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# The Art and Science of Place-Based Philanthropy: Themes From a National Convening

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Keywords: Place-based initiatives, place-based evaluation, place-based philanthropy, place-based systems change

## Key Points

- This article shares insights and implications generated at a convening titled *Is This a Better Place? The Art and Science of Place Evaluation*. Participants included funders, evaluators, and community partners who came to discuss and share effective learning practices and the role of evaluation in place-based work.
- Place-based work requires a long-term investment in collaborative partnerships to create, nurture, and sustain local and systemic changes. In order to support this complex work, partners have to incorporate approaches that are nimble, iterative, and responsive to the changing needs of a “place” over an initiative’s life span.
- The convening produced a number of considerations, presented in this article, for how funders, and their investments in evaluation, can support the design, implementation, and overall success of place-based efforts.

## Introduction

For more than 50 years, philanthropic and public-sector organizations have invested in numerous place-based initiatives to address persistent and pervasive poverty in communities around the country. Place-based initiatives use a comprehensive and intentional set of strategies to address the social, health, and economic needs of a neighborhood, city, or region. Place-based work requires a long-term commitment to a particular community, development of ongoing relationships with multiple community stakeholders, and supports and resources beyond grantmaking.

As our understanding of the complex, interrelated, and systemic issues affecting place has led to more sophisticated conceptual frameworks (Ferris & Hopkins, 2015), it has also resulted in a resurgence of interest in place by multiple affinity groups (e.g., Grantmakers for Effective Organization’s Place-Based Philanthropy Community of Practice, the Neighborhood Funders Group’s Working Group on Place-Based Community Change), large-scale public-sector initiatives (e.g., Promise Neighborhoods), and as evidenced by the importance of place within the national collective impact movement. Nationally and locally, we have not leveraged the collective knowledge of this work and established a strong place-based field. In many cases, multiple and parallel place-based investments in the same community are not intentionally integrated, and in some cases conflict with one another.

In response to this trend, the Aspen Forum for Community Solutions and the Neighborhood Funders Group (NFG) decided to collaborate on a series of convenings about place-based initiatives in 2014 and 2015. Aspen’s interest in this topic stems from its national Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund, which is supporting 21 communities across the U.S. in improving education and employment for young adults. The NFG is a network of foundations and other philanthropic organizations working to improve economic and social conditions in low-income communities.

The first event was *Towards a Better Place: A Conversation About Place-Based Philanthropy* (Aspen Institute & NFG, 2015). It sparked

various topical threads,<sup>1</sup> including interest in learning more about the role of evaluation and evaluators in supporting place-based work (Aspen Institute & Neighborhood Funders Group, 2015). In response to this interest, Aspen and NFG collaborated with the Jacobs Center for Neighborhood Innovation, a community development organization working in San Diego's Diamond neighborhood, and a national planning committee to develop a follow-up convening, *Is This a Better Place? The Art and Science of Place Based Evaluation* (Aspen Institute, 2016).

This article shares key insights and implications from this convening and subsequent reflection by the authors (who also facilitated convening sessions) about how funders and their investments in evaluation can support the design, implementation, and overall success of place-based efforts. To provide context, the article first provides a brief overview of how the convening was organized and introduces the place-based life span framework that was used to guide the convening. It then discusses how place-based initiatives have evolved to address systems change. This framing leads into the key insights from the convening, which are presented according to the life span of place-based initiatives. In each stage, we describe the funder's role in place-based work and the intersection with evaluation.

### The Making of a Convening

In recent years, a number of groups have convened place-based experts and thought leaders to explore the evaluation of place-based initiatives. This included *Place-Based Initiatives in the Context of Public Policy and Markets: Moving to Higher Ground*, at the Sol Price School of Public Policy at the University of Southern California, and *Place-Based Evaluation Community of Practice*, convened by Grantmakers for Effective Organizations. As an extension to these efforts, *Is This a Better Place? The Art and Science of Place-Based Evaluation* had three goals:

1. to share effective, innovative learning practices for dynamic, complex environments;
2. to identify appropriate questions and metrics at different developmental stages of place-based initiatives; and
3. to explore evaluation's role in the power dynamics of place.

The convening's organizers sought to create a unique experience by inviting triads of funders, evaluators, and community representatives engaged in place-based initiatives to anchor a semistructured, conversation-based format aimed at fostering understanding among the roles.<sup>2</sup> It was attended by 125 people, approximately 10 percent of whom identified as community representatives, from more than a dozen initiatives across the country.

