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EVALUATION BRIEF

Evaluating Inter-Organizational Collaborations

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Introduction

Inter-organizational collaborations (IOCs) are defined as relationships between organizations that leverage differences between participants to balance stakeholder concerns and achieve common goals (Hardy, Lawrence, & Grant, 2005). IOCs are becoming increasingly prevalent among government and non-profit entities because they have the potential to effectively address complex issues that require a comprehensive approach and because more funders such as government agencies and foundations are requiring organizational cooperation and collaboration (Faems, van Looy, & Debackere, 2004). IOCs are also appealing because they are seen as a way to improve services and/or produce cost savings by sharing resources and improving efficiency (Bardach, 1998).

The term “inter-organizational collaboration” can encompass a wide variety of organizational relationships, from very informal to structured and formal. These collaborations can involve as few as two organizations or a large number of organizations as is prevalent in community-wide collaborations. However, all IOCs have in common the voluntary and bounded pursuit of a shared goal without a transfer of ownership or take-over of one organization by another (Holland, 2010). The range of IOCs relationships—from least formal to most formal—can be summarized as follows:

- **Networking:** Informal interactions and mutual support with no specific shared goals.
- **Cooperation:** Semi-formal communication and information sharing without any defined mission.
- **Collaboration and Partnership:** Formal inter-organizational links and voluntarily shared resources to address a specific shared concern.
- **Outsourcing:** Contractual relationship in which one organization agrees to have another carry out specified functions or tasks.
- **Joint Venture:** Contractual relationship to address mutually shared goals. Involves extensive planning, sustained communication, and designated resources provided by each organization. Each organization still remains independent.

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Overview of IOC Evaluations

A rigorous and systematic evaluation presents opportunities for understanding the dynamics and impact of an IOC and should be regarded as an integral part of any collaborative initiative. Collaborations are strengthened when members receive regular and relevant information about the impact of their efforts, which in turn allows them to assess their effectiveness and adjust their activities accordingly (National TA and Evaluation Center, 2008). Measuring the impact of the collaboration and communicating results to IOC stakeholders and the general public strengthens the collaboration's credibility and contributes to long-term sustainability (United Way of Canada, 2007). Despite the prevalence of IOCs in the social service sector and the significant research that has been done on the topic (Alter & Hage, 1993; Baker & Faulkner, 2002; Borgatti & Foster, 2003; Brass, Galaskiewicz, Greve & Tsai, 2004; Oliver & Ebers, 1998), disagreement persists over what IOCs have accomplished, how to measure their impact, and whether observed outcomes can be attributed to IOCs.

Fundamental Research Questions

In evaluating IOCs most people are interested in answering two basic questions: (1) How well is the collaboration working; and (2) What have been the effects of the collaboration? The first question corresponds to the "process" component of an evaluation while the second question involves the "outcome" component of an evaluation. Given that the primary purpose of an IOC is often to change *how* services are delivered, initial evaluation efforts often focus on the first question.

How well is the IOC working? When examining the internal dynamics and functioning of an IOC evaluators typically seek to answer several related questions:

- Is there clarity and consensus regarding the goals and objectives of the IOC?
- Is the IOC being implemented as planned, i.e., are members fulfilling their obligations and are activities being implemented as agreed?
- How much collaboration is occurring, i.e., how frequent and intense is communication among IOC members?
- What barriers to implementation have been encountered and how have they been addressed?
- What changes have been made to the IOC's implementation plan? Why were these changes made?
- What effects has the collaboration had on the activities and functioning of participating organizations?
- How satisfied are IOC participants with the IOC and how it is being carried out?
- To what degree is power and authority shared among IOC members?

What have been the effects of the collaboration? When examining the impact of an IOC, several domains of outputs and outcomes are typically of interest:

- **Changes in member organizations:** Has participation in the IOC impacted the policies, efficiency, culture, or communication styles of participating organizations?

- **Changes in service availability, utilization, and quality:** Are more services available, are they utilized more (or less) frequently, and are they less redundant across organizations? Has participation in the IOC improved the timeliness, coordination, appropriateness, and overall quality of services provided to the target population?
- **Participant outcomes:** How have the lives of people served by the IOC been changed? Can these changes be attributed to the IOC's efforts or are other factors also at work?
- **Community outcomes:** How has the larger community beyond those targeted directly changed as a result of the IOC's efforts?
- **Community perceptions:** How has the IOC changed the perceptions of the community, the general public, funders, or other decision makers regarding the IOC and its collaborating organizations?

Factors to Consider When Designing an IOC Evaluation

Within the framework of the primary research questions noted above, the appropriate design for an IOC evaluation may vary considerably. The evaluation approach that is eventually selected depends on several organizational and contextual factors described below.

