’t solve it. Good luck figuring it out. And if you do, let us know how.” Some found this more troubling than others. Indeed, while some characterized the absence of a clear results chain as a weakness of the evaluation, others saw it as a means to stimulate learning, innovation, and exploration.

In terms of actual methods, informants by and large indicated that traditional evaluation tools were used. These included document analysis and interviews. There were also generally attempts to gather community-level data, although most informants noted the difficulty associated with doing so, as well as the absence of baseline measures on aspects of interest. Other data collection strategies included focus groups, which at least one informant noted should be employed more frequently when evaluating community-centred initiatives. Outcome mapping was employed by the Ahp-cii-uk and the Vibrant Communities Initiative, which also used contribution or network analysis; informants suggested that these strategies provided new ways of looking at the notion of partnership. Some programs, including the Homelessness Partnering Strategy and the Community Futures Program, tried to implement more innovative data collection techniques, including evidence gathering by communities and online survey tools. There were difficulties associated with both, however, in that not all evaluated communities had the capacity or inclination to be involved in data collection, some did not have reliable internet access, and others had difficulty compiling up-to-date email distribution lists. It was suggested that community partners were too busy to fill out a lengthy questionnaire. This led one informant to note that, “We used the old tools which is fine because, frankly, they work.” In support of this, although at least one program required communities to collect specific data, that evidence was not used in the evaluation because of problems with consistency and reliability across sites. Indeed, there is a tension in that place-based programs, by design, imply more expansive and sensitive data but at the same time seek to involve communities that may be ill-equipped to put these techniques into practice. This leads to concerns about data integrity and usability.

## Reaction, Use and Dissemination of Evaluations

The evaluations examined in this review were comparatively resource-intensive; they often involved multiple study sites, informants from several sectors and communities, a mix of qualitative and quantitative data, and the gathering of evidence at a neighbourhood- or community-level. Given this, it is surprising that very few informants believed the evaluations were systematically used, particularly by community partners. Many were not aware of how the evaluations were shared or whether the findings were applied in any way. While some suggested that the evaluations ensured that program objectives were met or provided partners with evidence to support future funding applications, the opportunity to use the evaluations' findings to improve program delivery, strengthen community capacity or enhance partnerships seems to have not been fully capitalized upon.

This could be a function of the dissemination strategies that were employed. In many cases, these appeared to be haphazard and often not in keeping with standard knowledge dissemination practices. For example, the dissemination strategy for some evaluations – generally those that were federally led – included nothing more than posting the final report on the website of the responsible federal department. Often, the evaluations were not shared with community partners until they had been fully approved by the Minister responsible for the program. As one evaluator noted, “The evaluation is the evaluation, and it is not our role to go back to the field and to talk to them about it.” Such an approach diminishes the community’s involvement in the evaluation and, potentially, the uptake of its findings. In those programs where federal engagement appears to have been higher, locally based government officials were typically involved. In these cases, there is evidence not just of a stronger relationship between partners, but a more collaborative approach to evaluation; this tended to increase the perceived utility of the evaluation, both by partners and the federal government itself, and may have improved institutional learning.

*“The evaluation is the evaluation, and it is not our role to go back to the field and to talk to them about it.”*

Some suggested that the evaluations were unwieldy; they were typically lengthy documents and may have employed terminology that was unfamiliar and inaccessible, to community partners. Moreover, some suggested that their design and execution was not aligned with community interests. Rather, the evaluations were intended to fulfill federally defined objectives that were not always relevant to the community. This was confirmed by one informant who noted, “Communities often experience initiatives and research as something ‘done to them’ by outside forces such as governments and institutions. Outsiders are seen as coming in, whether wanted or not, [and] pushing initiatives upon communities . . . and then leaving once the funding is finished.”

