

**Defining and Demonstrating Value for Money:
Strategies for Assessing the Impacts of Community Economic Development**

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Abstract

Accountability, value for money, results-based management, audits and evaluation are prominent themes in state-social economy interactions in Canada today. Community economic development organizations have been put on the defensive by the federal government's discourse and administrative requirements associated with performance measurement. Drawing on the fields of management, public policy and program evaluation, as well as local-level case studies, this paper advances three inter-related arguments: First, there is an emerging "tool-box" of evaluation methods and techniques that appropriately and efficiently assess the impacts of CED initiatives. Second, recent applications of these tools indicate that CED organizations and social enterprises generate significant non-financial value-added and social return on taxpayer investment, that is, *blended value*. Third, civil society has an opportunity now to take the offensive and gain control of the evaluation agenda. Stakeholder participation can be mobilized to define results frameworks and indicators, and demonstrate the value for money produced by the CED sector.

Keywords

Accountability, community economic development, evaluation, impacts, participation, performance measurement, results-based management, value-for-money.

Resumen

Hoy, en Canadá, temas tales como rendición de cuentas, valor por dinero, gestión basada en los resultados, auditorías y evaluación, son prominentes en las interacciones económicas entre el estado y la sociedad. El discurso del gobierno federal y las exigencias administrativas asociadas con la medición de desempeño han puesto a las organizaciones que se dedican al desarrollo económico de la comunidad a la defensiva. Haciendo uso de los campos de gestión, de evaluación de programas y política pública, así como de los estudios específicos a nivel local, este artículo promueve tres argumentos interrelacionados: Primero, está tomando importancia una "caja de herramientas" de métodos y técnicas de evaluación, capaz de evaluar adecuada y eficientemente los impactos de las iniciativas de desarrollo económico de la comunidad (DEC). Segundo, recientes aplicaciones de estas herramientas indican que las organizaciones de DEC y las empresas sociales generan un significativo rendimiento social, no financiero y de valor agregado sobre el capital invertido por el contribuyente, es decir, un *valor combinado*. Tercero, la sociedad civil ahora tiene la oportunidad de tomar la ofensiva y tomar control de la agenda de evaluación. La participación de los grupos interesados se puede movilizar para definir resultados, estructura e indicadores, y demostrar el valor por dinero que produce el sector de DEC.

Palabras clave

Rendición de cuentas, desarrollo económico de la comunidad, evaluación, impactos, participación, medición de desempeño, gestión basada en los resultados, valor por dinero.

Résumé

Responsabilité, optimisation des ressources, gestion axée sur les résultats, vérifications et évaluations sont de grands thèmes des interactions entre l'État et l'économie sociale actuellement au Canada. Les organisations de développement économique communautaire ont été mises sur la défensive par le discours et les exigences administratives du gouvernement fédéral au sujet de l'évaluation du rendement. S'inspirant des domaines de la gestion, de la politique publique et de l'évaluation des programmes, ainsi que d'études de cas locales, la présente étude présente trois arguments reliés entre eux : premièrement, une « boîte à outils » de méthodes et de techniques d'évaluation qui évaluent correctement et efficacement les incidences des initiatives de développement économique communautaire est en train de se constituer. Deuxièmement, les applications récentes de ces outils indiquent que les organisations de développement économique communautaire et les entreprises sociales apporte une importante valeur ajoutée non financière et un rendement social élevé sur l'investissement des contribuables, soit une *intégration des valeurs*. Troisièmement, la société civile a maintenant la possibilité de passer à l'offensive et de prendre le contrôle de l'évaluation. Les parties intéressées peuvent être mobilisées pour définir les cadres et les indicateurs des résultats et démontrer l'optimisation des ressources par le secteur du développement économique communautaire.

Mots-clés

Responsabilité, développement économique communautaire, évaluation, incidences, participation, évaluation du rendement, gestion axée sur les résultats, optimisation des ressources.

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to explore how organizations in the community economic development (CED) sector in Canada can define and demonstrate the value for money they generate. Accountability, value for money (VFM), results-based management (RBM), audit and evaluation are all prominent themes in state-social economy interactions today. To a large degree, CED organizations have been put on the defensive by the state's discourse and administrative requirements associated with performance measurement.

Drawing on the fields of management, public policy and program evaluation, as well as local-level case studies, this paper advances three inter-related arguments: First, there is an emerging “tool-box” of evaluation methods and techniques that appropriately and efficiently assess the impacts of CED initiatives. Second, recent applications of these tools indicate that CED organizations and social enterprises generate significant non-financial value-added and social return on taxpayer investment. That is, they create *blended value*.