Availability of Comparison Data: Evaluation professionals often regard experimental designs involving random assignment as the “gold standard” for assessing the ultimate impact of a human service intervention. However, in evaluating IOCs experimental designs are rarely appropriate or feasible, and even quasi-experimental designs involving a comparison group can be problematic since it is often difficult to identify a community that so closely resembles the community in which the IOC operates to provide a valid point of comparison. Realistically, evaluations of IOC efforts can most readily be accomplished using longitudinal or “time-series” designs in which data collected from organizations, communities, or program participants are compared over time at regular intervals.

Community Context: Every community is different, and as such each IOC will be designed to address different community issues. Understanding and documenting the political climate, the level of need among community members, available resources, and other current and historical change efforts can aid evaluators in understanding the context in which an IOC operates as well as other factors that may influence outcomes of interest. Relevant questions in this regard include:

- What is the history of collaboration in the community (including formal contractual relationships among potential IOC members)?
- What demographic and economic factors in the community may affect the IOC?
- What principal community leaders, funders, politicians, and other stakeholders may exert external or internal influence on the IOC?
- What are the values of the community (e.g., social and cultural norms, the prevailing political climate) that may affect collaborative efforts?

Ideally these contextual factors should be assessed prior to starting an IOC to ensure that appropriate human and fiscal resources are allocated and that potential barriers to the IOC are understood and addressed.

Membership Characteristics: The specific individuals and organizations involved in the IOC will vary depending on the nature of the collaboration. Groups may struggle to define who qualifies as being “involved” in the IOC and whether the parameters of membership should be formal and rigid or informal and fluid. Identifying and engaging potential IOC members are important steps in establishing the collaboration, and this process should be repeated periodically as the collaboration evolves. Businesspeople, government officials, funders, donors, community residents, politicians, and service providers may all be potential participants in IOC efforts.

Level of Commitment: Member organizations may vary significantly in the time, energy, and other resources they are willing or able to invest in an IOC. Problems can also occur when IOC members view a collaborative initiative as duplicating other efforts in the community. Such challenges are to be expected and evaluators should carefully document them so that IOC members can reflect on and address them more effectively. Evaluators can further assist by describing the uniqueness of the IOC effort and by helping members articulate what the IOC seeks to achieve. Likewise, IOC members must be committed to the evaluation if accurate, meaningful, and useful findings are to result. The evaluator must clarify how participation in the evaluation can benefit IOC members and by the same token the evaluator must listen to key IOC stakeholders’ recommendations for making the evaluation practical and useful. Ideally, each agency should assign a point person who will be involved in the evaluation effort and communicate evaluation issues to their organization.

Breadth of IOC Efforts: A multitude of outside organizations, government agencies, and individuals may influence the goals and target population of an IOC. The harder an IOC works to involve all relevant stakeholders, the less likely its efforts will be duplicative of existing efforts and the more likely its efforts will produce change. However, the more inclusive or larger the IOC becomes the more complex and burdensome its coordination and management will be. Likewise, as an IOC grows its evaluation must also become more sophisticated and complex. As such it is imperative that the evaluation ask the right questions of the right stakeholders without placing undue data collection burdens or expectations on any one IOC member. Multiple data sources should be used rather than attempting to design a lengthy “one size fits all” approach to information collection for all IOC stakeholders.

Developmental Stage of the IOC: Because collaborations take time to mature and reach their maximum potential, before beginning an evaluation effort it is important to consider the current developmental stage of the IOC (e.g., networking, cooperation, joint venture), the stability of inter-organizational relationships, and the stability of key leaders and staff in participating organizations. Since no IOC can be expected to produce immediate or dramatic community-level impacts an evaluation should focus primarily on process and implementation issues during the IOC’s early stages. Although data on baseline measures of intended long-term outcomes may be collected early on, the evaluator and IOC members must remember that significant distal outcomes often require years to manifest themselves and that it may nonetheless prove difficult to attribute observed changes directly to the activities of the IOC.

Developmental and Formative Indicators of IOC Efforts

A myriad of formative or “process” measures may be used to examine the functioning of an IOC and to understand how it has developed over time. The IOC’s members and evaluators

should take time to consider which indicators are most appropriate for the type of IOC they are creating, the kinds of changes each organization is expected to implement internally, and how these efforts are expected to sustain themselves. Evaluators may wish to explore some of the general categories of developmental or formative indicators described below.

Planning Process: The development of an IOC's shared vision, goals, and principles is a fundamental step in creating a successful collaboration. Evaluators should document this process as the contextual backdrop against which to evaluate the success of the IOC's implementation and outcomes. This information will provide the basis for creating an action plan and evaluation framework for the collaboration's work and will remind stakeholders of the "big picture" when they are mired in the minutiae of implementing the IOC.