In spite of these shortcomings, there were some programs that integrated knowledge dissemination into the evaluation process. Consistent with this, an evaluator noted that “One of the objectives was to put the learning into a digestible container.” There is evidence that this approach increased the utility of the evaluation as a learning tool, with informants suggesting it provided a basis for making adjustments and transferring practices that appeared to be working. A few of the programs used interim reporting techniques, including locally produced statistical

profiles, reflection reports, and mid-term project summaries; the Vibrant Communities Initiative offers perhaps the best example of this. Interim reporting served a dual purpose. In the first place, it allowed for an ongoing feedback loop in which partners were able to track progress and identify, early on, potential problems. At the same time, it generated data that would later inform more structured or summative evaluation activities. A related technique, used by the Ahp-cii-uk, was to implement two-leveled or phased reporting; this included annual reporting on basic accountability measures, which were used to support future funding decisions, coupled with more qualitative or longer-term measures that were collected near the end of the project and informed the communication of best practices. This model combined the need to address accountability issues with a desire to share lessons learned.

Some programs also included a greater focus on knowledge sharing, which tended to extend right through to the dissemination of the evaluation. For example, the Ahp-cii-uk integrated face-to-face interaction into its governance structure. This provided a forum for discussing best practices, which again reinforced an ongoing feedback loop. Others, including the Vibrant Communities Initiative and Local Immigration Partnerships Program, organized senior-level roundtables or conferences. These brought together partners and, in the best case scenario, other organizations, which not only allowed for knowledge sharing, but may have led to the formation of additional partnerships. Again, there appears to be a positive correlation between more elaborate dissemination strategies and a more collaborative relationship between funders and communities.

With respect to the documentation of best practices or lessons learned, some programs placed a stronger emphasis on this than others. This is, in part, a reflection of the intended purpose of the evaluation. For example, the Vancouver Agreement and Homelessness Partnering Strategy viewed the evaluations as a program requirement to document the outputs of the program and the relationship between the investment and overall results. Other programs, notably the Vibrant Communities Initiative, Action for Neighbourhood Change, and Ahp-cii-uk, placed a strong emphasis on using their evaluations to build local capacity, to strengthen communities' ability to engage in evidence-based program development, and to provide input into strategies and initiatives that improved overall outcomes. This latter set of evaluations has, as a result, documented a number of best practices, both at the national and community level. Some of these relate to the success of various program interventions or initiatives, but much of the documentation focuses on the design and delivery of place-based or community-led programs, appropriate governance models, and strategies for building and strengthening partnerships. These lessons are catalogued on their websites and in various knowledge transfer products. This type of documentation, while in some ways embedded in the more federally focused evaluations, is more difficult to locate. For example, while the website of the Community Futures Program includes a "Best Practices" section, it is password-protected and not accessible to non-members. In addition, when best practices are documented, the more federally focused evaluations tend to emphasize administrative and programmatic lessons learned. These include concerns with respect to financial accountability, timelines, data availability, and reporting requirements, with much less focus on capacity building, community-based partnerships, or the extrapolation and applicability of the evaluated program model to other policy areas or problems.

Informants tended to regard communities' reactions to the evaluations as initially skeptical or concerned, but eventually positive or ambivalent. Even the more neutral reactions were viewed

as a step forward. Some informants noted a history of strained relations between communities and external funders or “outsiders” and some saw the more community-based or learning-focused evaluations as a means of improving this. On projects where ongoing federal investment was less-than-certain, informants tended to regard the evaluation as a way to justify the program and provide a foundation for longer-term investments. Some informants suggested, however, that evaluation principles were not fully compatible with their community’s culture; this tended to be most prevalent in those projects that involved rural or Aboriginal communities.