A national planning committee of a dozen experienced evaluators, consultants, and funders working in place-based initiatives developed a Place-Based Initiative Life Span framework to organize key questions faced by place-based funders and the role that evaluation plays in supporting the multiple stakeholders. (See Figure 1.) The committee also identified key questions in each stage's domain to guide peer exchange. (See Table 1.) These questions triggered rich discussion among participants and offer reflection points for the larger field.

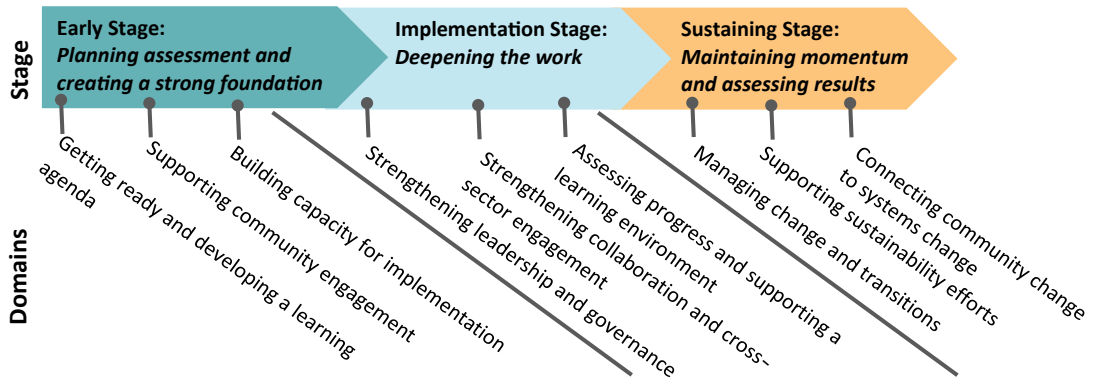
### Place-Based Initiatives Through the Lens of Systems Change

Through trial and error, place-based work has evolved from focusing on a targeted place to the realization that in order to make sustainable change, place-based initiatives have to incorporate a "systems-based" approach (Hopkins, 2015). New conceptual frameworks have therefore suggested focusing locally and systemically, being aware that "place" is an open, evolving system

<sup>1</sup>Threads included a special edition of *The Foundation Review* focused on place-based philanthropy (Volume 7, Issue 3) and a long-term plan by Aspen and NFG to sustain the conversation through periodic national convenings; the next is this year in Aspen, Colorado.

<sup>2</sup>The format incorporated the Spark model, a method of providing short presentations at trade shows. Similar to Ted Talks, Spark presentations are intended to be targeted, address a provocative question, and in this case, highlight different perspectives of funder, evaluator, and community representative.

**FIGURE 1** Place-Based Initiative Lifespan



that requires a “macro” lens to examine the systemic barriers that may impede or support sustainable and scalable impact. These frameworks have also stressed that it may not be feasible or realistic for pilot initiatives to be transplanted into new communities and that strategies will need to be tailored to local contextual factors (Ferris & Hopkins, 2015; Centre for Community Child Health, 2012).

The reconceptualization of placed-based work has required experts and funders to engage in

critical dialogue about the state of place-based initiatives. Can a single initiative, or even a set of similar initiatives, move the needle in a specific place given the national trends of poverty and other socio-economic epidemics? What approaches used by funders, practitioners, and evaluators are the right fit for complex place-based systems change requiring engagement with diverse stakeholders in the community? Field experts are also arguing for the importance of making implicit systemic structural issues such as race, class, gender, and power explicit in

SECTOR

### Place-Based Work Is About Systems Change

Systems change was an important topic at *Is This a Better Place: The Art and Science of Place Evaluation*. This definition of the term “place based” (Karlstrom, Brown, Chaskin, & Richman, 2007) was used to ground the conversations at the convening.

Place-based work is the intentional, strategic, long-term engagement in a place ..., which can be a central city, an arts district, or a neighborhood. It seeks to provide opportunities for those living in the target area greater involvement in a foundation’s priority-setting and decision-making process. It requires a commitment to a particular community over an extended period of time, direct and ongoing relationships with multiple community actors, and community relationships as a primary vehicle of philanthropic operation, and supports and resources beyond grantmaking.

