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Key Points

· As more funders support networks as a mechanism for social change, new and practical knowledge is emerging about how to build and support effective networks. Based on extensive review of different types of networks and their evaluations, and on interviews with funders, network practitioners, and evaluation experts, the authors have developed an accessible framework for evaluating networks.

· This article describes the evaluation framework and its three pillars of network assessment: network connectivity, network health, and network results.

· Also presented are case examples of foundation-funded network evaluations focused on each pillar, which include practical information on evaluation designs, methods, and results, as well as a final discussion of areas for further attention.

Introduction

Networks harness the power of decentralized collaboration to promote social change.[1] They form because members are interested in developing and using relationships to achieve individual or collective goals. Unlike other types of more formal social organizations, a network's authority is distributed across its members. They are not top-down, concentrated, or centralized, and networks are coordinated more than managed (Easterling, 2012; Plastrik & Taylor, 2006). Advantages of networks are at least threefold. They can bring together novel combinations of talent and resources to support innovation, assemble and disassemble resources and capacity with relative ease, and adapt to emerging opportunities and challenges in their environment (Wei-Skillern & Marciano, 2008; Scearce, Kasper, & Grant, 2010).

Nonprofits and funders have different motivations for supporting networks. Some recognize that many of today's challenges are too complex and interdependent for individual organizations to address effectively. Solving them requires sustained cross-sector collaboration that deploys a critical mass of capacities and resources. For others, there is a desire to reduce duplication and inefficiency in the nonprofit sector. Still others believe that boundary-spanning networks can create the capacity to surface new and innovative solutions (Kania & Kramer, 2011; Katcher, 2010; Plastrik, Taylor, & Cleveland, 2014; Plastrik & Taylor, 2006).

Increased activity in network building is yielding new and practical knowledge about effective practices as practitioners and funders report on their insights and struggles. This, in turn, has led to deeper questions: What are key success factors in building a network? What should funders

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[1] This article was adapted from a longer report and casebook written by the authors with Peter Plastrik in 2014 and available at www.networkimpact.org

support when they design network grants? How can network builders and funders tell how well a network is doing?

Fortunately, some funders and nonprofits have invested in the evaluation of their networks (Creech, 2004; Innovations for Scaling Impact & Keystone Accountability, 2010; Monitor Institute & Grantmakers for Effective Organizations, 2011). There is much to be learned from these emerging practices, and this article offers specific examples based on real-life evaluations. This article also draws on the authors' experiences working on the design, implementation, and evaluation of a wide range of networks in the U.S. and globally, including network organizing to support policies that benefit rural people and places, cross-sector initiatives to promote immigrant integration, regional collaborations to end homelessness, and network efforts to increase place-based civic engagement.

Three Areas of Focus for Network Evaluation

Networks come in many shapes and sizes. Choices about how the network is constructed are driven by the network's ultimate goal and theory of change about how to use a network to get there. Networks might differ, for example, on:

- purpose, from improving learning or service delivery to promoting innovation or public-policy change;
- membership, organizations, individuals, or both;
- sectors represented, a single sector (e.g., health, education) or multiple sectors;
- geography, rooted in a particular place (e.g., a single community) or spanning many locations;
- size, small or very large;
- lifespan, enduring or temporary; or
- funding source, national, community, or family foundations; local, state, or federal governments.

Although different types of networks are oriented to different purposes, this article is intended to be applicable to all types of networks. Choices about where to focus the evaluation might differ based

on network type, in that some characteristics may be more important to evaluate than others. But the ideas here apply regardless of how a network is constructed and what its ultimate purpose might be.

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Three things matter especially to networks, making each an important focus for evaluation (Waddell, 2011; Woodland & Hutton, 2012). Alone or in combination, they are potential responses to the question: What should be the focus of a network evaluation? (See Table 1.)

1. *Network connectivity.* Connections are the essential glue in a highly decentralized network. Networks bring people together to find common cause, and it is important to know if deliberate efforts to weave network members' ties to one another are resulting in efficient and effective "pathways" for shared learning and action (Lanfer, Brandes, & Reinelt, 2013). Network connectivity has two dimensions that can be assessed: membership, or the people or organizations that participate; and structure, how connections between members are structured and what flows through them.