## DISCUSSION

As this review has suggested, there has not been a consistent federal approach to the evaluation of place-based initiatives. Nonetheless, we have been able to draw out several themes with which we will conclude. We should, however, mention four limitations of this study. First, the bulk of the data are drawn from qualitative interviews with key informants, a practice that is consistent with most of the evaluations that have been examined. This method assumes that informants are being honest and that their memory of the program and evaluation is consistent with actual practices. In some cases, informants noted that they could not remember specifics; where possible, these gaps were filled using secondary source materials, but on matters related to feelings, perceptions, and impressions, such triangulation is simply not possible. Second, this review looks at just a sample of place-based initiatives. While the findings and conclusions contained herein would appear to have broad implications for the evaluations of other similar programs, it should be kept in mind that they are drawn from the nine projects on which we focused. Third, our review includes a number of fundamentally different place-based initiatives, which have been assessed against a single rubric. This opens the possibility that the disparities in evaluation frameworks may be a function of the variance in place-based approaches across policy fields rather than a variance in evaluation philosophies. Finally, the projects included in our review were at different developmental stages when we examined them. Some, such as the Vancouver Agreement, had run for more than a decade and have since been terminated, while others, like the Local Immigration Partnerships Program, were in their infancy and still the focus of ongoing evaluation. Given that many of the informants highlighted the fluidity of the initiatives in which they were involved, it is possible that there will be changes or developments in the more recent initiatives that might erase or amplify some of the apparent distinctions.

The projects we examined emerged under a diverse set of external circumstances and constraints. These factors influenced the direction and structure of the projects, including the role envisioned for communities, the definition of “success” and the approach, scope, and overall design of the evaluations. Contextual circumstances also affected outcomes and potentialities which, in turn, influenced program choices. There are, in other words, external factors *that varied over time* that would have conditioned the evaluations. Given the differing times and wide range of place-based initiatives that have been pursued and of which this review provides just a slice, any attempt to identify a consistent set of place-based evaluation principles, approaches or designs must be treated with caution. Subject to these caveats, we have grouped our observations into four major categories.

**1. Evaluation should not be separated from overall policy or program design.** Although we have focused specifically on evaluation approaches, we must emphasize that evaluation cannot be decoupled from policy or program conceptualization and implementation. This is particularly true where place-based approaches are employed. Unfortunately, the balance of evidence suggests that this principle has not been adhered to, especially among the evaluations that focused more on accountability. While longer-term goals like capacity-building, engagement, and relationships were often highlighted in program descriptions, evaluations tended to revert to traditional measures and approaches. Even though place-based policy-making demands a new way of engaging with communities, assessing outcomes, and evaluating success, our informant interviews indicate that many evaluations tended to be narrowly constructed and often appeared as an after-thought. Furthermore, there was frequently a mismatch between funder and community objectives, as well as between the spirit of the program and the execution of the evaluation. In cases where we observed a stronger relationship between the design of the program and the evaluation, it is evident that this was emphasized from the outset. In other words, coherence in design and assessment is something that must be nurtured throughout the life of a program; it cannot simply be “tacked on” at the evaluation stage.

The match, or mismatch, between program design and evaluation also raises issues about the achievement of policy goals. In particular, place-based initiatives are generally pursued because partners recognize that identified problems cannot be solved by any one government or organization acting in isolation. From this, it follows that there is a shared interest in broadening partners’ analytic and operational capacities to address the problems that initially inspired the partnership and provided its *raison d’être*. In spite of this, many evaluations addressed only the interests of the federal government. Furthermore, the evaluations were often planned or undertaken at the end of the funding cycle. At that point, there was little opportunity for communities to learn or for programs to be reconfigured, effectively undermining the possibility of developing a shared knowledge platform for problem-solving by the partners.

If shared problem-solving is seen to be an essential feature of addressing a so-called “wicked” problem, there will need to be a better alignment between policy design and assessment. As well, evaluation will need to be situated as an ongoing and integral part of the program. In this way, it will benefit all partners, instead of being a final step that is largely concerned with the immediate ‘return’ on the federal government’s financial investment.