The authors suggest that place-based work is also, essentially, about creating, nurturing, and sustaining changes in systems because it often involves catalyzing changes in local, state, or national systems – either intentionally or as an unintended consequence. The following definition illustrates this connection:

Systems change is an intentional process designed to alter the status quo by shifting the function or structure of an identified system with purposeful interventions. It is a journey which can require a radical change in people’s attitudes as well as in the ways people work. Systems change aims to bring about lasting change by altering underlying structures and supporting mechanisms which make the system operate in a particular way. These can include policies, routines, relationships, resources, power structures, and values. (Abercrombie, Harries, & Wharton, 2015.)

**TABLE 1** Convening Questions for Sessions on the Place-Based Initiative Life Cycle

<b>Early stage: Planning, assessment, and creating a strong foundation</b>	
<b>1. Getting ready and developing a learning agenda</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are key considerations for assessing funder and community readiness in the early phase of place-based initiatives? What does it mean to be "ready"? How can evaluators provide support?</li> <li>• How do power dynamics influence discussions about roles, decisions, expectations, and how communities and funders work together? How can evaluators support reflection and learning during this early phase?</li> <li>• What are the appropriate evaluative and learning questions to assess and measure in the early phases of work? How can evaluators engage both funders and community stakeholders in developing a relevant and shared learning agenda?</li> </ul>
<b>2. Supporting community engagement</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are effective strategies for assessing and understanding the role and influence of race, culture, and power dynamics? In the context of the community engagement (e.g., history, norms regarding stakeholder interactions), as well as in evaluator's role in the community engagement?</li> <li>• How can evaluation support and facilitate learning about these issues? With attention to who is included in the learning and what happens with the learning?</li> <li>• How does evaluation assess and support community engagement strategies? Including definitions of community engagement and units of analysis (individual, group, organization, collaborative, neighborhood)?</li> <li>• How can evaluators support planning and data-driven decision-making? Including values that undergird decision rules, chosen metrics, and capacity-building considerations?</li> </ul>
<b>3. Building capacity for implementation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How can evaluators assess and support community capacity-building efforts, particularly capacities to addressing race, culture, and power dynamics?</li> <li>• What are effective ways to promote continuous and timely learning among diverse stakeholders? What are effective strategies for evaluators to facilitate the engagement of diverse stakeholders in evaluation?</li> <li>• What evaluative questions and planning tools are most helpful to provide direction and guidance during early-stage work?</li> </ul>
<b>Implementation stage: Deepening the work</b>	
<b>1. Strengthening leadership and governance structures</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How can evaluation support responsive, accountable, and collective leadership? What are some indicators of responsiveness, accountability, and collective leadership?</li> <li>• What are the characteristics or indicators that residents have significant influence and leadership in the initiative?</li> <li>• Should evaluators be "seen, but not heard?" If not, what does leadership need to hear from evaluators?</li> </ul>
<b>2. Strengthening collaboration and cross-sector engagement</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How can evaluation help groups to surface, understand, and leverage the motivations of different sectors to participate in and commit to the work?</li> <li>• What is the role of evaluation in identifying and surfacing elephants in the room that can interfere with collaboration, such as power dynamics, cultural assumptions and disconnects, and the impact of local history around collaboration?</li> <li>• How can evaluation assess and support deeper community engagement and network building (building social capital) and surface opportunities to build networks that can address inequities?</li> <li>• How can evaluation support accountability and responsiveness to the needs of different communities, including communities experiencing disparities?</li> </ul>
<b>3. Assessing progress and supporting a learning culture</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are strategies and techniques to promote team (rather than individual) learning with a diverse set of stakeholders (within foundation, within community, between foundation and community)?</li> <li>• What are the roles of the evaluator and the foundation in creating a culture of learning (structured spaces and practices that support learning, reflection, and adaptation)? What are successful models?</li> <li>• How can the measurement of outcomes support the learning process in a dynamic way, rather than becoming a singular focus?</li> </ul>
<b>Sustaining stage: Maintaining momentum and assessing results</b>	
<b>1. Managing change and transitions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What role can evaluation play in assessing and supporting the various transitions and phases of place-based work? How do you maintain momentum when leaders, organizations, or circumstances change?</li> <li>• How can evaluators assess and surface issues that help funders more effectively manage place-based efforts as the initiative matures (i.e., coordination of multiple contractors, communications, funder-community dynamics)?</li> <li>• What are some of the key considerations, challenges, and strategies for effectively managing transitions?</li> </ul>
<b>2. Supporting sustainability efforts</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What does sustainability mean for place-based initiatives? How can evaluation support local capacity to sustain community change efforts?</li> <li>• How can evaluation identify and assess efforts to leverage existing resources and identify new resources (i.e., funding; partners and allies; knowledge; places and spaces) as the place-based initiative matures?</li> <li>• What are other ways that evaluation can support sustainability efforts for community change? What does successful sustainability look like?</li> </ul>
<b>3. Connecting community change to systems change</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How can evaluation help stakeholders connect to and toggle between complimentary community and systems-change efforts to increase influence and alignment?</li> <li>• How can evaluation help bring to the fore the power dynamics that exist in community change and systems-change work (including the dynamics spurred by the evaluation itself) in a way that productively moves both efforts forward?</li> <li>• What are some common evaluation questions and metrics that have been – or can be – applied to local systems-change and community change efforts?</li> </ul>