2. *Network health.* A crucial factor for a network's well-being is its capacity to sustain the enthusiasm and commitment of voluntary members and enable their ability to work as a network to achieve shared goals. Network effectiveness depends on much more than a network's ability to build internal systems and structures and execute network plans. It also depends

TABLE 1 The Three Pillars of Network Evaluation

Network Connectivity	Network Health	Network Results
• Membership: people or organizations that participate in the network • Structure: how connections between members are structured and what flows through those connections	• Resources: material resources a network needs to sustain itself (e.g., external funding) • Infrastructure: internal systems that support the network (e.g., communication, rules and processes) • Advantage: network's capacity for joint value creation	• Interim outcomes: results achieved as network works toward its ultimate goal or intended impact • The goal or intended impact itself (e.g., a policy outcome was achieved, a particular practice was spread, the community or its members changed in a certain way)

on a network's ability to engage its members, sustain their engagement, and adapt as needed (Kickert, Klijn, & Koppenjan, 1997). "Members of a network affiliate voluntarily and stay only as long as their individual interests are being met" (Easterling, 2012, p. 60). The results from assessing a network's health can be used by network members to promote continuous improvement of network performance. Network health has three dimensions that can be assessed: resources, or the material resources a network needs to sustain itself (e.g., external funding); infrastructure, or the internal systems and structures that support the network (e.g., communication, rules, and processes); and advantage, or the network's capacity for joint value creation.

3. *Network results.* While many networks do not have an activist agenda and are instead channels for communication, referrals, learning, or support (Easterling, 2012), the networks foundations support generally seek to achieve a particular type of social change. They come together for a purpose, and while network connectivity and health are important to their ability to achieve those results, it is important to know if the network itself is making a difference. Network results have two dimensions that can be assessed: interim outcomes, or the results achieved as the network works toward its ultimate goal or intended impact; and the goal or intended impact itself (e.g., a policy outcome was achieved, a particular practice

was spread, the community or its residents changed in a certain way).

Three Approaches to Network Evaluation

• *Intended uses.* Network evaluations can be undertaken for the same purposes as other evaluations: ensuring accountability for use of resources, examining the extent to which networks are achieving results or impact, or using evaluation to support strategic learning and continuous improvement. It is important to be clear upfront why the evaluation is being undertaken and who its users are, as those decisions affect later decisions about what gets evaluated and how. It can be highly valuable for network evaluations to support network members' own learning and knowledge creation rather than solely focusing on accountability or results (Backer & Kern, 2010). Networks often take on complex problems for which there are no clear recipes for success. In these instances, one of the most valuable contributions an evaluation can make is to document what is and is not working as it is happening in order to identify how strategies can be improved. To adapt effectively, networks need real-time feedback loops.

• *Intended users.* Network evaluations usually have two main intended users – the funders who support networks or network practitioners themselves. In terms of network practitioners, an evaluation's users can be individual network contributors or the overall collective member-

ship. Evaluations focused on network practitioners as users should think about the information and learning needs of both perspectives.

- *Design.* An evaluation's design is the overall methodological plan for how information will be gathered. It defines how the evaluation will address the questions users want answered. Decisions about the evaluation's intended use and users should drive design choices. Some basic lessons about design based on the three purposes outlined above have emerged.

  - For evaluations focused on accountability, it is important to recognize that holding networks accountable to strict plans and timelines for progress is not likely to yield useful findings, since network strategies and anticipated outcomes are likely to evolve. Rigid assessment frameworks based on linear models of cause and effect run the risk of overlooking important unintended activities and outcomes and can stifle a network's creative impulses.
  - For evaluations that examine network results or impact, because of the complexity and evolving nature of the "intervention" most designs are necessarily nonexperimental. They also tend to be conducted later in the network's life cycle or retrospectively after an impact has been observed, to see if the network played a role. These designs look at whether a credible case can be made, based on data, that the network contributed to its intended results or impact. Designs might use, for example, comparative or individual case studies that show how different elements of network practice fit together to produce results. They might also use techniques like contribution analysis (Mayne, 2001) or process tracing (George & Bennett, 2005).
  - For evaluations that support strategic learning, designs for assessing complex systems or processes of social innovation, such as developmental evaluation (Patton, 2010) or the application of systems thinking to the evaluation can be particularly useful

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(Cabrera, Colosi, & Lobdell, 2007). Developmental evaluation embeds evaluation in the process of strategy development and implementation, bringing data into a smart learning process and supporting decisions about the most useful pathways forward. For decentralized and adaptive networks in which members are coming together in unique configurations for different purposes, guiding a network's steps forward.

Network Evaluation Case Studies

The following case studies present different aspects of network evaluation and are organized to reflect the three main elements discussed above – connectivity, health, and results. (See Table 2.) The foundations that supported these assessments aimed to accomplish one or more of the following:

- Better understanding of the nature of a network's needs and identifying opportunities for supporting the network's effectiveness.
- Determining whether a network is an effective vehicle to achieve a desired change.