**2. Effective evaluations require appropriate data.** Many informants commented on the lack of data, including good baseline data, and the difficulty of securing evidence on long-term outcomes. This problem has both local and overarching dimensions corresponding to distinct program and evaluation requirements. Milestones, performance data and project output measures are essential for *managing* individual projects; comparable indicators and outcome measures, on the other hand, are essential for *comparing* multiple projects and assessing overall programs. These latter measures require collaboration and consistency across individual sites, as well as prior agreement about data collection. As such, they should be part of the initial program design. A number of informants noted that data problems were only recognized at the evaluation stage when it was too late to address them.

Our review suggests that evaluators did not generally have the information they would have needed to assess all of the desired program impacts. As a result, some aspects simply went unevaluated and the focus rested on the components of the program that could be measured

easily. These tended to be the ones that responded most directly to federal concerns associated with leveraging, cost-effectiveness, and economic impacts. Other aspects were ignored or assessed using less than ideal measures. While qualitative data derived from interviews and, to a lesser extent, focus groups are typically employed, there is insufficient attention to sociological and psychological survey research techniques that examine attitudes, perceptions, and motivations. This type of exploration would allow program designers and evaluators to establish causal predictors of individual or community behavior. This could help determine the factors that contribute most frequently to identified problems or successes. Appropriate program interventions could then be targeted at actual root causes. Nonetheless, informants noted a preference, particularly among federal funders, for economic and financial indicators, which were subsequently reflected in evaluative structures.

Reflection at the outset of the program would help partners develop constructs and measures that accurately reflect all of a program's objectives. This would appear to be a prerequisite for consistency and common action. Good practice would also require establishing baseline community data against which to evaluate change. For this reason, objectives, measures, and data collection should be integrated into the initial partnership agreements, notwithstanding local capacity issues. There was an acknowledgement that elevating the level of community engagement would require additional training, as not all communities possess the data collection and assessment skills that formal evaluations require. Importantly, some informants felt that involving community partners more intimately in conducting evaluations contributed to local capacity-building.

**3. Evaluations must include an assessment of all program objectives.** While there was a stated emphasis on partnerships, local capacity-building, and sustainability, these terms were generally not defined in a manner that could be measured, and assumptions regarding their causal antecedents were not, as a rule, clearly articulated. Moreover, tools to evaluate these so-called "soft" outputs saw limited use. While informants frequently identified these goals as important, many admitted that they had difficulty measuring them. As a result, traditional performance measures were more often employed, leaving the other outputs unmeasured.

This narrow construction had at least three consequences. First, communities were sometimes left with the impression that government partners did not understand the purpose of the program, given that many of the issues of greatest local interest – the so-called "soft" outputs – were left out of evaluation frameworks. This omission conflicted with the broad rationale for adopting place-based initiatives in the first place, namely the importance of communities and the need for local collaboration to address the issues at hand. Second, and related, even though the initiatives we examined were typically a response to complex problems requiring institutional capacity across a range of sectors, the achievement of that capacity – particularly at the local level – was often not evaluated. As such, there was an inability to assess whether capacity had been built and, if so, what factors had contributed to its enhancement. Evaluations were also not able to pinpoint whether the federal investment had resulted in greater local resilience or an ability to cope with either the original problem or potential future problems. Moreover, this tendency to privilege narrow and discrete program objectives over broad institutional and social objectives seems inconsistent with the current (internal) federal emphasis on risk assessment and mitigation, a strategy that presumably has as much currency at the community level. Third, evaluators and partners were unable to assess the relationship between the program intervention and the achievement of *all* of the identified objectives. This



produced both an accountability gap and a missed opportunity for learning, neither of which is consistent with the goals of the funders or the objectives of community partners.