SECTOR

place-based work (Ferris & Hopkins, 2015; Juarez & Associates & Harder+Company Community Research, 2011). Despite these complexities, funders and community leaders launching new initiatives illustrate the optimism that the next generation of place-based initiatives will have a greater chance at achieving impact when they work strategically, factoring in larger socioeconomic contexts, broader public policies, and the market economy (Ferris & Hopkins, 2015).

In order to do complex, placed-based systems-change work, foundations and their partners must adapt their strategies. Philanthropic, public, and corporate funders must embrace building collaborative partnerships and aligning, blending, or braiding funding across sectors to bridge gaps and break down organizational and systemic silos (Hopkins & Ferris, 2015). The convening highlighted numerous examples of collaborative partnerships among funders, most notably Promise Zone communities.<sup>3</sup> They also must examine their organizational culture and assess whether community-engagement practices and underlying assumptions about race, class, and power truly support the work that is happening on the ground (David & Enright, 2015; Mack, Preskill, Keddy, & Jhavar, 2014). Funders will also need to take a learning orientation to

evaluation that promotes real-time adaptation, rather than one based purely on accountability (Grantmakers for Effective Organizations, 2009).

Evaluators, as critical thought partners to philanthropy, must also adjust their traditional approach. They must be skillful about navigating the complexity of place-based initiatives by using methods that are adaptive, iterative, and supportive of both learning and capacity building (Preskill, Gopal, Mack, & Cook, 2014). The traditional sense of “rigor” in evaluation in place must be reconsidered, shifting the focus from accountability to quality and credibility while balancing cultural responsiveness and engaging stakeholders in using timely data to inform learning and adaptation (Lynn & Preskill, 2016). This is not to say that more traditional formative and summative evaluation approaches should not be applied to place-based systems-change initiatives. In fact, a variety of evaluation approaches – developmental, formative, summative, and impact assessments – should be used to both inform the work and document how systemic changes contribute to desired community- and population-level changes.

### Insights from the Convening

To build on the conversation in the field about the state of place-based initiatives and the role of funders and evaluation, event organizers made an open invitation to funders, community organizations, and evaluators in their networks that are working on initiatives across the U.S. to contribute their knowledge and experiences. The following sections focus on the key insights from the three stages – early, implementation, and sustaining – discussed at the convening.

#### *Early Stage: Planning, Assessment, and Creating a Strong Foundation*

The early stages of place-based initiatives focus on planning and provide an important opportunity to address foundational capacity building and norm setting among all partners. The work in this stage includes creating mechanisms for authentic community engagement and developing a shared learning agenda, which will help all partners understand what is working and what may need to be refined over time. Early-stage

### Early Stage: Critical Questions for Funders

- How do our organizational assumptions and practices align with the values and needs of the community?
- Do we understand the needs and assets of the community? Do we know their history and culture?
- How can we engage the appropriate group of community members as partners in this work?
- What evaluation approaches are most appropriate for our dynamic learning needs, development, and growth?

<sup>3</sup>For other examples of successful funder partnerships, see the Collective Impact Forum at <https://collectiveimpactforum.org>.



work also includes building capacity of partners for implementation, building partnerships, and creating an inclusive and functional governance structure for an initiative (e.g., First 5 LA's Best Start Communities, the Colorado Trust's Community Partnerships).

The early stage is also an important time for funders to clearly explain to community members and stakeholders how they expect to engage with the initiative. Funders should describe the role that they expect to play and their expectations of the time frame for progress and impact. Preparation for the early stage of place-based investments is a key opportunity for all stakeholders, and funders in particular, to assess the underlying structures, values, policies, and resources that promote or prevent a community from thriving.

