

*IS THIS A BETTER PLACE?*

# THE ART & SCIENCE OF PLACE-BASED EVALUATION

Convening Report  
October 5-6, 2015  
San Diego, California

## **The Aspen Forum for Community Solutions**

The mission of the Aspen Forum for Community Solutions is to support community collaboration –including collective impact – that enables communities to effectively address their most pressing challenges. The Aspen Forum seeks to serve as a platform for sharing best practices across community collaborations, by documenting community success stories, mobilizing stakeholders, advocating for effective policies, and catalyzing investments. [www.aspencommunitysolutions.org](http://www.aspencommunitysolutions.org)

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Founded in 1995, the Jacobs Center for Neighborhood Innovation is focused on building communities and lifting lives. As a creative catalyst and incubator, the Jacobs Center works with the community to revitalize Southern San Diego's Diamond Neighborhoods. This means transforming nearly 60 acres into sustainable developments that provide residents with greater access to resources and amenities that improve their quality of life. Additionally, the Jacobs Center works with community organizations to increase residents' economic opportunities, leadership skills, and educational, success. [www.jacobscenter.org](http://www.jacobscenter.org)

## **Neighborhood Funders Group (NFG)**

NFG's Working Group on Place Based Community Change is dedicated to finding achievable solutions to building robust communities of opportunity. To be successful, NFG is challenged to uncover creative and effective ways to connect philanthropic organizations with practitioners, researchers, policy-makers and government personnel engaged and committed to the practice of comprehensive community change. To meet this challenge NFG works to mobilize resources that enable us to appeal to members and non-members alike through direct outreach, convenings, collaborations and advocacy. [www.nfg.org](http://www.nfg.org)

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# Introduction

When it comes to improving the well-being of people and communities, place matters. Since the creation of urban settlement houses in the late 19th century, private and public funders, practitioners, and policymakers have worked towards tackling the problem of poverty in place. Various approaches, called “comprehensive community initiatives,” “place-based,” or “place-conscious” approaches, the work is centered on supporting change at a focused geographic level. The mounting evidence of place’s influence on outcomes for individuals and families has spurred an increase of public and private place-based investments in recent years.

Yet, despite the growing evidence of the importance of place, understanding how and what investments improve communities remains elusive. Evaluation is a key tool for understanding investments in the social sector. However, the evaluation field has struggled to develop a strong base of evidence in the complex, multi-level environment of place. Furthermore, the dynamic nature of place, in which change is the norm, highlights the shortcomings of traditional social-sector-based research and the need for adaptive, learning-based models to support change.

The Aspen Institute, Jacobs Center for Neighborhood Innovation, and Neighborhood Funders Group hosted a convening, *Is This a Better Place: The Art and Science of Place-Based Evaluation*, to explore these issues on October 5–6, 2015, in San Diego, California. Over 100 participants from across the country, representing a diversity of experiences from public and private funders, evaluators, intermediaries, and community representatives, engaged in conversation-based discussions to:

- Share effective, innovative learning practices for dynamic, complex environments
- Identify appropriate questions and metrics at different developmental stages of place-based initiatives
- Explore evaluation’s role in the power dynamics of place

**“When it comes to evaluation and change, we’ve got to do some work that hasn’t been done in a long time, and that is the uncomfortable work of talking about structures that were designed to design 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.”**

*-Michael McAfee,  
Vice President for Programs  
PolicyLink*



Building on the lessons learned from two prior events (NFG and The Aspen Institute’s [Towards a Better Place](#) and the University of Southern California’s [Prioritizing Place](#)), convening organizers worked with an advisory group to organize place-based evaluation’s diverse topics and core themes. They identified three developmental stages that describe the evolution of place-based initiatives to organize workshop sessions. (The below table outlines the key stages and the associated sessions.) Through moderated workshops, convening attendees identified successes, challenges, and emerging solutions for developing a place-based learning agenda for increased impact.

Stage Of Development	Workshop Sessions
<p><b>Early Stage:</b> Planning, assessment, and creating a strong foundation</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Getting ready and developing a learning agenda</li> <li>2. Supporting community engagement</li> <li>3. Building capacity for implementation</li> </ol>
<p><b>Implementation Stage:</b> Ongoing learning and course correction</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Strengthening leadership and governance structures</li> <li>2. Enhancing collaboration and cross-sector engagement</li> <li>3. Assessing progress and supporting a learning culture</li> </ol>
<p><b>Sustaining Stage:</b> Maintaining momentum and assessing results</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Managing change and transitions</li> <li>2. Supporting sustainability efforts</li> <li>3. Connecting community change to systems change</li> </ol>

Systems change was a theme that threaded through the sessions. Communities are highly complex systems, and any attempt to create change in them will lead to both predicted and unpredicted consequences. Throughout the sessions, participants either explicitly or implicitly focused on ways to understand and more tightly connect community systems.