TOOLS

TABLE 2 Reboot Social-Network Analysis Clusters and Boundary Spanners

Dimension	Focus	Examples of Evaluation Questions	Example Case and Use of Evaluation
Connectivity	Membership: Participating people or organizations	• Who participates and what role do they play? • Who is connected to whom? Who is not connected but should be? • Are members participating with the capacities needed to meet network goals (experience, skills, connections)?	**Reboot** • Evaluation helped foundation staff think about what to look for in other network-building approaches it might support. • How to support hubs and keep network connected as it grows. • Network maps revealed how members' relationships evolved over time.
	Structure: Member connections and resource flow	• What are the number, quality, and configuration of network ties? • How efficient are the connections? • What is flowing through the network –information and other resources?	
Health	Resources: Material resources needed for sustainability	• How diverse and dependable are network resources? • How are members contributing resources? • Is the network adapting its business plan over time?	**Urban Sustainability Directors Network** • Self-assessment data used to create a "State of the Network" report presented to members at annual meeting. Report gauges progress on network's goals and identifies key trends that inform planning. • Planning committee reviews more detailed assessment report as part of process to set next year's priorities. • Network funders review report on what is working and what is not, and identify needs.
	Infrastructure: Supportive internal systems and structures	• What is in place for coordination and communications? • What are the governance rules and how are they followed? • Do decision-making processes encourage members to contribute and collaborate?	
	Advantage: Capacity for joint value creation	• Do all members share a common purpose? • Are members working together to achieve shared goals, including goals that emerge? • Are members achieving more together than they could alone?	
Results	Interim Outcomes: Results achieved as the network works toward its goal	• Are there clear signals of progress/interim outcomes and are they understood and measured? • Is progress being made on the way to longer-term goals or intended impacts?	**MA Regional Networks to End Homelessness** • Real-time reporting of evaluation research accelerated spread of best practices throughout pilot networks. • Results informed decision by state to continue support of regional cross-sector collaboration.
	Goal or Impacts: Ultimate results	• At which levels are impacts expected –individual members, members' local environments, members' combined impact on their broader environment? • If the goal is achieved, can a case be made that the network contributed?	

- Generating new knowledge for the social change field by creating new understanding about what networks do best and how they do it.

The three cases cover a range of methods and tools, as well as evaluation results.[2] The networks themselves are diverse, varying in size, purpose, sector, issue, and geographic focus as well as type of membership. The evaluations also have different types of funders: national foundations, local community foundations, and family foundations.

Network Connectivity: Reboot Network Assessment (2010-2012)

Assessing network connectivity requires unique data and analytic tools and yields findings that shed light on the role that member ties play in building a network and how different connectivity structures enable learning and action. The Reboot evaluation took on these topics as part of a larger evaluation process funded by the Jim Joseph Foundation. Although no previous connectivity data had been collected, the evaluation revealed a set of clear structural patterns with implications for the network's future.

Key Evaluation Questions

1. *What impact has Reboot had on its members?*
2. *How are Rebooters connecting? Is Reboot building a strong community of young Jewish thought leaders?*
3. *What impact does the network have on Rebooters' broader community of friends and colleagues and on the Jewish organizational landscape?*

Background

Reboot is a network of individuals in the U.S. that was established in 2003. Reboot's purpose is to reinterpret Judaism/Jewishness in America so it has meaning and value for younger Jewish-Americans. Its members create innovations in cultural and religious practices – new events, products (e.g., movies, books, CDs), services, and organizations. Each year, Reboot added about 30 members, by invitation only and with an emphasis on recruiting young "cultural creatives" working in the arts and media. At the time of

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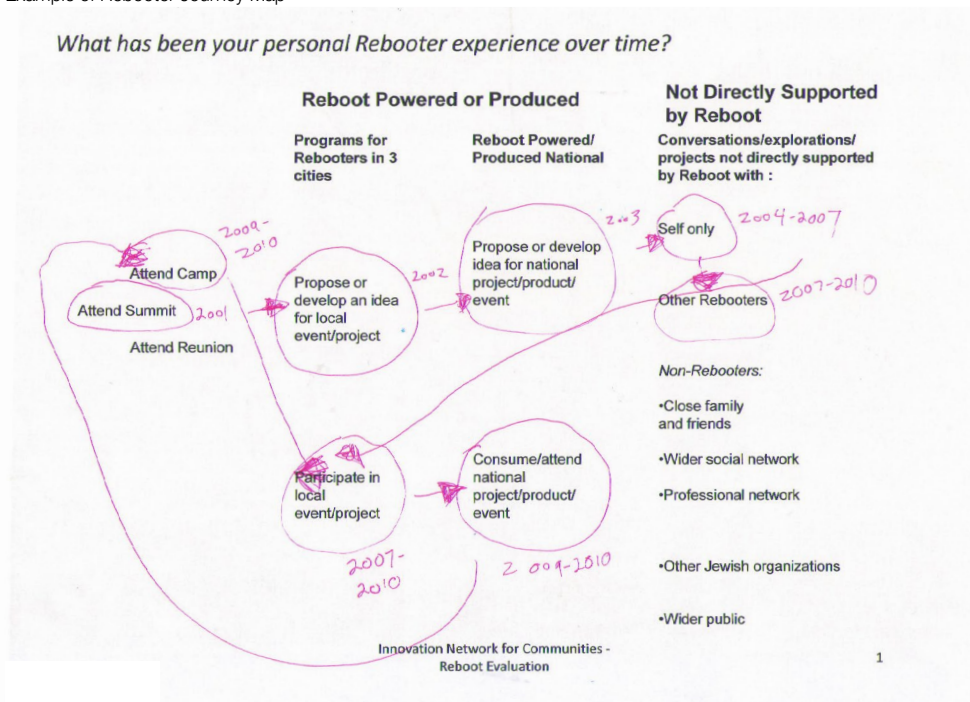[2] The three assessments profiled here were conducted by one or more of the authors.