Evaluation can be particularly helpful in this process, especially with an evaluator who understands the complexity of place-based work and uses strategies that promote learning, capacity building, and community engagement. Evaluators can:

- map community assets and realities,
- help a funder assess its own readiness,
- build understanding of a community's history and cultural context,
- build trust with local stakeholders, and
- inform how the funder should interact with the community over the course of the initiative.

This is the appropriate phase not only to establish a learning agenda, but also to begin setting up evaluation practices and structures that will fuel a formative and summative evaluation that can help key stakeholders tell the implementation, progress, and impact stories. Discussion at the convening produced some guidance for partners in the early stage of a place-based initiative.

- Funders should be prepared to assess their own organizational readiness, practices, and assumptions while allowing the community to develop at its own pace. Funders must be keenly aware of their assumptions and practices. An evaluator who is serving as a learning partner can assist this self-reflection process to identify the foundation's culture, the role it plays in the community, and the perceptions of residents, nonprofits, and other stakeholders (David & Enright, 2015). Funder self-awareness is critical to launching a place-based investment because it clarifies aspirations and limitations, what the funder can and cannot do, its risk tolerance, and its understanding of the time needed to achieve results. As funders engage in a reflection process, communities must also understand their own needs and assets. In other words, rather than having funders or even representative community-based organizations define the communities' needs and assets, it is important for funders to

### What Should Funders Look for in a Place-Based Evaluator?

- A community-based approach: Experience in focusing on the unit of place and the network of community interrelationships.
- A systems lens: Attunement to shifting the function and structures of an identified system.
- A multilevel perspective: Proven ability to balance community, organization, and system levels.
- Responsiveness: Ability to create rapid-cycle feedback loops and adapt learning questions and plans appropriate for various stakeholder groups as the initiative evolves.
- Long-term planners: Skill in establishing data-collection processes and mechanisms that can be transformed into formative and summative assessments.
- Rigorous flexibility: Ability to balance the need for rigorous design and methods with requirements for relevant and useful findings.

create a space to create solutions with community residents in a process that allows all parties to build their knowledge of the place (e.g., participatory community-needs assessment). This clear assessment process by both funder and community will identify the alignment or disconnect between the two partners.

- Build trust by sharing agenda-setting responsibility with the community. A key to creating a strong foundation for place-based work is to engage the community (i.e., local funders and service providers, community residents) and external stakeholders (e.g., national funders, intermediaries, and technical-assistance providers) at the earliest stages to develop initial goals and objectives. Place-based approaches cannot succeed if community members are not active participants in developing the work (Barnes & Schmitz, 2016). Evaluators can provide important support by capturing, reflecting, and communicating timely information about the shifting nature of the work to foster open, transparent communication among stakeholders. Evaluators can also capture how the initiative is fitting with community and cultural norms, behaviors, and expectations. This feedback loop supports the development of trust, partnership, and collaboration.
- Know the community – people, context, history – and the role that the funder plays in this context. Place-based funders should not rely exclusively on representatives of community-based organizations as the voice of a community. These organizations have their own constituencies and are not necessarily tuned into community needs, particularly when those needs are not within the organization’s core mission. Similarly, different types of funders – local, national, public, private, and/or individuals – have their own relationships and influence on the work in the community. Evaluation partners play a critical role by continually identifying various perspectives and stakeholder needs, including how a funder is perceived

by the community and how community partners are actively engaged in the work. In addition, an evaluation process that is attuned to cultural differences among stakeholder groups is critical to understanding past successes, traumas, and experiences. As one convening participant suggested, “You need to understand each other’s world view, including a community’s past, which may shape present world view.”