The strength of the convening was the rich conversations participants had while sitting at a table with peers. This document captures the key highlights from each session and aims to share these insights with participants and the field at large. The document links to the ongoing learning agenda being supported through The Aspen Institute to build awareness, mobilize stakeholders, and catalyze partnerships in the place-based field.



## Key Definitions

### Place-Based Work

Place-based work is about systems change. Place-based efforts seek to improve the lives of residents in neighborhoods experiencing entrenched, intergenerational poverty, racial discrimination and profiling, and disparities in education, income, criminal justice, health, housing, and other areas. In order to address these inequities, it is crucial to understand the system in which these settings and institutions work, and to examine how power dynamics, distribution of resources, race, gender, and class inequities, and other power structures and values keep a community from thriving. Stakeholders engaged in place-based work understand that these issues are at the forefront of every change effort. Place-based systems change requires risk taking, deep engagement and relationship building with diverse partners, adaptability, responsiveness, common goals, and a data-informed learning process for decision making.

### Place-Based Initiative

A place-based initiative is an intentional, strategic, long-term engagement with a place—which can be defined as a city, an arts district, or a neighborhood—that provides opportunities for community members to have greater involvement in the funder's priority-setting and decision-making process. Defining features include commitment to a particular community over an extended period of time, direct and ongoing relationships with multiple community actors, community relationships as a primary vehicle of philanthropic operation, and supports and resources beyond grantmaking (e.g., TA, provision of direct services).

### Systems Change

Systems change is an intentional process designed to alter the status quo by shifting the function or structure of an identified system (e.g., education, health, housing, or criminal justice) with purposeful interventions. Systems change is a journey that can require a radical transformation in people's attitudes as well as in the ways people work. Such change aims to bring about lasting benefits by altering underlying structures and supporting mechanisms that make the system operate in a particular way. These structures can include policies, routines, relationships, resources, power dynamics, and values.



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

Place-based initiatives are large-scale, long-term efforts that require funders and leaders to make a number of important decisions with far-reaching implications for the work ahead. Creating a strong foundation means that funders need to engage the community, choose strong partners to work with, and create a supportive governance structure for the initiative. Using a systems perspective helps place-based leaders focus on moving beyond implementing single strategies, instead emphasizing changing underlying structures, values, policies, and resources that prevent a community from thriving. It's important that the initiative partners identify critical needs and capacity gaps, and that they choose a strategy for addressing both.

Evaluators who are involved in the early stages of a place-based initiative can support the work through helping partners get ready by developing a learning agenda, by facilitating community engagement, and by building evaluation capacity for implementation, which includes helping community members understand the value of evaluation. In the first round of breakout sessions, participants discussed the critical importance of communications and dialog, the appropriate methods for evaluating place-based initiatives, and the ongoing challenge of aligning partners in the work.

## Session Insights

**All participants, funders, and partners should be prepared to take stock of their own organizational readiness, practices, and assumptions.** Funders need to reflect on how their assumptions and practices impact the work and should be prepared for the discomfort and change place-based work requires. One session participant noted that organizational development needs were overlooked in the project planning and in retrospect stated, “we would have equipped our evaluators differently.” Before communities can genuinely evaluate their readiness, they need time to develop trusting relationships, to vocalize their concerns, to reflect on their needs and priorities, and to develop the capacity to effectively engage in community change. They need time and support to study and understand the needs and assets in their communities (as part of gaining power and ownership). Session participants described misconceptions about the communities’ readiness to engage in place-based work, observing that some communities may not understand what place-based work is or how it can help transform their community. In response to this need, there should be more in-depth assessment to understand what is causing those issues and clearly identify those needs.

**Be aware of community context and history as you set out to engage the community.** Community is a complex term that can involve multiple stakeholders from various levels (parents,

## Creating a Strong Foundation

Nancy Csuti, Director of Research, Evaluation & Strategic Learning at the Colorado Trust, explained that the Trust had to deconstruct how their organization worked to effectively engage in place-based work. Recognizing that they needed a “local” view of the work instead of traditional program officers, nearly all of the Trust’s program officers left, and the Trust then hired five community partners who live in the communities where they work.