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the evaluation, Reboot had about 350 network members. Many, but not all, were active. The Jim Joseph Foundation made a $3 million grant to Reboot in 2008. Program officer Adene Sacks, who had developed the grant, needed to evaluate the network so the foundation board could consider the possibility of making a follow-up grant. An evaluation was also an opportunity to help the foundation board understand more about why and how to invest in network building as a broader strategy to achieve its goals, and a chance to engage Reboot's board, staff, and other funders in reflection about the network's condition and future.

Evaluation Design and Implementation

The foundation and Reboot decided to co-develop the evaluation to meet both their needs. It took some time to find an outside evaluator to help them design and execute it, however. Traditional evaluators of organizations, Sacks says, "weren't speaking the same language as Reboot. They would say, 'We want to see your business plan and metrics for success,' and Reboot would say things like, 'We're redefining Jewishness for a new generation.'… And the evaluators would say, 'Can you put some numbers on that?' They wanted to tie organizational outcomes to the network. … We needed a framework that would help us understand what Reboot was trying to do." A six-member evaluation advisory group was
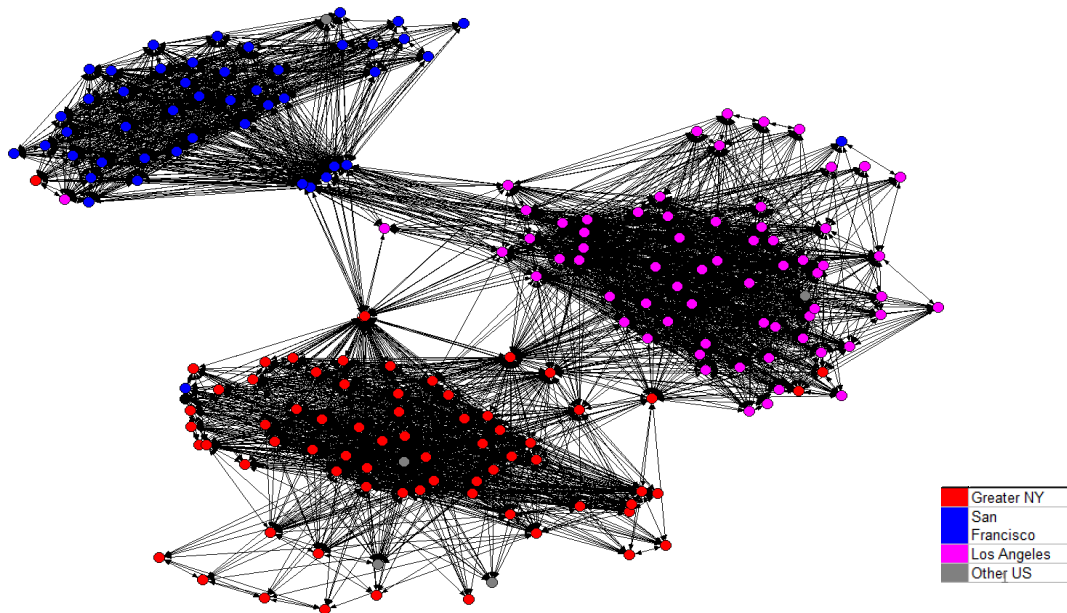
FIGURE 1 Example of Rebooter Journey Map

formed, composed of Sacks, a Reboot board member, the Reboot staff, and the two-person evaluation team. The evaluation process involved these major steps:

- *Review of network materials provided by staff.* Evaluators also read, viewed, or listened to a number of Rebooters' innovative products.

- *Articulation of a theory of change.* This provided a common understanding of what Reboot was seeking to accomplish and its strategies.

- *Stakeholder interviews.* One-on-one interviews with 23 Reboot founders, members, Reboot advisors, and foundation staff helped introduce the evaluators to the network's "language" and some of its more active members. As a result, evaluators began to create "journey maps" that identified variations and patterns in the ways that members engaged, and depicted the flow and drivers of their various network experiences. (See Figure 1.)

- *Focus groups with Reboot members.* These sessions, held in the three cities containing the bulk of

Reboot membership – New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles – added to the evaluators' understanding of Rebooters' journeys and helped them to develop questions for a member survey.