- Invest in participatory and developmental evaluation approaches that promote learning, engagement, and capacity building while also creating the infrastructure for later formative and summative evaluation. Since place-based work involves engaging the community and partners in evaluation and learning, evaluation methods should be timely as well as developmentally and culturally appropriate. Incorporating participatory methods also promotes genuine community engagement rather than relying on proxies such as community-based organizations. Human-centered design charrettes, data fairs, interactive community-asset mapping, and scenario mapping are examples of data-driven approaches that facilitate collaborative dialogue and build stakeholders’ capacity to understand their community’s needs. These methods can also be embedded in a developmental-evaluation approach (Patton, 2011; Preskill & Beer, 2012), which uses real-time or rapid-cycle feedback to support routine reflection, learning, and strategy development. In the context of place-based efforts, these feedback loops require additional consideration for the various audiences (e.g., community partners, organizations, funders). The structure of a feedback loop may depend on the stakeholder group and the decision-making processes in which they are involved. Evaluators, for example, may provide data to funders to help understand and inform strategies at the broader implementation level (i.e., across various sites), whereas community stakeholder groups working within the broader initiative may find it more useful to receive community-specific



data (i.e., community friendly and linguistically appropriate) to inform their local strategies (Harder+Company Community Research & Special Service for Groups, 2014).

In order to use these approaches effectively, convening participants emphasized that evaluators should be involved from the beginning to create trusting relationships and foster evaluative thinking. Participants also recommended that funders invest in long-term evaluation to support the development of the initiative and strategies, instead of limiting evaluation to discrete strategies (Ferris & Hopkins, 2015; GEO, 2009). Finally, the early stage the time to set up data-collection systems and processes that will inform formative and summative assessments.

#### *Implementation: Deepening the Work*

As place-based efforts move into implementation, the work shifts to leadership development and governance structures. This includes supporting effective collaboration and cross-sector engagement that moves beyond information sharing and knowledge exchange to shared action and mutual accountability. This phase requires a concerted effort to address new tensions and possible operational conflicts stemming from imbalance of power, race, and equity dynamics. Partners in place-based initiatives also need to reassess and address engrained community “ways of working” and structural barriers that impede progress. Evaluation should continue to support a learning culture, while deepening the focus on implementation. Evaluating implementation progress includes assessing whether the expected policy or practice changes are supporting the community-level outcomes established in the early stages of the work.

- Create space for open conversations about race, class, and power. Convening participants talked a lot about issues of race and equity that are central to working with marginalized, low-income communities, which have historically been deprived of formal power and access to resources. At the convening, keynote speaker Michael

McAfee, vice president for programs at Policy Link, argued,

When it comes to evaluation and change, we have to do some work that has not been done in a long time, and that is the uncomfortable work about talking about structures that were designed [to take] opportunity out of communities. We need to talk about race, we need to talk about class, we need to talk about culture, and we need to talk about gender.

*“Power dynamics are directly related to systems change because those who have the power make the changes. Does there need to be a change in power to make change happen?”*

– Session participant

Funders, evaluators, and community stakeholders need to create the space to collaboratively and purposefully assess how race, class, equity, and power issues impact change. As these discussions unfold, power dynamics become particularly important to name and openly discuss. This includes the power funders have in distributing the resources for the work as well as the power

#### Implementation Stage: Critical Questions for Funders

- How are we addressing race, power, and equity issues? Have we built enough time and space to reflect on how these issues impact the communities and how we do our work together?
- Are we paying attention to the power dynamics unfolding among partners and stakeholders? What is our role in how these dynamics play out? How do we respond?
- How are we engaging community partners in what we are learning through our evaluation? How can this level of engagement strengthen the value and use of data to inform strategy development and decision-making?

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evaluators have given their access to various perspectives. The information produced through evaluation can also potentially shift an initiative in favor of a funder, nonprofit, or other stakeholder group. Therefore it is important for an evaluator to recognize how their findings (and dissemination of findings) can have ethical implications on the power dynamics of an initiative.

- Use the funders' position of influence to understand, leverage, and shift motivations for participation and action. Participants noted the critical role that funders and evaluators have in continuously assessing and helping to maintain motivation in the long arc of place-based work. Place-based stakeholders have different motivations for engaging in the work and, in part, it is the funder's and evaluator's role to help understand what these motivations are, how they can be leveraged, and how they can be constantly refreshed so motivations for shared action are current. For example, a community partner such as a developer may first be motivated to be at the table to prevent its development from being blocked by the community. This motivation may shift as the developer realizes that including the community may be more beneficial

to securing the development's financing. In these cases, evaluation plays a critical role in uncovering the different motivations and how funders can use their influence to support stakeholders to align their work toward a common agenda.