This highlights how place-based work is at its core about shifting power and allowing residents to “own the space” and better understand and use the power they hold.



CBOs, schools, etc.). How do we know we captured the “right” representation of community members? Some session participants expressed concern that using community organizational representatives does not mean you are talking to the “community.” In addition to identifying the appropriate “community,” it is critical to *know* that community in order to build relationships and better engage them in the work. For example, several participants highlighted the importance of understanding past traumas and experiences of the community. As one participant suggested, “you need to understand each other’s world view, including a community’s past, which may shape present world view.”

**Participatory and developmental evaluation approaches promote learning and engagement, which are invaluable for place-based initiatives.** Participants shared various methods that encourage community engagement. Participatory methods, such as community-based participatory research, human-centered design charrettes, and interactive asset mapping, can help build the capacity of members to better understand their community’s needs and progress using a data-driven method. A developmental evaluation approach can also support reflection and learning through the use of community-friendly and timely feedback on findings. Developmental evaluation is a flexible and adaptive approach that makes it particularly useful for complex, evolving initiatives. In order to use these approaches effectively, participants emphasized that evaluators should be involved from the very beginning to help develop trusting relationships and to engage community members in evaluative thinking and in articulating goals and objectives.

**Evaluators and funders working with community members should build trust by engaging in open and honest dialogue from the start of an initiative.** Dialogue with the community, from the earliest stages to the development of initial goals and objectives, is key to creating a strong place-based project. Continuous communication with the community is imperative. Members must see themselves in the process and not just included as an afterthought or in a token way. Giving back information

quickly helps to ensure that it is correct and not misrepresented, and also provides accountability and encouragement to continue. Many also felt that it is important for funders to have open discussions with community members about the non-negotiables of an initiative. This kind of funder transparency is crucial to building trust. For example, if decision making is not a process that involves equal participation between funders and community, then it should be made clear from the beginning. However, others also stressed that funders should be flexible with their approach and resources given the dynamic nature of place-based work. These conversations benefit from using a strengths-based approach that acknowledges the assets and strengths in the community.

**What skills make for an effective evaluator of a place-based initiative?** Evaluators in place-based initiatives play a unique role, affecting every part of the work. Effective evaluators are a steady influence on the strategy. They can help uncover the motivations for why participants agree to stay at the table, and the processes they use can create space for, or cut out, the voice of the community. Evaluators in these settings should understand real-time feedback loops and the value of steady adaptation of learning questions. They need the ability to help participants address complexity, think through a systems lens, and uncover and manage power dynamics. These skills are particularly valuable in complex, adaptive settings and help untangle the complexities of collaborative, cross-sector processes. Careful choosing of an evaluator can avoid a mismatch between the needs of the project and the expertise of the evaluator, such as in the example of the evaluator who had randomized control trials expertise and focused on administrative data while the initiative was focused on capacity building.

**Evaluations are shaped by the questions asked and by the people who are empowered to ask questions.** Due to the powerful role evaluation can play, it is critical for an evaluator to carefully consider whose voices will go into shaping the questions asked, how often to refresh these questions, and who will be involved in interpreting the results. By working collaboratively with stakeholders, the evaluation can ensure there is a shared learning agenda that focuses on actively informing the initiative and helping untangle the complex dynamics among the collaborative, cross-sector partners.

## Place-Based Presenters

**The Colorado Trust: Community Partnerships Initiative**  
[www.coloradotrust.org](http://www.coloradotrust.org)

- Nancy Csuti, Director of Evaluation, The Colorado Trust
- Debbi Main, Strategy and Evaluation Consultant, University of Colorado, Denver
- Krista Martinez, Community Partner, The Colorado Trust

## Evaluative Questions When Building Capacity for Implementation

- 1) **Connection to People:** Describe the groups that will be most affected by and concerned with this policy, decision, program, or practice. Ex: What are the benefits and burdens that communities experience with the policy, decision, program, or practice? What factors may be producing and perpetuating positive and negative effects on communities?
- 2) **Connection to Place:** Consider environmental, economic, and social justice as the three main areas of sustainability and equity. Ex: What impacts do communities of color, immigrants, and refugees experience in these areas? How are public resources and investments—such as funding, housing, education, and transportation—distributed geographically?
- 3) **Connection to Process and Power:** Understand the community's access to processes and power. Ex: What barriers do community members encounter in making changes directly related to equity and racial justice? How do participating organizations engage the community in planning, decision making, and evaluation?