Third, civil society has an opportunity now to take the offensive and gain control of the evaluation agenda. Stakeholder participation can be mobilized to define RBM frameworks and indicators to serve the needs and priorities of the marginalized, rather than those of state technocrats. Such citizen-directed, or participatory, evaluation can mobilize support from the community for the social economy and inform improvements in CED interventions, while at the same time demonstrating the value for money produced by the sector.

Global Context

The concepts of *value* and *globalization* are inseparable. Chief executive officers of major corporations are rewarded mightily for creating “shareholder value,” the hegemonic benchmark of corporate performance, usually defined by share price and price-to-earnings ratios. In fact, shareholder value has taken on the character of both common sense (as if to say: “of course this is why businesses exist!”) and religious mantra (for those who worship money), while (usually successfully) providing deep protective cover for the too-often obscene excesses of global capitalism. Put simply, shareholder value drives corporate discourse as well as strategy.

For the past decade, precisely as globalization has gained momentum and reach—catalyzing deeper inequalities across and within countries while it lavishly rewards elites—the neoliberal policies of developed countries have obliged states and citizens to devote greater attention to value – in this case, value for money – in the public and non-profit sectors. This has led to an increasing use by governments of results-based management, audits, evaluations and other accountability practices and procedures. The discourse associated with these activities has trumpeted the imperative of achieving value for money and results for *taxpayers*.

Canadian Context

If you are a shareholder or a taxpayer, therefore, globalization *values* you! However, non-profit and co-operative organizations working on community economic development in Canada have been put on the defensive by this shift to value for money (VFM) and results-based management (RBM). For their part, though, governments have really had no clear idea of how to judge success in VFM or RBM. Expectations vary widely across governments, programs and

individual managers. Furthermore, in Canada's current political environment, frequent rotations of parties in power and, federally, the persistence of minority-government gridlock, have resulted in politicians sending mixed signals, or no signals at all, to bureaucrats on what constitutes success in government policies and programs.

Outside the state, CED organizations and social enterprises work hard to achieve multiple bottom-line objectives in an already badly funded sector. They have had little time or energy to do anything else than react, and often with some defensiveness, to moves by government to embed VFM and RBM measures in grants and contracts to the sector. A decade after these concepts were introduced, governments still do not understand how CED groups create value and generate results. And few local groups themselves have taken the time to understand this process, either – though this is starting to change.

The Emerging Tool Box for CED Evaluation

Paradoxically, however, the past ten years have also seen the robust development, testing, refinement and application of a set of tools for more effectively assessing the results of CED interventions. Reflective practitioners and professionals and engaged scholars have filled this “emerging toolbox” with data-collection methods and indicators at the regional community, CED organization, enterprise, household, and individual levels. These tools track both quantitative and qualitative results. They are being disseminated across the sector unevenly but steadily.

The most general of these tools is the logic model. A logic model depicts the expected results of an intervention along a chain, from inputs (ideas and money), to activities (training, technical

assistance, finance) to short-term results (often called outputs; e.g. enterprises assisted, participants trained), to medium-term results (usually known as outcomes; e.g. improved organizational sustainability, more effective enterprise business practices, increased employment opportunities), and, finally, to longer-term results (referred to as impacts; e.g. increased household income; reduced poverty and unemployment rates in a community; leadership development for other social initiatives).

It is true that logic models are a technocratic technique. But they constitute a useful way of describing the *theory of change* of an intervention, and then testing, through evaluation, the extent to which this theory is applied in practice, and indeed, its overall validity. Furthermore, logic models can involve multiple levels: the macro, or policy level; the meso, or institutional, level; and the micro level, which includes communities, CED organizations, enterprises, households and individuals. In larger, complex evaluations, evaluators look for interactions across as well as within these various levels. In fact, the most important analytic task is to understand what happens in the *spaces between the boxes in logic models*.

Another complementary set of tools has been developed for the *community* level. One important leader in this area has been the Centre for Innovative and Entrepreneurial Leadership (CIEL), based in British Columbia. The Centre has created a Community Vitality Index and a Business Vitality Index, and supports local organizations across Canada in customizing these tools to meet their needs for evaluation, management and planning. Another organization that has developed community-level indicators is the Federation of Canadian Municipalities, with an emphasis on, expectedly, the performance of services provided by local governments.