- *Online survey to Reboot members.* The survey focused on members' experiences in the network, their value propositions for participating, and any changes in their engagement with family, friends, and colleagues as a result of Reboot.

- *Social-network analysis.* A second survey was administered that asked Rebooters to identify which other network members they connected with for non-Reboot network reasons, and the perceived strength of the connection. The results of this survey were used to visually represent network connectivity through social-network analysis. (See Figure 2.)

Evaluation Conclusions

In January 2012, the evaluators sent their 23-page report to the Jim Joseph Foundation and Reboot staff (Taylor & Plastrik, 2012). The social-network analysis maps uncovered several patterns of

FIGURE 2 Connections Between Rebooters in the Three Main Cities

	Greater NY
	San Francisco
	Los Angeles
	Other US

interest to both funder and network members:

- Reboot had a committed core of well-linked members with direct connections to large numbers of other Rebooters. Even though the network had added annual cohorts of about 30 members since its startup, the evaluation revealed a substantial amount of connectivity across cohort years.
- Although most Rebooters lived in New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles, there were differences in the patterns of connections among members within each city.
- The Reboot connectivity maps provided evidence of the network's strength, Sacks says. "It proved to me that the network was sustainable. It had key players and boundary spanners [between the major city clusters]. It had evolved cross-cohort connections. I felt hugely gratified seeing those network maps and understanding how much was happening in the network that had nothing to do with the founders or the organizational backbone [Reboot staff] for the network."

Evaluation Use

The Reboot evaluation was a learning opportunity for the foundation. "It helped the staff think about what to look for in other network-building approaches it might support," says Executive Director Charles "Chip" Edelsberg. The Reboot evaluation also influenced the foundation's board's thinking about what it wanted to see in a renewal grant. Sacks helped the board members understand what the evaluation could tell them about the Reboot network. "I wanted the board to understand network evaluation and network-building process metrics, in order to appreciate how networks build value and why greater connectivity was good." She used the presentation of evaluation findings as an opportunity for the board to consider the connection between network strength and impact. Board members "used Reboot to teach themselves about networks," Sacks says.

For the Reboot staff and board, the network maps revealed how members' relationships had evolved over many years. Explains Reboot co-founder

Rachel Levin, "Seeing the big picture in this way helped us think about how to support the hubs and keep the network connected as we continue to grow."

The foundation and Reboot collaborated on producing a summary of the evaluation report that could be posted online, and made an effort to design the report and promote the key findings so that they would be relevant and accessible to others in the field.

Network Health: Urban Sustainability Directors Network Assessment (2009-2013)

The health of a network – the members' satisfaction and sense of shared purpose, the effectiveness of network infrastructure and activities – is an important, ongoing concern, not just something to be examined every three or five years. The Urban Sustainability Directors Network (USDN) process of continuous assessment and improvement offers an example of how to build such an approach into the everyday fabric of a network and how to get substantial value out of the flow of comprehensive assessments. "Having this data," says Darryl Young, director of the Sustainable Cities Program at Summit Foundation, a USDN funder, "makes is easy for me to update my trustees and to reinforce – or contradict – what I already understand about the network from a 'gut check' standpoint."

For early funders of USDN, data about network health provided useful information. The data showed funders and network leaders "what was working out and what was not taking hold as well as you might want, the data spoke for itself." Young says. This made it easier to help other larger funders to decide to invest in the network.

Key Evaluation Questions

- *What are the members' most important value propositions and how well do they think those propositions are being met?*
- *What level of engagement in network activities does each member have? How does the infrastructure enable engagement, and what barriers do members face?*
- *What are members' ideas about how network performance could be improved?*
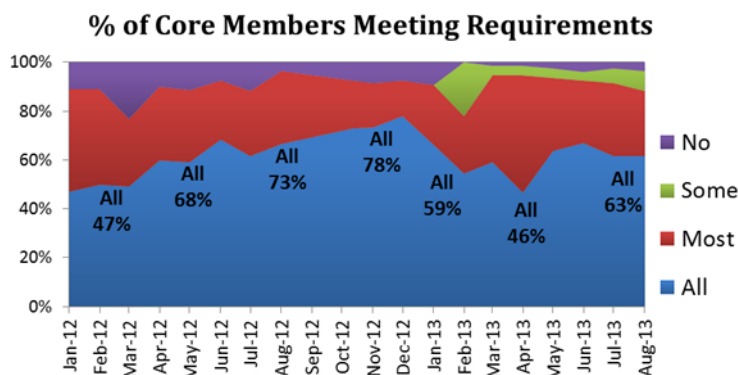
Background

The Urban Sustainability Directors Network is a network of sustainability directors for local governments in North America, established in 2009. The network was formed by a handful of colleagues with similar positions in cities across the U.S. and Canada who wanted to connect and learn from one another. Sustainability directors are local government employees with responsibility for developing, coordinating, and implementing their government's sustainability initiatives. USDN's purpose is to help sustainability directors to exchange information, collaborate to enhance practice, and work together to advance the field of urban sustainability.