- Hanh Cao Yu  
*Social Policy Research Associates*

Adapted from Equity and Empowerment Lens,  
Multnomah County, 2012. <https://multco.us/diversity-equity/equity-and-empowerment-lens>



## Importance of Data to Community Members

A community resident participant shared: "Seeing your own community's data helps members take a more 'macro' look at their communities. It is no longer about 'me,' it is about the issues affecting my entire community." He explained three core ways data help:

- Data helped us understand where there is greater need as well as what our strengths are.
- We learned to question the data, critique where it came from, and reflect on how it applies to our lived experience—our "community wisdom."
- Data help people take a step back and understand their own world better. They have to go through a reflective process to understand what the true needs of their communities are and the steps they need to take to make change.

- Saul Figueroa, resident in one of First 5 LA's Best Start Communities



## First 5 LA: Best Start Communities

[www.first5la.org](http://www.first5la.org)

- John Bamberg, Senior Program Officer First 5 LA, Best Start
- Saul Figueroa, Best Start Community Leader, Compton
- Giannina Fehler-Cabral, Senior Research Associate, Harder+Company Community Research

## Blandin Foundation

[www.blandinfoundation.org](http://www.blandinfoundation.org)

- Wade Fauth, Vice President for Organizational Assessment and Planning, Blandin Foundation

## Early Stage Resources

- Readiness for Organizational Learning and Evaluation Instrument (ROLE), Hallie Preskill and Rosalie T. Torres, <http://www.fsg.org/tools-and-resources/readiness-organizational-learning-and-evaluation-instrument-role>.
- BART System of Group and Organizational Analysis (Boundary, Authority, Role, and Task), Zachary Gabriel Green and Rene J. Molenkamp, [https://www.academia.edu/4356539/The\\_BART\\_System\\_of\\_Group\\_and\\_Organizational\\_Analysis\\_Boundary\\_Authority\\_Role\\_and\\_Task](https://www.academia.edu/4356539/The_BART_System_of_Group_and_Organizational_Analysis_Boundary_Authority_Role_and_Task).
- Best Practices in Place-Based Initiatives: Implications for the Implementation and Evaluation of Best Start (2011). Harder+Company Community Research and Juarez & Associates. [http://www.first5la.org/files/07864\\_2LiteratureReview\\_NoAppendix\\_11282011.pdf](http://www.first5la.org/files/07864_2LiteratureReview_NoAppendix_11282011.pdf).
- "Developmental Evaluation," Better Evaluation, retrieved February 2016, [http://betterevaluation.org/plan/approach/developmental\\_evaluation](http://betterevaluation.org/plan/approach/developmental_evaluation).
- "Our Evaluation Model: Evaluating Comprehensive Community Initiatives," The Community Tool Box, Workgroup for Community Health and Development, University of Kansas, retrieved February 2016, <http://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/overview/model-for-community-change-and-improvement/evaluation-model/main>.
- Developmental Evaluation: Applying Complexity Concepts to Enhance Innovation and Use (2011), Michael Quinn Patton, The Guilford Press, NY.

- *Imagine, Act, Believe: A Framework for Learning and Results in Community Change Initiatives* (2006), The Annie E. Casey Foundation, Baltimore, MD.
- *Evaluating Social Innovation*, Hallie Preskill and Tanya Beer, May 2012, FSG and Center for Evaluation Innovation, <http://www.evaluationinnovation.org/publications/evaluating-social-innovation>.
- *Evaluating Complexity; Propositions for Improving Practice*, Hallie Preskill, Srik Gopal, Katelyn Mack, Joelle Cook, October 2014, FSG, <http://www.fsg.org/publications/evaluating-complexity>.
- *Commissioning Multicultural Evaluation: A Foundation Resource Guide*, Traci Endo Inouye, Hanh Cao Yu and Jo-Ann Adefuin, Social Policy Research Associates, retrieved February 2016, <http://www.spra.com/wordpress2/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TCE-Commissioning-Multicultural-Eva.pdf>.
- *Equity and Empowerment Lens*, Multnomah County, Oregon, 2012, <https://multco.us/diversity-equity/equity-and-empowerment-lens>.





# Implementation Stage: Deepening the Work

Setting the table for funders and partners is just the beginning for place-based initiatives. Once the work starts, there are more challenges to overcome and more opportunities to deepen the work. In the second set of workgroup sessions, participants discussed ways that evaluators can help strengthen the leadership and governance structures of place-based initiatives, support effective collaboration and cross-sector engagement, and provide data to assess progress and support a learning culture. As initiatives unfold and evolve, evaluators also encounter new tensions and conflicts (e.g., power, race, and equity dynamics) that inevitably arise when working with diverse stakeholders.