At the level of the *CED organization*, a new tool that has emerged over the past five years, under the leadership of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Evaluation at the University of Toronto, is the Expanded Value-Added Statement (EVAS). The EVAS, an integrated social accounting method, uses carefully constructed (and fairly conservative) assumptions to quantify, in dollar terms, the social values added that a non-profit or cooperative produces. Calculating the value of, for example, volunteer hours contributed to the organization, or unpaid contributions to other organizations, gives a much clearer picture of the value for money achieved by third-sector groups. CEDTAP has been working with several CED groups in Ontario to apply EVAS to their organizations (Quarter, Mook and Richmond, 2007).

Usually EVAS is applied to a single organization for a single fiscal year, and this yields valuable insights. Mook (2006; 2007), however, has recently pushed the application of EVAS into new territory, including green construction projects and affordable housing investments, assessing multiple performance indicators over ten to 20 years. The central feature of EVAS is that it is an *integrated* accounting statement, and not a separate report. It is this core feature that distinguishes these new applications from some other methods of assessing social and environmental sustainability.

Finally, at the level of the *social enterprise*, a tool has emerged known as Social Return on Investment (SROI). Building on earlier cost-benefit techniques, and tested by the Roberts Enterprise Development Fund in the United States in the 1990s, SROI has bee promoted, explored and applied in Canada by Social Capital Partners of Toronto and the BC-based Enterprising Non-Profits Program. The SROI method calculates all the social costs –

philanthropic grants or government support (tax treatment, subsidies, program funding) – associated with a social enterprise, and then calculates the social benefits generated by the social business for its program participants. Such benefits can include employment secured, income taxes paid, reduction in the use of social assistance and other transfers, and reduction in the use of other publicly funded programs, from addictions counselling to correctional services. Furthermore, SCP has joined forces with the consulting firm Eko Nomos to integrate a gender-sensitive “livelihoods approach” to the SROI process (Enterprising Non-Profits, 2006), derived partly from the United Nations’ experience in developing countries.

There are other tools, too. The sub-fields of microfinance, self-employment and women’s entrepreneurship, for instance, have spawned their own evaluation tools, literature and networks. Some tools, to be sure, require a very significant commitment of time and money to utilize effectively. Yet the primacy of demonstrating value for money compels funders and CED organization alike to make a substantial investment in this and other areas.

Blended Value: Evidence of Value for Money

Recent applications of these tools indicate that CED organizations and social enterprises create significant non-financial value-added and social return on taxpayer investment. That is, they create what some have called *blended value* (Emerson, 2004; Emerson and Bonini, 2004). This evidence is not easy or simple to access, and deserves wider exposure. Much of it is contained in evaluation reports in the “grey literature” that have not been widely circulated, but which contain important findings on the performance of the CED sector.

For Canada, among the more relevant studies are the following:

- research in Calgary showing that every dollar spent on programs that house or prevent the eviction of poor people saves \$7.00 that society does not have to pay out for social housing, emergency shelter, addictions treatment and correctional services (United Way of Calgary and Area, 2005);
- input-output modelling demonstrating that all taxpayer costs associated with labour-sponsored funds in Quebec and British Columbia are repaid within two to three years by employment and tax benefits, social-assistance savings and other direct, indirect and induced effects (Hebb and Mackenzie, 2001);
- social accounting analysis showing that tax revenues to all levels of government exceeded tax expenditures by more than a factor of two to one on a decade-long pension-fund investment in affordable housing in Vancouver (Carmichael, 2006; Mook, 2006, 2007);
- cost-benefit research documenting that every dollar in loan funds provided by Community Futures Development Corporations in western Canada produce more than \$14 in accumulated revenues by local entrepreneurs (Ference Weicker and Co., 2002);
- a program evaluation that found that, after three years, provincial tax revenues from employment and household income exceed the cumulative costs of tax credits to CED investment funds in Nova Scotia (Government of Nova Scotia, 2005).
- an evaluation of four microcredit programs in Atlantic Canada showing that 60% of program participants no longer needed the social assistance they received prior to the program (Wehrell et al, 2002).

These studies begin to paint a picture of the considerable value added to the programs, communities, organizations, enterprises and individuals by CED or CED-type interventions.

Moreover, there is more specific organization—and enterprise—level evidence. At the CED organization level, EVAS studies show, for example, that:

- the Waterloo Cooperative Residence in Ontario produces almost 30 percent more value-added through volunteer time and informal skills training of members and in the broader community (Quarter, Mook and Richmond, 2007).
- the Ottawa Community Loan Fund generates nearly an additional \$50,000 in value-added each year through volunteer contributions and unpaid sector consulting (Harji and Babcock, 2007);
- the PARO Women's Enterprise Centre in Thunder Bay produces, annually, over \$130,000 in value-added through volunteer contributions, unpaid consulting to the sector and other factors (Harji and Babcock, 2007).