- Create opportunities for the community to guide and actively learn from the evaluation process. Whether funders invest in evaluations that uncover power dynamics, surface motivations, help define the problem, or explore solutions, it is critical that community stakeholders are involved in interpreting and using results. Participants suggested various supports for community engagement and learning, including work groups where stakeholders can guide the development of the evaluation and help interpret results, community-friendly learning briefs after key events, infographics to visually communicate strategies and evaluation findings, and learning communities where information can be shared and discussed.
- Normalize setbacks and nonlinear change as part of growth, and rely on developmental and formative evaluation to track overall progress. Place-based work is messy. Funders who work with communities must be willing to take risks and expect the unexpected, despite well-articulated theories of change. Participants talked about how evaluation plays a key role in making sense of the setbacks, so that even failures are important ways of learning about how change happens in a place. All partners (funders, community partners, evaluators) should view setbacks as opportunities to support reflection and the understanding that "we're in this together." At the same time, a more focused formative evaluation – one that documents implementation process, milestones, and intermediate outcomes – can help determine whether the initiative is heading in the hoped-for direction. This includes assessing whether there is sufficient evidence that the activities are in fact likely to influence the desired policy and practice changes, whether these policy

and practice changes are likely to influence the desired community outcomes, and what – if any – unintended consequences are likely. The formative evaluation process can also help identify accelerating or impeding factors that stakeholders can either leverage or manage if it is a factor that could present an obstacle as the initiative moves forward. While the work is messy on a day-to-day basis, evaluators can help community partners maintain focus on the larger picture of progress and change.

### *Sustaining Stage: Maintaining Momentum*

A place-based initiative is a long-term endeavor, one that, at its core, is an iterative process of learning, building capacity for implementation, and adjusting strategies as needs evolve (Juarez & Associates & Harder+Company Community Research, 2011). Participants noted that place-based initiatives often involve a decade or more of commitment and focused support, and that long-term place-based initiatives require active maintenance and reassessment. At the sustaining stage, funders must continue to check assumptions about the work, identify evolving needs, monitor and understand shifting community contexts, strengthen new and existing relationships, support community empowerment and capacity building, and address emerging power dynamics. Funders should monitor and tend to relationships, structures, and processes to ensure that the place-based investment continues to be relevant and connects to ongoing and evolving community priorities. This is also a critical stage for funders to link and weave place-based, systems-change, and collaborative or partnership-focused efforts into a cohesive whole.

- Develop mechanisms to continuously reassess the most appropriate role for the funder at more mature stages of the initiative. As place-based initiatives shift to maintaining the momentum of the work, the funders' roles and responsibilities should evolve. For example, in early phases a national funder may support a community to launch a change agenda, while in later phases its role may pivot to connect the local initiative to other national public and private change

efforts that support momentum and provide additional resources. Similarly, a local foundation deeply engaged in the day-to-day work in early phases may shift to a capacity-building role to support community ownership and sustainability. This was cited as a place where an experienced evaluation partner can help the funder understand the most appropriate role to play at any point in time.

- Balance the time and energy needed to manage long-term, transparent, open relationships with communities and stakeholders, while managing internal foundation expectations about progress and impact. Place-based or systems-change efforts require all stakeholders to commit to multi-year and even multidecade efforts. Funders must invest their resources and time to maintain trusting relationships by listening to emerging concerns, meeting and integrating new partners, reflecting on changing community needs and priorities, and paying attention to power dynamics. At the same time, foundation staff must be a continuous advocate and case-maker internally within the organization to help the board and leadership understand the long-term nature of the investment as well as the incremental and more substantial implementation progress underway. Evaluators who are documenting the progress of place-based work can provide helpful support for balancing these tensions.
- Monitor context and weave investments, initiatives, and change strategies into a cohesive whole. In the sustaining stage, community partners and the funder should arrive at a full picture of the community and systems being impacted by the investment. An important role for the funder and the evaluator is to monitor the context and the community environment for new change efforts and investments, and to intentionally weave and connect these investments into a comprehensive whole. It is natural that new programs, investments, and initiatives will come and go – each frequently with its own evaluation efforts.

Funders who plan for this stage of the work are in a unique position to guide place-based investments so that they reduce redundancy and understand all of the issues addressed in earlier stages of the work. The funder can also help connect and leverage complementary evaluation efforts and provide incentives for stronger collaboration and coordination of data collection, sharing, and analysis. This will reduce the burden on the community and strengthen what is learned. Furthermore, this alignment increases the likelihood of a successful set of complementary initiatives and establishes a more robust evaluation narrative.