## Session Insights

**Create space for open and honest conversations about race, equity, and power.** Place-based and community change efforts require a culture shift for all stakeholders, including for evaluators, communities, and funders. One session participant noted that, “in terms of readiness we need to understand power dynamics and who gets to represent the community” while another suggested, “we all have power and must use it responsibly.” Others noted that the true work begins by understanding the issue and by being clear and inclusive about the ultimate goal as well as about the community’s needs and priorities. Participants noted the importance of being prepared for the conflicts, tensions, and risks inherent in this work—work that some participants explicitly refer to as “social justice.” It requires moving beyond a “foundation-centric” view, and acknowledging and discussing issues of power, race, and equity in historically marginalized communities. Evaluators can help surface these issues, leading to more thoughtful reflection on how they affect the work and what needs to change to effectively move forward.

**Don’t underestimate the importance of power dynamics.** Power dynamics are inherent in any group setting, but are particularly



**“Evaluation can uncover power dynamics, but it is also part of the power issue: There is power in shaping the questions an evaluation will seek to answer, interpreting the results, and using them to take action. When an evaluation is not careful to include a wide variety of voices in these key steps, it can unintentionally shift or reinforce power dynamics for a group.”**

**— Jewlya Lynn,  
Spark Policy Institute**





**Community knowledge is as important in the process of interpreting the data as the data itself. It brings intuition, lived experience, and data together in powerful ways. This encourages shared ownership of the information, helps stakeholders understand things that surprised them, and minimizes the chance that results will be rejected.**



challenging in place-based work that involves engaged community members, public partners, non-profits, and the private sector. Power dynamics include:

- Non-profits who are competing for funding, which influences the services they are ready to offer, the populations they prioritize, and even the geographic areas in which they work.
- Fear of exposing something less than ideal about individual organizations, leading to a lack of genuine involvement and willingness to fully examine how to strengthen the system.
- Recognizing that one of the first major power plays in a collaborative effort is who has the power to decide who else should be at the table.
- Selecting the role of the facilitator, and the extent to which the person is neutral, is willing to provide the reality check, and is able to challenge power dynamics.
- The ability to value dissent and move a project forward in the face of differences.

**Understanding, leveraging, and shifting motivations for participation is fundamental to engaging partners in long-term, sustainable strategies for strengthening the community.** Evaluators can be a partner in uncovering these agendas and identifying untapped potential motivations, both by understanding what is already there and by exploring what has worked in other places when similar partners have come to the table. For example, there is a difference in engagement between developers who are at the table to prevent their development from being blocked by the community and developers who realize that community inclusion can be beneficial to secure financing. Understanding motivations should ensure that partners are aligned on a common goal and are not working on competing agendas that prevent the work from moving forward.

**The community must own the process of interpreting evaluation results.** Whether the evaluation is seeking to uncover power dynamics, surface motivations, help define the problem, or explore solutions, it is not just the questions asked that will shape the results; it is also the people who are involved in interpreting and using those results. It is extremely important to make the research accessible and to keep community partners engaged. The attendees offered the following suggestions to make evaluation data accessible to communities:

- Make data visually appealing and extract and highlight important statistics. Interpretation and discussion should be handled gingerly.

- Use a strengths-based approach when framing the data. Framing the data in positive ways will make it easier for participants to interpret the results and not become defensive about negative or unexpected findings.
- Host social gatherings where information can be displayed and shared (e.g., gallery walks, world café, and other interactive methods).
- Convene different communities sharing similar issues to promote buy in and the opportunity to learn from each other.

**Focus on outcomes that matter to stakeholders.** Choosing the outcomes and measures must be a collaborative effort. The “bad old days” of funders dictating the results they would like to see are contrary to successful place-based work. The community will only sustain working toward outcomes that they believe are important. Communicate the community’s story, not just the data or the funder’s story. While the funder may have a theory of change and want to share how that is playing out in the work, it is fundamentally the community’s story that needs to be told. Highlight the roles of different types of community members in working toward change.

**Expect set backs and non-linear change.** Work in communities is messy. Set backs and even failures are important ways of learning about how community systems operate. Organizations and people may push back against change or new aspects of the community systems may be uncovered as changes are implemented.