Furthermore, at the level of the social enterprise, SROI studies have demonstrated that:

- Renaissance, a Montreal-based clothing recycler, and its participants, who face multiple employment barriers, repay all societal costs – all grants and subsidies from public and private sources – in 2.7 years (Social Capital Partners, 2005a);
- Inner City Renovations of Winnipeg, a contractor, reported \$400,000 in cost savings to society over two years, while maintaining innovative savings and training programs for its Aboriginal participants who were re-entering the labour market (Social Capital Partners, 2005b).

Finally, looking in more detail at impacts on individual program participants, the findings of a large-scale experiment in Cape Breton run by the Social Development Research Corporation is worth noting. Community employment provided to more than 700 participants in the Community Employment Innovation Project resulted in improved income and employment stability, and a general reduction in reliance on federal Employment Insurance and provincial Income Assistance. Large reductions in the incidence of low income were observed for former IA recipients, in particular (Gyarmati et al, 2006).

None of these studies provides conclusive evidence on its own, and the research cited here employs a variety of methods and indicators. Still, the combined *weight* of the findings of these studies lends strong support to the contention that CED interventions produce significant, *blended* (social *and* financial) value for money for taxpayers, governments and other funders. In fact, in several sub-areas – labour-sponsored investment funds, microcredit programs, Community Futures corporations, mature social enterprises – it would appear that *these interventions can, under generally positive conditions, repay all their social costs within three years*. This is a very significant "meta-finding" for funders, policy makers and practitioners, and deserves further examination.

The Imperative of Participation

Participation and results can and should be at the heart of any effort by the CED sector to take control of the evaluation agenda. Stakeholder participation can be mobilized to define RBM frameworks and indicators to serve the needs and priorities of the marginalized, rather than those of state (or non-state) technocrats. Such citizen-directed, or participatory, evaluation can

facilitate support from the community for the social economy and inform improvements in CED interventions, while at the same time demonstrating the value for money produced by the sector.

In fact, at the sector level, one effort has already been made along these lines. In 2004-2005, as part of the federal Social Economy Initiative (SEI), the Caledon Institute of Social Policy (2005) produced a “horizontal RMAF” for the initiative – an evaluation framework cutting across federal departments that was actively influenced by, and formalized a role for, civil society. In this instance, CED practitioners were represented on a national Social Economy roundtable, and served as the voice of the non-governmental sector. A set of evaluation procedures and performance indicators were acceptable to both sides, in effect, negotiated between the state and sector leaders (see Leviten-Reid and Torjman, 2006; Jackson, 2005a). (When the Liberal government of the day fell and the Conservatives came to power, however, the SEI was cancelled, except for two elements: a pan-Canadian research program and a financing trust for Quebec).

Nonetheless, more work needs to be done to boost participation at the levels of the CED organization and the social enterprise, in particular. Program participants and members of the local community at large can, and should, be invited to help design, oversee, analyze, review and act on the findings of evaluations and impact studies. They may need some general training in the basic concepts and technology of the tools. However, in general, these stakeholders should be asked to *define success* and its key indicators from their own perspectives. They should also monitor the downstream action taken by CED groups on the findings of such studies.

Much is known, especially from international experience, about effective ways and means of *doing* participatory evaluation. In particular, citizens and program participants can be represented, with other stakeholders, on task forces or working groups that coordinate or oversee evaluations. And they can be involved, directly or indirectly, in the collection of both qualitative and quantitative data. Further, and importantly, citizens and program participants can, and should, be directly involved in deciding on what action needs to be taken arising out of the findings of the evaluation. In this type of participatory evaluation, professionals and scholars must be skilled facilitators – not merely directors – of the process (Jackson, 2005b; Jackson and Kassam, 1998). This is particularly important in urban and sub-urban settings, where the economic, social, cultural and ethnic diversity of local populations render local dynamics complex and sometimes divisive.

As they participate, citizens and participants will define for themselves the key indicators of success – and the theories of change they believe lead to that success. In so doing, their analysis will also contribute to the creation of new knowledge about the value generated by CED organizations and social enterprises. To be sure, citizens and program participants can be tough critics of CED interventions. Yet they can also be insightful *co-creators* of this new knowledge, and fiercely loyal allies when the worth of such interventions – the value for money – is demonstrated to their satisfaction.