**4. Place-based policy-making demands new ways of thinking about evaluation.** There appears to be a strong appetite for more collaboration, horizontality, sensitivity to local concerns, and place-based initiatives. This represents a culture change of sorts, an issue identified by a number of informants, but the shift is neither complete nor free of tensions. Tensions were evident with respect to the relative emphasis that should be accorded to partnership versus control, to long-term change versus discrete short-term program impact, and to learning versus accountability. On each of these points, more thinking is needed because they profoundly affect both policy design and evaluation. In particular, they raise issues related to attribution, which is complicated by shared funding, decision-making, and implementation models. How best to evaluate multiple objectives and outcomes is unclear, although systematic investigation and research are needed to establish causal connections and to support claims about the effects of program interventions on overall policy outcomes. This is not presently the case.

Program and evaluation design generally appeared to be atheoretical, with a number of informants suggesting that theories of change or ideas about likely causes and effects were only developed mid-way through the evaluation, if at all. Our review suggests a connection between the funding relationship, governance structure, role accorded to community partners, and the overall emphasis on learning, best practices and local agency. When federal partners had a more direct and explicit funding and decision-making role, the emphasis on accountability, control, and value-for-federal-dollar increased, potentially at the expense of enhanced local capacity and transformative community change.

The effect of greater federal involvement was recognized by some informants who suggested that funders tend to be risk-averse. This is perhaps necessarily so, but too much caution would appear to squelch experimentation and learning. Moreover, although some evaluations tend to bypass community stakeholders and simply report results directly to the Deputy Ministers of funding departments, learning cannot be exogenous to place-based program design. Rather, learning must be endogenous and internal links need to be fostered with a view to promoting feedback and continual learning which, in turn, drive policy and program decisions. Absent this, the promise of place-based initiatives will be only partially realized.

Finally, although most place-based initiatives emphasize long-term sustainable change, fostering strong relationships, and deepening community engagement, government support is typically fixed, short-term, and uncertain. One informant questioned, for example, why the federal government would invest short-term resources in an initiative that could only achieve results over the longer term. The principles that underpin shorter-term fiscal expenditure are compatible, of course, with an emphasis on reduced public spending and “smaller” government, but they may conflict with the achievement of longer-term policy outcomes. Rather than setting these long-term outcomes aside or leaving them unevaluated, program designs should set out expectations for what needs to be achieved at different points in time. Evaluations could then measure whether predicted institutional changes, capacity-building and trust had occurred and whether their impacts conformed to program expectations. With time, this would permit the development and augmentation of increasingly sophisticated theory of change models.

## **APPENDIX 1. KEY INFORMANTS**

We are grateful to the following individuals who allowed us to interview them and use their insights to inform this study.

### **Evaluation and Analysis Community**

Dal Brodhead, New Economy Development Group

Neil Bradford, University of Western Ontario

Helen Dupuis, formerly of Human Resources and Skills Development Canada

Jamie Gamble, Imprint Consulting

Cheryl Gorman, Integrare Consulting

Anna Grzybinska, Citizenship and Immigration Canada

Isabelle Légère, Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada

Peter Zoutis, Industry Canada

### **Federal Program Officers**

Mary Barr, Citizenship and Immigration Canada

Mike Bulthuis, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada

Cathy Chalupa, Western Economic Diversification

Holly Dolan, Rural Secretariat

Liz Huff, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (retired)

Al Garman, Health Canada (retired)

Lori Seeley, Industry Canada

Michael Slivitzky, Natural Resources Canada

Kelly Steele, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada

### **Community and Non-governmental Partners**

Tim Aubry, University of Ottawa

Denis Bérubé, North Claybelt CFDC

Mark Cabaj, Tamarack

Shirley Chang, Building Opportunities with Business

Michelle Corfield, Nuu-chah-nulth Tribal Council

Victoria Esses, University of Western Ontario

Paul Shakotko, United Way of Halifax Region

## APPENDIX 2. INTERVIEW GUIDE

The following questions provided a basis for our interviews with informants. Note that the interviews were semi-structured; not all questions were posed to all informants, and additional lines of enquiry may have been pursued.