## Place-Based Presenters

### White House Promise Zones Initiative

[www.portal.hud.gov/hudportal/HUD?src=/program\\_offices/comm\\_planning/economicdevelopment/programs/pz/overview](http://www.portal.hud.gov/hudportal/HUD?src=/program_offices/comm_planning/economicdevelopment/programs/pz/overview)

- Erich Yost, Management Analyst, US Department of Housing and Urban Development

### Healthy Places NC

[www.kbr.org/content/healthy-places-nc](http://www.kbr.org/content/healthy-places-nc)

- Lori Fuller, Director of Evaluation and Learning, Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust
- Doug Easterling, Professor, Social Sciences and Health Policy, Wake Forest School of Medicine
- Mina Silberberg, Associate Professor and Vice Chief for Research and Evaluation, Duke Division of Community Health

### Aspen Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund

[www.aspencommunitysolutions.org/the-fund](http://www.aspencommunitysolutions.org/the-fund)

- Steve Patrick, Vice President and Executive Director, Forum for Community Solutions, Aspen Institute
- Meg Long, President, Equal Measure

## Implementation Stage Resources

- A Developmental Evaluation Primer, Jamie Gamble, published by the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation, <http://www.mcconnellfoundation.ca/en/resources/publication/a-developmental-evaluation-primer>.
- Spark Policy Institute's Developmental Evaluation Toolkit, <http://www.sparkpolicy.com/tools>.
- Wilder Collaboration Factors Inventory, Paul Mattessich, Barbara Monsey, Marta Murray-Close, <https://www.wilder.org/Wilder-Research/Research-Services/Pages/Wilder-Collaboration-Factors-Inventory.aspx>.
- The Why and How of Working with Communities through Collective Impact: An E-Course, Living Cities, <https://www.livingcities.org/resources/295-the-why-and-how-of-working-with-communities-through-collective-impact-an-e-course>.
- Integrating Health Partners, Early Childhood Council Health Integration Evaluation, Brief Report #2, Spark Policy Institute, <http://sparkpolicy.com/docs/SPARK-ECCEval-Brief2-HealthPartners-FINAL.pdf>.
- Building Public Will: One Faith Leader at a Time, Kiran Obee and Jewlya Lynn, The Colorado Trust and Spark Policy Institute, [http://www.coloradotrust.org/sites/default/files/PHC\\_IssueBrief\\_062314\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.coloradotrust.org/sites/default/files/PHC_IssueBrief_062314_FINAL.pdf).
- Society for Organizational Learning (SOL), <https://www.solonline.org/>

# Sustaining Stage: Maintaining Momentum and Assessing Results

Place-based initiatives are long-term endeavors that continuously change and evolve. Convening attendees frequently noted that ten-year initiatives are a minimum to expect change, and many actually require even longer. As an initiative enters the sustaining change, much of the work described in earlier stages continues but is adapted for new contexts. As evaluators, it is critical to continue to check assumptions about the work, to identify evolving needs, to strengthen new and existing relationships, to support community empowerment and capacity building, and to address emerging power dynamics. This final set of workshops focused on how evaluators can support place-based initiative partners as they manage change and transitions, support sustainability efforts, and connect community change to systems change. While most of the initiatives represented in the convening were developmentally in the first two stages of place-based work, session participants provided insights on key considerations as initiatives matured.

## Session Insights

**Systems change and place-based investments are rooted in the need to develop long-term, transparent, open relationships with communities and stakeholders.** These change efforts require all stakeholders (funders, community members, evaluators) to be ready and committed for the “long haul,” which to participants meant multi-year and even multi-decade efforts. Participants noted that funders in particular may need to reflect on how their assumptions and practices impact community efforts, including being prepared for the pace of change, power dynamics, and community tensions that may arise. It may also require that funders regularly justify their decisions to their boards and emphasize the important role of working in a specific place.