The original group's seven core members each invited five peers to join the network and attend its first gathering. It now has about 120 core and associate members from about that many cities and counties, plus 300 city staff who participate in network working groups and its online communications. About 10 foundations have supported USDN through the years, including Bloomberg Philanthropies and the JPB, Kresge, John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur, Summit, and Surdna foundations. It has a planning committee of 10 members that, in consultation with membership, sets network priorities and budgets. In 2014, a full-time staff of four supported the network.

Evaluation Design and Implementation

At the network's beginning, Managing Director Julia Parzen wanted to adopt a process for continuous improvement. "The network is a living organism," she explains. "If you don't take its temperature, how do you know how it's doing?" Working with consultants, she developed an initial assessment framework: connectivity of members plus indicators of network health, such as member engagement and satisfaction with value propositions. Over the years, indicators were added to these broad categories and the category of network impact – on members, their communities, and the field of urban sustainability – was added to the assessment process.

FIGURE 3 Percentage of USDN Members Meeting Network Requirements

The USDN assessment process works on an annual cycle, with data collected throughout the year. Major features of the network's assessment process include:

- Member surveys. USDN conducts two membership surveys annually, as well as targeted surveys of working group members and participants in other activities. Individual survey responses are confidential but not anonymous, which permits staff to follow up with specific members about specific items. Surveys ask members to identify their three most important value propositions from a list of a dozen statements, or to write in additional important value propositions. Then members are asked to rate how well their most important value propositions are being met. Members also are asked to agree or disagree with a set of statements about what the network is accomplishing and how they feel about the network, another way of understanding member satisfaction. Finally, surveys ask about member experiences with specific activities and network infrastructure (e.g., online activities, working groups, annual meeting) to determine what needs to be improved or eliminated.

- *Monitoring of member participation.* The network monitors and documents member participation in a wide range of USDN activities. Monitoring covers whether individual members are participating (e.g., attending working group meetings, initiating projects with other members, engaging in online activities) and whether they are providing "leadership" on network activities (e.g., serving on the planning committee, co-chairing an active working group). This information is augmented with information from member surveys. A participation "score" is compiled for each member and aggregate participation findings are part of an annual report to members. Each planning committee member then takes responsibility for helping a set of members to become more engaged members and leaders. (See Figure 3.)

- *Analyzing USDN's performance data.* Large amounts of network performance data are collected throughout the year, with big "bumps" in information when member surveys are administered. Network staff and consultants analyze the data, with initial findings and conclusions shared with several member-based committees for discussion and revision.

- *Reporting to the membership and funders.* The annual meeting, the only time all network members gather, is the setting for an overview on performance. A "state of the network"

Some evaluations thoroughly address both a network's development and its impacts.

report is presented by the managing director and is part of the information members receive before indicating their priorities for the coming year. The USDN planning committee meets immediately before the annual meeting to discuss the implications of the state-of-the-network findings and the options to share with members for addressing concerns or desires the following year. Funders and network leaders also meet during the annual meeting for a progress report and feedback.

- *Each element of the assessment cycle is linked to mechanisms to use the data to improve the network's performance.* For instance, survey data about members use of and satisfaction with the network's website, which facilitates communications among the widely dispersed members, are studied by a committee of members, staff, and consultants, which determines what to change or add to the website's functionality.

Evaluation Conclusions

The USDN's 2013 "state of the network" report found:

- Large majorities of members reported the network was "delivering very well" on what was most important to them. Ninety percent of members reported the network provided them with "access to trusted information about issues, models, solutions, etc."
- New user groups were starting and others ending. Nearly all members participated in at least one network group or committee, and about half of the members were in at least one leadership position in the network.
- Increasing numbers of members had applied for grants from the network's internal funds and were collaborating with other members on projects.

- A rise in the percentage of members who reported that participating in the network had helped them to "save time," "find a solution to a key challenge," "make a change in policy/program/process," and/or "avoid a problem already faced by peers." Two-thirds of members said participation had helped them find a solution to a key challenge.
- In her presentation at the annual meeting, Parzen noted that the network's growing capacity for collaborative problem solving was leading to a change in the network's focus. "At the outset, USDN was about paying attention to the dynamics of the core and building it so that USDN could be generative. … Today, USDN is a strong network whose members value it highly for fostering exchange and collaboration. Now there is a drive to engage more and exchange more value at the periphery [with organizations and other networks]."

Evaluation Use

At the 2013 annual meeting, members overwhelmingly embraced recommendations that emerged from the assessment process, including:

- Support more opportunities for deep, in-person exchanges among members.
- Devote more resources to collaborative activities among members, including regional collaborations, but maintain the quality of information-sharing activities, which continue to be very important to members.
- Form long-term relationships with other entities, such as the federal government and key nonprofits in the urban-sustainability field – both of which are increasingly important value propositions for many members.
- Continue to stress the network's participation requirements and efforts to help members get and stay involved, because those result in increased member satisfaction.

