Developmental evaluation and the 'Stronger Economies Together' initiative in the United States[☆]

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ABSTRACT

This article describes a developmental evaluation and explains its impact on the Stronger Economies Together (SET) initiative of the U.S. Department of Agriculture in collaboration with the Nation's four Regional Rural Development Centers and Land-Grant universities. Through a dynamic process, this evaluation of the early phases of an initiative led to continuous program alterations based on feedback. The relationship of the evaluation team to the initiative's coordinating team enabled seamless transfer of observations, suggestions, and recommendations to decision makers. The multidisciplinary character of the evaluation team provided a diverse set of perspectives with a depth of subject matter and knowledge from relevant fields. One lesson is that developmental evaluators must be flexible, nimble, creative, and adaptive. When expected data are imperfect or nonexistent, the team must collect alternate information and make recommendations to improve data collection. As the initiative proceeded and modifications came about, the evaluation team had to recognize the changes in the program and focus on different questions. This experience with developmental evaluation provides insights into how interdisciplinary teams may need to change course and conduct a developmental evaluation when a formative evaluation was originally envisioned.

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1. Introduction

This article presents an evaluation effort designed to help improve 'Stronger Economies Together' (SET), a national initiative to enhance the capacity of rural regions in the United States to prepare economic development plans. The purpose of this article is to describe a formative-turned-developmental evaluation research project and explain its impact on SET.

In recent decades there has been a series of attempts to enact a comprehensive, well-funded rural development policy in the U.S. For a variety of reasons, these efforts have failed; predictably, some argue (Honadle, 1993, 2001, 2008, 2011). In 2002 and 2008, comprehensive agricultural legislation established titles that encouraged the formation of locally initiated regions with the promise of grant funding and technical assistance. The 2008 Rural Collaborative Investment Program, the most recently defeated bill, would have provided resources for self-identified rural regions to

support the development and implementation of strategies they devised to meet their local needs. In the wake of this latest setback to advocates, the U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Development (USDA RD)[1] community and economic development staff created the Stronger Economies Together (SET) initiative in 2009 in partnership with the nation's four Regional Rural Development Centers (RRDCs) and the land-grant universities in the states.[2]

SET is a novel approach for the USDA to catalyze economic prosperity in rural America. At the time of our evaluation SET provided approximately 35 h of training, customized data (an approximately $15,000 in-kind contribution),[3] and technical assistance to participating regions. The initiative started in 2010 with eight pilot states (Arizona, Kentucky, Louisiana, Missouri,

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[1] In this article, the following abbreviations are used: USDA (United States Department of Agriculture); SET (Stronger Economies Together); USDA RD (United States Department of Agriculture Rural Development); Regional Rural Development Centers (RRDCs); and the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA), the Federal Partner to the Cooperative Extension System and the Regional Rural Development Centers, State Training Team.
[2] Detailed overviews of the SET initiative may be found at the USDA RD web site under Community Development (see Web references).
[3] The customized data would have cost the region approximately $15,000.

New Mexico, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia). With multiple SET regions per state, there were twenty-two multi-county regions in the initial pilot phase (referred to as Phase I). In Phase II, eleven new states (Alabama, Arkansas, Colorado, Indiana, Michigan, Mississippi, New Hampshire, New York, Texas, Vermont, and Washington) were added and sixteen new regions were formed. In July 2012, six new states (Georgia, Nevada, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Dakota, and Virginia) joined the program and eleven new regions were being formed at the time this manuscript was submitted.[4]

In the spring of 2011, the authors of this article were selected as an interdisciplinary research team by the Southern Rural Development Center (SRDC), located at Mississippi State University, and the United States Department of Agriculture Rural Development (USDA RD) to conduct an external (independent third party) evaluation of SET. In response to the request for proposals, our team submitted a plan for a *formative* evaluation based on a variety of rigorous methods for a robust external evaluation. Our evaluation project plan included a variety of methods, including analysis of applicant data, observation of training, review of curricular materials, and social network analysis using participant data. As the project unfolded, the initial (formative) evaluation plan became irrelevant and unnecessary because of the client's urgent needs for immediate, *ongoing* feedback from our team to support adaptive program development. In this article, we describe the shift from a formative to developmental evaluation and the impact of our work on the program.