**Change is constant, so trust continues to be an issue to watch as partners engage in place-based initiatives.** As place-based work evolves, community needs and priorities change, and new partners come in to support the work. This requires allowing communities the time, resources,

**“Talking about complexity and dealing with it are two different things.”**

*– Session participant*

**“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*



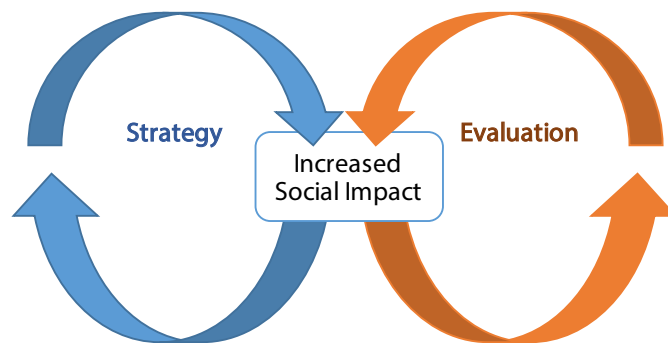
and capacity to develop new trusting relationships, to vocalize emerging concerns, to reflect on changing community needs and priorities, and to strengthen their capacity to effectively engage in community change. A critical aspect of community members gaining power and ownership of the change strategies requires that residents study and understand the changing needs and assets of their community. Evaluators can support strengthening the community's capacity to address all of these challenges and make key decisions. For example, evaluators can facilitate a learning process that helps communities identify pivotal moments in the life cycle of the initiative that can guide their current decision making (e.g., What worked? What didn't work? What should we try this time? What is our new data telling us? Who else should we partner with?).

### Unresolved Questions: Questions for Future Consideration

- Where do you find alternative norms to those in your organization?
- How do we hold space for different types of tactics, Black Lives Matters, for example?
- How much risk are we willing to take to test new ways of creating social change?
- What infrastructure is needed to elevate the expertise of citizens?

**Place-based and systems change work requires an ongoing interaction between strategy and evaluation.** Placed-base evaluations are situated in complex, unpredictable systems where change is constant. Evaluators play a critical role in rationalizing this complexity and in guiding the use of information to appropriately adapt strategies. This cycle is an iterative learning process that stokes the fire of social impact (see diagram below).

### Intersection of Systems Change and Evaluation



**Over time, evaluators can play a wide range of roles in place-based and systems change efforts.** These roles may include a neutral facilitator, a diarist or storyteller, a capacity builder, a coach or trainer, and a reflective practitioner focused on leading learning conversations. Evaluators may also help foster sustainability by connecting community leaders equipped with evaluation data

with new potential investors who may support their community change efforts. Participants noted that these “embedded” roles can help move the work and group processes forward by lifting up power dynamics that are private or confidential, or by making difficult topics discussable. However, participants cautioned that these roles, as well more traditional measurement and evaluation responsibilities, require very different skillsets that will not necessarily reside within one person or organization. It is also important to understand that the need for external evaluators may decrease as communities become more empowered in owning the change process, building their capacity to do the work, and evaluating their own efforts.

Evaluators must be clear when they are soliciting input, making decisions, collecting data, or making an informal or formal assessment, regardless of how embedded or external, developmental or summative, their focus. This is particularly true when evaluators are toggling between several roles or are shifting roles as the change effort matures. These role shifts can create complicated trust, confidentiality, or relationship dynamics. An oft mentioned issue is when evaluators shift from highly embedded roles, where they are trusted advisors, to roles that assess implementation. These role shifts must be clearly messaged, and communication, data collection, analysis, and reporting processes must be refined with each role transition.

## Place-Based Presenters

### Chula Vista Promise Neighborhood

[www.cvpromise.org](http://www.cvpromise.org)

- Sarah Zevin, Program/Management Analyst, US Department of Education
- Kathie Lembo, Chief Executive Officer, South Bay Community Services
- Sandy Keaton, Senior Researcher, San Diego Association of Governments

### United Way of San Diego County

[www.uwsd.org](http://www.uwsd.org)

- Shaina Gross, Senior Vice President, United Way of San Diego County

### Wells Fargo Regional Foundation, Neighborhood Grants Program

[www.wellsfargo.com/about/regional-foundation/](http://www.wellsfargo.com/about/regional-foundation/)

- Lois Greco, Senior Vice President, Evaluations, Wells Fargo Regional Foundation

### Building Healthy Communities—Sacramento

<http://sacbhc.org/>

- Hallie Preskill, Managing Director, FSG
- Kim Williams, HUB Manager, Sacramento Building Healthy Communities Site
- Christine Tien, Program Officer, The California Endowment
- Lynne Cannady, LPC Consulting Associates

## Sustaining Stage Resources

- Global Action Research Center <http://theglobalarc.org/>
- Greco, Lois; Grieve, Maggie; and Goldstein, Ira (2015) "Investing in Community Change: An Evaluation of a Decade of Data-Driven Grantmaking," *The Foundation Review: Vol. 7: Iss. 3, Article 6.* <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/tfr/vol7/iss3/6>





# Final Thoughts:

## Implications for Evaluators

Evaluators find themselves holding and shifting between multiple roles as place-based initiatives evolve. The conversations at this convening highlight the direct implications for the work of evaluators.