Network Results: Massachusetts Regional Networks to End Homelessness Pilot Evaluation (2009-2011)

Some evaluations thoroughly address both a network's development and its impacts. The

evaluation of the Regional Networks to End Homelessness pilot in Massachusetts stands out as a comprehensive effort that combined the monitoring of network development for continuous improvement with an examination of the connection between network-based efforts to prevent homelessness and the outcomes achieved.

Key Evaluation Questions

- Are regional, broad-based, cross-sector networks effective vehicles for implementing housing-focused approaches to ending homelessness?
- What capacities do networks need to do this work?
- Can network-based housing focused interventions reduce the need for shelter and drive systems change?

Background

In 2008, the Massachusetts Special Commission to End Homelessness called for a system redesign that would reduce reliance on shelters as a strategy to address homelessness in the state and convert shelter expenditures into resources for housing. The Massachusetts Interagency Council on Housing and Homelessness (ICHH) responded by releasing a Request for Responses (RFR), inviting stakeholders from around the state to test innovative strategies that could inform emerging statewide housing approaches. The RFR identified eligible candidates for the 18-month pilot as regional, broad-based, cross-sector networks that reflected a public-private partnership. Membership could include municipal leaders, philanthropies, business leaders, and advocacy groups in addition to entities that provide services to the homeless. Each regional network was required to create a leadership council with broad-based, multistakeholder participation and systems for network communication and coordination as well as topical working groups.

Ten regional networks participated in the pilot, reaching every community in Massachusetts. Eight networks were funded with state resources and two with support from the Paul and Phyllis Fireman Foundation, which also funded the evaluation. According to foundation Senior Executive Susanne Beaton, the pilot came at a critical time in a statewide conversation about homeless services and systems change.

Contributing to the evaluation gave the foundation a seat at the table to ensure that successful innovations and the collaborations that produced them were thoroughly documented.

Contributing to the evaluation gave the foundation a seat at the table to ensure that successful innovations and the collaborations that produced them were thoroughly documented. The evaluation would not have occurred without the foundation's support. "It's very difficult to fund an evaluation with state resources, because it's expensive," says current ICHH Director Liz Rogers. "You're trying to fund as many services as possible."

Embedding a comprehensive evaluation into the state's pilot, rather than waiting until later to assess the effort, was also a way to signal to the networks that "at the beginning, there would be some kind of judgment" about the pilot's efficacy, says Bob Pulster, who designed the RFR while he served as director of the ICHH.

Evaluation Design and Implementation

The ICHH and the foundation anticipated that networks would experiment with new ways of working and adapt these over time. Given the limited period for the pilot, a bias in the evaluation was toward regular actionable reporting so that the networks could adjust their strategies based on data in real time.

The ICHH, external evaluators, and the regional networks each had an important role to play in the evaluation. The ICHH provided daily counts of the number of families in the Department of Housing and Community Development's Emergency Assistance-funded motels (since all contracted shelter units were full). Networks

Ongoing evaluation reporting to the networks led to changes in network organization. For example, results of the network health survey prompted several regions to adjust their membership or membership responsibilities and improve internal communications.

reported on progress toward shared goals and benchmarks outlined in a regional network work plan. As required by the ICHH, some of these goals were client-centered, such as reducing the need for shelter and placing people in housing. Others focused on network-related outcomes, such as increasing opportunities for broad-based discussion with diverse stakeholders.
The evaluation process involved four major steps:

1. Baseline focus groups with a cross-section of network members. To confirm each network's structure and strategy and the rationale, the evaluator conducted focus group interviews with a cross-section of network members soon after the pilot's launch.

2. Quarterly reports. These reports, submitted by the networks, provided point-in-time information about progress toward network development goals set out in the networks' work plans.

3. Follow-up focus groups with representatives from each network, including the network's coordinator. These groups were conducted at midterm and pilot completion, to capture network members' perspectives on their successes and challenges.

4. Network health survey. Just after the midpoint in the pilot period, the evaluator administered this survey to all regional network members. The survey included questions about resources, infrastructure, and network collaborations that are pertinent to most networks, as well as questions about network capacity and performance related to ICHH pilot goals.

Evaluation Conclusions

The 89-page evaluation report was widely distributed to key state legislators, members of the ICHH, legislative allies, all of the networks' members, shelter providers, and others (Curtis, Bernstein, & Taylor, 2011). "We used it as a planning tool internally to affect additional programming," says the ICHH's Rogers. The report focused on two aspects: the process and outcome of network development and the impact of the networks.