- 1. What was the overall objective behind the study or evaluation/assessment?**
- 2. Who was involved in developing the structure of the evaluation/ assessment and determining which outcomes to examine?**
  - How was the design developed? Was it by the federal government acting alone or was there collaboration with other partners?
  - Were communities and non-federal partners consulted and given an opportunity to specify outcomes and to frame evaluation questions?
  - Did communities or partners also undertake their own separate evaluations/studies? If so, how did these differ from the federal evaluation? Were there attempts to link studies or to have them serve complimentary purposes?
- 3. Did the evaluation focus primarily on issues of accountability, performance management and departmental mandate? Was a broader set of questions examined?**
  - Was the evaluation's scope confined to the federal mandate? How were the 'returns on the federal investment' specified or defined?
  - How was accountability approached?
  - Who were the intended 'users' of the evaluation/assessment? Was it implemented with a view to producing 'lessons' and driving innovation? Were partners consulted as to their information needs?
  - Was sustainability or durability of the project/program examined by the evaluation?
- 4. Did the evaluation/assessment examine local capacity development?**
  - Was there debate about whether community capacity building was a legitimate outcome for this project? If so, how was capacity defined and measured? Was the definition of local capacity developed in consultation with program managers and community groups?
  - Did program managers and community groups agree on the definition of community capacity and the importance of assessing its development? What specific capacities were deemed important to examine?
- 5. Did the evaluation/assessment explore the relationship between the federal government and other partners?**
  - Did the evaluation/assessment explore the federal government's role in the project beyond financing?

- Was the federal contribution to facilitating the work of partners assessed? Was the contribution by partners to facilitating federal interests (for example, providing access) assessed? How was this done?
- How was leveraging treated and measured in the evaluation/assessment? Did issues arise in connection with attribution and accountability (who gets the credit or blame)?
- Were outcomes that fell outside the federal department's direct mandate included in the evaluation? More precisely, was the attainment of community and partner goals assessed, and was it considered a successful outcome?
- How were trade-offs between federal and community goals dealt with in the evaluation? Were they recognized and, if so, were federal goals assigned primacy in the evaluation/assessment?
- Was an attempt made to assess variables such as trust, network building and social capital which play a role in partner relations? If so, how was this done?

**6. Was the federal evaluation design shaped by theories of change or by formal program impact theories linking program interventions to overall outcomes?**

- Was the evaluation/ assessment informed by an explicit description of how program interventions would lead to the desired result? (i.e. an explicit "theory of change")
- Did all partners have the same view of how interventions were linked to results? Was this tested by the evaluation?
- How did the evaluation/assessment try to come to grips with the problem of attribution (that is, linking interventions to outcomes)? Did the evaluation/assessment set out a clear "results chain"? Was a formal attempt made (for example, by creating a process to collectively review assumptions) to validate assumed causal links between interventions and results?
- Were factors outside the project ambit (like the state of the economy), with the potential to influence outcomes, identified and assessed by the evaluation/assessment?

**7. Were differences evident between the federal government and its partners in regard to the utility and focus of the evaluation/assessment? If so, what were they?**

- How did the federal government react to the evaluation/assessment? How did communities react? Was the analysis seen as valuable?
- Were partners' objectives consistent with each other? Was success defined the same way by all partners?
- Did all partners agree on the timelines for success (that is, how long it would take to achieve results)?
- Did project objectives and methods shift over time?
- Did the evaluation/assessment make an effort to identify unintended consequences?
- Was there concern on the part of communities that the evaluation or assessment could lead to a loss of government support? How was this dealt with?

**8. How were evaluations/assessments used by the partners?**

- Did the evaluations/assessments lead to a reassessment of program direction, priorities, partnership structure, or process?
- How did federal program managers use the evaluation? How did communities use the evaluation?
- How were evaluation results and findings disseminated to participants?
- What process (if any) did program managers and community representatives have for making use of the evaluations/assessment to drive program/project improvements?
- Were there any methods, tools or approaches used in this evaluation that were particularly successful and/or innovative that should be recommended for similar types of studies?

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