**Trust is essential.** Collaboration is at the core of place-based work, which is dependent on strong, trusting relationships. Evaluators must be acutely aware of the natural ebb and flow of trust as the work evolves. Transparency and clear communication about roles strengthens trust in communities.

**Power dynamics.** Place-based initiatives involve power dynamics, including who is involved in decision making, how much funding each partner receives, and who implements the timeline for an initiative. Power dynamics related to race, class, and equity also emerge as critical issues are addressed. Evaluators can uncover these dynamics and help facilitate discussion around these issues, but they should be aware how their reporting can unintentionally reinforce or shift power dynamics in an initiative.

**Developmental evaluation.** The complexity and ongoing evolution of place-based work requires some level of developmental evaluation. Developmental approaches highlight the non-traditional role of evaluators as facilitators, change agents, and even conflict mediators. They require attunement to a continuous learning and reflective process that rapidly elevates findings to inform decision making. Developmental approaches also require that evaluators be nimble, adaptive, and responsive to evolving needs.

**Support community's capacity building and empowerment for sustainability.** Investing in place means investing in the people and communities that live and work there. Ultimately, the community should own the process of systems and community change and must build their capacity to sustain the work over time. Evaluators ought to identify opportunities to support communities as they learn how to develop strategies, how to implement them, how to monitor their progress, and how to build stronger partnerships and seek opportunities to leverage existing efforts to support system-wide change.



# Convening Agenda

Sunday, October 4th (Hard Rock Hotel)	
6:00-8:00pm	Reception
Monday, October 5th (Jacobs Center for Neighborhood Innovation)	
7:30am	Shuttle to Jacobs Center for Neighborhood Innovation
8:00-9:00am	Registration, Breakfast, & Networking
9:00-10:00am	<p><b>Opening</b></p> <p><i>Welcome</i> Reginald Jones, Jacobs Center for Neighborhood Innovation Steve Patrick, Aspen Forum for Community Solutions</p> <p><i>Goals of convening, life cycle framework, overview of agenda</i> Sheri Brady, Aspen Forum for Community Solutions Jennifer James, Harder+Company Community Research</p> <p><i>Keynote Speaker</i> Dr. Michael McAfee, PolicyLink</p>
10:00-11:00am	<b>First Session: Place Based Change as Systems Change</b>
11:00-11:15am	Transition to Second Session:
11:15am -12:45pm	<p><b>Second Session: Early Stage -- Planning Assessment and Creating a Strong Foundation for Place-Based Work</b></p> <p><i>Topic 1: Getting ready and developing a learning agenda</i> <i>Topic 2: Supporting community engagement</i> <i>Topic 3: Building capacity for implementation</i></p>
12:45-1:45pm	<b>Lunch, Report Out, &amp; Networking</b>
1:45-2:00pm	Transition to Third Session
2:00-3:40pm	<p><b>Third Session: Implementation Stage—Deepening the Work</b></p> <p><i>Topic 1: Strengthening leadership and governance structures</i> <i>Topic 2: Strengthening collaboration &amp; cross-sector engagement</i> <i>Topic 3: Assessing progress and supporting a learning culture</i></p>
3:45-4:15pm	<b>Report Out, Reflection &amp; Close</b>
6:00pm	Dine arounds
8:30-9:30am	Breakfast
9:30-9:50am	<p><b>Second day Welcome</b></p> <p>Sheri Brady, Aspen Forum for Community Solutions Jennifer James, Harder+Company Community Research</p>

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Monday, October 5th (Jacobs Center for Neighborhood Innovation)

9:50-10:00am	<b>Transition to Final Session</b>
10:00-11:45am	<b>Final Session: Sustaining Change- maintaining momentum and assessing results</b> <i>Topic 1: Managing change and transitions</i> <i>Topic 2: Supporting sustainability efforts</i> <i>Topic 3: Connecting community change to systems change</i>
11:45am-12:00pm	<b>Break</b>
12:00-12:20pm	<b>Overview of Key Themes</b> Sheri Brady, Aspen Forum for Community Solutions Jennifer James, Harder+Company Community Research
12:20-12:30pm	<b>Next Steps &amp; Closing</b> Reginald Jones, Jacobs Center for Neighborhood Innovation Steve Patrick, Aspen Forum for Community Solutions

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