- Invest in evaluation practices that help both refine strategy and tell the story of progress and impact. Place-based evaluations are situated in complex, unpredictable systems where change is constant. Evaluators can help make sense of this complexity and support the use of information to adapt strategies. Strategy informs what to evaluate, and evaluation informs the ongoing adaption of strategy. When these two processes are reinforcing each other, there is a greater likelihood of increased social impact and

change. Funders should invest in evaluation learning processes that help communities identify pivotal moments in the life cycle of the initiative that ask key questions: What worked? What didn't work? What should we try this time? What are our new data telling us? With whom else should we partner? Answers to these types of questions can help drive strategic refinement, document implementation, and demonstrate the impact of place-based work.

### Final Reflections

Place-based work by nature is a complex, long-term investment that can be unpredictable. This convening highlighted the critical role of funders in place-based work – not just from an investment standpoint, but also as a partner in the process. Preparing for place-based initiatives requires funders to make numerous considerations in preparing and implementing this work:

- *Identify your role.* Funders should carefully consider and articulate what role they want to play in a place-based initiative. There are many roles funders play (e.g., convenor, agenda driver, co-participant, but not driver) and the role they choose will be a major

## The Place-Based Initiative Life Span Redux

The concept of an initiative life span was helpful for organizing the convening's conversation. It recognized that funders' questions and concerns will be different based on the stage of the initiative's development. Yet, the convening's discussions emphasized that change in place-based initiatives does not occur in a sequential or linear way. "Early stage" questions will need to be addressed repeatedly as the political, cultural, or leadership ecosystem changes. Questions explored in the "sustaining stage" should be posed early on to prepare stakeholders for the future. In this more nuanced presentation of place-based-initiative life spans, evaluation plays a key role in supporting real-time decision-making, capturing long-term impacts and change, as well as a key knowledge-management function (tracking learnings and reminding stakeholders of past successes and challenges).

At its best, evaluation can support a place-based investment to be an ongoing, dynamic relationship that supports broader positive change in a community. Three core approaches should be considered:

1. *Developmental evaluation*, to understand the results and implications of current strategies and related significant events to inform real-time adjustments. This evaluation supports grantee critical reflection.
2. *Formative evaluation*, to understand the "through line" of the work and document how significant events and contextual influences affect change. This documentation frequently offers funders a level of confidence that change is headed in the right direction.
3. *Summative evaluation*, which links the initiative's activities to the targeted policy, practice, and community change outcomes. This approach is critical to understanding if the desired change occurred.

influence on the work. Clarity of role may help avoid misunderstandings and unmet expectations, not to mention frustrations with those in place.

- *Reflect and check assumptions.* Funders should reflect and clearly articulate their assumptions and expectations about the work ahead, and have an open and continuous dialogue with partners as the work begins and evolves, and as expectations or assumptions change. Being transparent about what the funder needs to continue to make a case for supporting the work of the community – what the funder needs to “bring back to the board” – helps everyone be on the same page when it comes to expectations.
- *Set the table for establishing trust.* Set the foundation for creating trusting, transparent relationships that will form collaborative partnerships among stakeholders (funders, community partners, community-based organizations, local businesses, evaluators) that will help sustain the work even after funders transition out.
- *Acknowledge race, class, and power dynamics with humility.* As Ferris and Hopkins (2015) note, “Place based initiatives are about race and power” (p. 85). Funders have the responsibility to create the space to openly discuss how these issues have historically impacted community partners, including becoming vulnerable to the role that philanthropy has played in contributing to these dynamics. In order to create an equal distribution of power, funders need to genuinely engage the community as partners in shared decision-making – a process that often requires dedicated and deliberate capacity building as part of the investment.
- *Invest in an iterative, multilevel evaluation approach.* Funders should seek evaluators that incorporate flexible approaches that guide learning and adaptation while also supporting formative and summative assessments. This has the three-fold benefit of helping to shape and refine the change strategy, document implementation and attainment of critical milestones to show necessary progress, and provide the opportunity to make statements of impact as the initiative sunsets.
- *Reassess strategies as needs evolve.* Funders and partners should continue to reassess roles and strategies as needs evolve, considering the changing systems (e.g., the regional economy, local and state policies) that impact the implementation of an initiative.
- *Focus on sustainability from the onset.* Rather than waiting for the final stages of the investment to think about sustainability, leverage opportunities and resources that will support sustainability and systems change from the beginning. Consider conducting a scan of existing public, private, philanthropic, and individual assets and investments at the onset and assist communities in blending and braiding these resources in support of a cohesive agenda.

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