2. Evaluation approach

2.1. Developmental evaluation

In addition to the "science, technology, and craft of evaluation" (Morell, 2010, pp. 1–2), it is important to systematically understand how to contend with "surprise, with situations in which programs and evaluations do not behave as expected." This article describes how a proposed formative evaluation in response to a request for proposals (RFP) for an *external* evaluation was transformed into a developmental evaluation approach that was very much from an *insider*'s perspective as an integral part of the design team.

The original RFP stated that "... the successful applicant will work closely with SRDC and the USDA RD, so some modification of your proposed activities may take place in consultation with [the client]. Also ... the External Evaluator may need ... to modify the evaluation design at one or two points during this 19-month period." This disclaimer turned out to be key to the entire project. Once we started the project, it became abundantly clear that what we were doing was more *developmental* than *formative*.

Developmental evaluation differs from formative or summative evaluation research. Where formative evaluation focuses on delivery and implementation and summative evaluation emphasizes outcomes, developmental evaluation instead assesses the project as it is being conducted and provides feedback throughout the project. Developmental evaluation has been described as "an appropriate approach when innovations are in early stages, when environments are changing (or are particularly complex), when organizational learning is emphasized, or when systems (not individuals) are the change target" (Fagen et al., 2011, pp. 649–650). Developmental evaluation might be used later to develop formative or summative evaluation research (Fagen et al., 2011).

There is limited knowledge about developmental evaluation (Gamble, 2008). As such, developmental evaluation does not have a single, prescribed methodology or set of steps. Dozois, Langlois, and Blanchet-Cohen (2010) state:

How is developmental evaluation practiced? The short answer is: *any way that works.* Developmental evaluation is an adaptive, context-specific approach. As such, there is no prescribed methodology. The 'right' method is determined by need and context, and may be drawn from any number of disciplines, including organizational development, traditional evaluation, research, and community development to name just a few (2010, p. 30; emphasis in the original).

One way that developmental evaluation differs from formative or summative evaluation is the role of the team in relation to the project being evaluated. Developmental evaluators become part of the programmatic team.[5]

According to a leading authority on evaluation, the evaluator's primary function in the team is to facilitate and elucidate team discussions by infusing evaluative questions, data, and logic, and to support data-based decision making in the developmental process (Patton, 2011, p. 20).

As part of the programmatic team, evaluators develop a holistic understanding of the program and can have greater impact on the program because of the relationships they have developed with the programmatic staff and participants (Cherniss & Fishman, 2004). Developmental evaluators provide data-driven feedback throughout the life of the program with the express intent of modifying the program.

In evaluation research, interdisciplinary work has become increasingly utilized to address the complex problems evaluators seek to analyze and can play an important role in developmental evaluation. Interdisciplinary teams work together, seeking to view the problem holistically rather than breaking it down into separate sections (Jacob, 2008). Norman, Best, Mortimer, Huerta, and Buchan (2011) emphasize that because science rewards a focus on disciplinary knowledge, we know much about specific facets of problems and little about their breadth. They argue that uniting these two approaches is essential to creating programmatic activities that offer solutions to problems. Interdisciplinary work also promotes diversity in thinking by generating new ideas and considering new ways to solve problems.

To this end, interdisciplinary analysis is more credible (Muller & Subotzky, 2001). Saari and Kallio suggest that "developmental impact evaluation may generate larger interdisciplinary projects across their knowledge silos, which may in turn have a stronger societal and client-oriented impact" (2010, p.12). Interdisciplinary teams are argued to help address the challenges of unexpected issues (Morell, 2005).

2.2. Team approach

To answer the diverse questions posed by the funder to capture the complexity of SET, we assembled an interdisciplinary team of five faculty members. Our advanced degrees include regional science, urban planning, and public administration. For instance, attending the national training for the state training teams for Phase II regions helped us connect the training manual with what the STTs were expected to do in the field and to how they were making use of the materials. The team's interdisciplinary

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[4] Nevada started earlier than the other Phase III sites and describes itself as SET 2.5.

[5] Indeed, the competitive process for selecting an evaluation team specified that the evaluator could not be from one of the SET pilot states to avoid a conflict of interest. Our proposal went a step further in claiming independence because our institution is outside the land-grant university system, which explicitly precluded our university's participation in SET.