Setting the Evaluation Agenda

In the current context in Canada, the federal Conservatives still “own” the discourse on accountability. Even in minority-government status, they are pushing forward measures that are

less about performance assessment and more about value for money and, especially, spending controls and reductions. For their part, senior bureaucrats in Treasury Board, in particular, want to make greater use of results-based evaluation to assess, in effect, every major federal program every five years.

It is within this context that CED leaders and their allies must define and assert a sector-led agenda on evaluation and VFM. There are no handbooks on how to do this, and it will not be easy. However, there are several issues that the sector can expect will surface, and on which it must build clear positions almost immediately. Three such issues are worth noting.

- 1) *Quality versus cost in evaluation.* Mayne (2006) has contrasted the wide and deep practices performance auditors use to achieve quality with the “quick and dirty” evaluations commissioned by programs themselves. Of course, in Canada at least, the prime difference is that performance audits (particularly those carried out by the Office of the Auditor-General) are bigger, longer and more expensive, and also assess much larger dollar-value interventions than do typical individual program and project evaluations. But Mayne argues that certain practices of auditors enhance quality, particularly the extensive use by auditors of peer review by specialists both inside and outside the audit group. Teams evaluating CED interventions in a participatory and results-oriented manner should consider employing various forms of peer review, as well, while still controlling costs.
- 2) *Attribution versus contribution analysis.* In all evaluations, and especially assessments of long-term impacts, there is always a question of how to determine the extent to which documented results can be attributed to the intervention under study or to other factors or forces. Aside from running expensive and complex experimental and control groups, using

- large-scale data sets, attribution is difficult to address. However, Mayne (2001, 2004) has argued that assessments that construct, with multiple lines of evidence, credible “performance stories” are well-positioned to undertake *contribution analysis* showing how, in substantial detail, the intervention under study has contributed to change among individuals, households, enterprises, communities or even national policies. Again, developing reasonable-cost ways and means of telling credible performance stories and carrying out meaningful contribution analysis must be priorities for CED evaluations.
- 3) *Randomized clinical trials versus triangulation and mixed methods.* After a long period of “peaceful co-existence” among quantitative and qualitative methodologists in the evaluation field, there has been, in international development in particular, a recent resurgence on the part of the advocates of RCTs—randomized clinical trials. Led by Columbia University’s Centre for Global Development, and funded by some major foundations, these advocates have launched a well-resourced attack on the non-experimental approaches of most aid-related evaluations, aggressively making the case, instead, for RCTs and experimental design to drive impact evaluation, especially. This incursion has energized an important debate. While RCTs and experimental design may yield credible findings, they are often large-scale, very expensive and pose serious ethical dilemmas (i.e. how do you tell non-program participants they cannot receive the same benefits as their peers in the program group?). Moreover, as recently formed Network of Networks on Impact Evaluation (NONIE) of aid agencies has shown, careful use of mixed data-collection methods, triangulation, and time-series data, likely, for considerably less cost than large-scale experimental studies, can yield impact evaluation findings in which policy makers can have a high degree of confidence (NONIE, 2007).

In the Canadian CED sector, a small number of large-scale, long-term experiments is probably a very good idea. The Social Research Demonstration Corporation is already skilled in managing such studies and should continue to do so. At the same time, a larger number of significant-sized impact evaluations using mixed methods and triangulation at multiple points in time should be designed and implemented. And both streams of activity should be vigorously shaped, monitored and utilized by sector leaders and their allies at all levels: locally, provincially and nationally.

These are only three of the issues the CED sector must engage proactively if it is to lead and drive, rather than merely respond to, debates and activities related to evaluation and value for money questions. Other issues will emerge, and the agenda will be a full one, indeed—as it should be.

Conclusion

Participatory evaluation of the blended value created by CED and the social economy is, therefore, the way forward. This area of practice would be advanced by seed funding for multi-site applications of this approach, together with support for networking and exchange among scholars, practitioners, program participants and citizens across Canada. It would also be worth exploring the potential for *international* networking and exchange on methods and experiences applying this approach. Organizations such as CIRIEC, the Society for Third Sector Research and the International Development Evaluation Association, among others, could play catalytic roles in moving this work forward.

Value for money should not be defined solely by governments and private funders. Practitioners, scholars, citizens and participants should define VFM, as well. It is time for leaders in CED and the social economy to take control of the evaluation agenda.

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