Noting significant differences between the networks' development processes, the evaluation found:

- Collaborative partnerships with a broad range of stakeholders allowed networks to identify and serve clients at the earliest possible stage.
- Network coordinators played a critical role in developing and maintaining regionwide systems for efficient collaboration.
- Regular opportunities for peer exchange accelerated the spread of best practices.
- Ongoing evaluation reporting to the networks led to changes in network organization. For example, results of the network health survey prompted several regions to adjust their membership or membership responsibilities and improve internal communications.

According to Rogers, use of the network health survey was pivotal because it allowed comparison of network members' perceptions of progress with evaluation data from other sources (quarterly reports, information-form coordinators) and confirmed that, in the view of most network members, new ways of working held promise. "Seventy percent of the respondents

said they were working with people they had never worked with before," she notes, "and they were delivering services in a more effective way than they had done before."

The ICHH's final calculation of outcomes for clients served through the pilot showed that the networks' innovations prevented 10,883 families from becoming homeless, housed 376 chronically homeless adults, rehoused 409 homeless individuals, and diverted 839 families from shelter. Monitoring and evaluation of the networks' activities identified the innovations that most contributed to these results, including court-based prevention and tenancy preservation in partnership with private and public landlords and co-location of prevention staff and resources. These and other innovations required new ways of working through the regional network model. The report concluded that "Regional Networks … are an effective platform on which to build innovative and efficient homelessness prevention, shelter diversion, triage, and rehousing services."

The evaluation offered a set of recommendations to the governor's office and the legislature concerning use of the network model, including:

- Regional networks should continue to coordinate resources across multiple client-access points and facilitate broad-based discussions.
- The state should continue to provide technical assistance to regional networks related to data and evaluation. Working with the ICHH, networks should continue to assess effectiveness and network health, use data strategically to improve outcomes, lead regional planning efforts based on data, and make the case for programmatic or policy changes necessary to end homelessness.

Evaluation Use

The evaluation's documentation of the networks' record of success led the United Ways of Massachusetts and the ICHH to immediately commit $1 million to support network coordination in all regions through the following fiscal year. As a direct consequence of pilot results, the state legislature approved HomeBASE,

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a major program that builds on the innovations successfully used in the pilot. Nine of the 10 regional networks continue to function, says Rogers, meeting and running working groups. "In one memorable case," she says, "a network redid its 10-year plan and institutionalized the network." And the legislature and the governor's office continued to consider systems change strategies that will repurpose shelter resources to further investments in housing.

Conclusion: The Potential for Shared Learning

As the three cases illustrate, there is no one right way to approach network evaluation. What gets assessed and how should be driven by the questions the network or its funders want to know. These experiences do, however, offer some overarching lessons to consider as decisions about evaluation investments are made.

- *Evaluation can be a supportive network tactic.* As stated earlier, members participate only as long as the network has value for them, and networks generally are easy for members to leave. This makes the process of evaluation itself a possible organizing and sustainability tactic for a network. It can help to ensure that members' needs are being met, and can help to demonstrate the value for them of participating. Without those things, network membership inevitably will fall off and the network itself eventually may disband prematurely.

- *There is more to this than just network analysis.* The de facto approach to network evaluation,

when it is done at all, generally focuses on one method – a Social Network Analysis (SNA). The software is readily available, the process is well known, and the analysis produces attractive visual outputs. As the Reboot evaluation showed, SNA can be very useful when the evaluation question is about where and how members are connecting. But there are many other questions that this approach will not answer, and many other methods that can be used to evaluate networks. There must be a match between the evaluation's purpose and the method.

- *Networks evolve and their evaluation needs typically evolve with them, although not necessarily at a similar or even pace.* Networks move through stages of development, from launching and growing to performing and achieving, and then on to sustaining, transitioning, or disbanding. While there are no hard and fast rules, in general, evaluations in the early and middle stages of a network's development tend to focus more on assessing network connectivity and health because that information is most relevant to their development at that time. Evaluations focused on results tend to be more useful at a network's later stages, after it has had sufficient time to develop and perform. At the same time, there are also networks for which connectivity, health, and results are all important questions to address simultaneously. While the cases here were selected to each illustrate how to assess one element specifically, evaluations could focus on all three elements at the same time.

- *Even small evaluation investments can make a big difference.* Examples of network evaluations are few and far between in the philanthropic sector compared to other types of social change efforts, and investments in network evaluation in general should increase. But it also is worth noting that sometimes a little evaluation can go a long way, and there are certain phases when a network's evaluation needs may be less intense. As the USDN case demonstrated, useful evaluation is not always expensive or conducted by external consultants. For example, once networks have been shown to be functioning well, it may

be possible to limit evaluation to just a core set of measures that are needed to keep tabs on performance for regular reflection and continuous improvement.

This article is a step toward continuing to build the field of network evaluation and to encourage funders and network practitioners to engage in evaluation and further innovate. The hope is that those working in this field will continue to share what is being tried and learned so the field can use evaluation to support more effective network efforts.

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