Decision-Making and Leadership: To work together effectively individuals and organizations need a clear sense of their respective roles and responsibilities, as well as agreement on how decisions will be made and implemented. Flexibility and the ability to compromise are important attributes of successful IOCs as they must often find innovative and creative approaches to complex issues. Similarly, effective leadership is critical to the success of an IOC. Documenting how and by whom decisions are made in an IOC can provide valuable information for improving the collaborative process and understanding how change occurs.

Interpersonal Trust: Collaborations are strengthened when members build personal working relationships with one another and learn about the priorities and constraints of their organizational partners. Building trust among participants takes time and effort, as does fostering a healthy climate for collaboration. Assessing the level of trust and development of personal relationships among IOC partners can provide insights into the facilitators of and barriers to successful IOC implementation.

Structural Network Changes: In larger community collaborations one of the most concrete and typical ways of understanding the impact of an IOC involves a detailed examination of the linkages that develop over time among IOC members. Such examinations are often referred to as a "network analysis", which involves repeated measurements of the number of linkages that exist among IOC members and the nature of exchanges between these members. In successful IOC efforts it is expected that the total number of network connections, the frequency of connections among members, and the richness of these relationships will grow over time.

Implementation over Time: The implementation of coordinated activities and agreed-upon organizational changes tends to be the hardest part of an IOC's work. It is important to take on the right amount of work at the right pace and to create opportunities for "small victories" that give the group energy and strengthen commitment to the effort. Documenting these activities can help IOC members identify areas of progress and make adaptations as needed. It should be expected that members' participation in the IOC will naturally ebb and flow over time; however, the IOC will likely fail if partners do not fulfill their fundamental roles and commitments under the initiative. By asking organizational representatives to carefully document what they have done to fulfill these responsibilities, the evaluator can assess both the level of commitment to the IOC as well as the likelihood that it will succeed.

Resource Allocation: Community organizations often have a history of competing for resources. Collaboration requires that participating organizations contribute resources and work together to leverage additional resources. Documenting the utilization of resources and the IOC's ability to generate and share new resources can shed light on the efficiency and effectiveness of the IOC's efforts.

Communication: Open and frequent communication (both formal and informal) is a key factor influencing the success of collaborations. Process evaluations should document communication among IOC members and analyze how communication changes over time.

Branding and Messaging: As an IOC becomes more coordinated and effective its members must consider how to communicate about the partnership with external audiences, including potential clients and funding sources. The careful documentation of issues related to messaging and branding can assist members with long-term decisions regarding the IOC, particularly in situations in which power and responsibilities are not shared equally among IOC partners. Evaluators may wish to assess the clarity or shared perception of the brand among IOC members and how this branding builds group cohesiveness and a sense of shared identity.

Sustainability Efforts: Ensuring sustainability is not just a matter of resource development; the involvement and commitment of stakeholders and community champions, together with planning for changes in the collaboration's leadership and members, also contributes to long-term sustainability. Evaluation efforts can aid this process by helping IOC members and funders understand the impact of factors in the external environment, such as funding sources and changes in local laws and policies, so that the IOC can adapt accordingly.

Measuring IOC Outcomes

As with a process evaluation researchers and IOC members are presented with far more potential indicators of impact (or outcomes) than are possible or useful to track and measure. At the same time, in assessing the impact of an IOC evaluators should focus not only on the intended goals of the collaboration but also on how the partnership has changed the member organizations themselves as well as the larger community. General research questions regarding the impact of an IOC that may be incorporated into the evaluation process are summarized below.

How have the member organizations changed? Among the most basic and least appreciated impacts of IOC efforts are the changes that take place within member organizations as a result of their participation in an IOC. Such changes are often implicit goals of such collaborations as member organizations attempt to coordinate and align their policies and practices and the ways in which they interact with the IOC's target population. At a minimum evaluators should consider examining outcomes in the following areas:

- **Organizational structure, governance, policies, and procedures:** How have members of the IOC changed their policies and procedures to facilitate the goals of the IOC and align themselves better with partner organizations?
- **Changes in organizational climate or culture:** How has the climate or culture of member organizations changed? For example, do organizational leaders seek out the

advice and input of their employees? Are they more involved or invested in the community? Are they more receptive to inter-organizational collaboration?

- **Inter-organizational communication:** While also identified as a process measure, increased and improved communication between partner organizations is a potentially important long-term outcome of an IOC in its own right, particularly with respect to communication about families or communities that are jointly served by multiple organizations.
- **Redundancy and efficiency:** Has the collaborative process changed the number, scope, or frequency of services that are provided by each member organization? Have these changes occurred as a result of greater inter-agency service coordination? Are the individual organizations more efficient in providing services?

How have the activities or services provided across the entire IOC network changed? Not only are changes in individual member organizations of interest, changes in services or activities across the entire IOC member network are also important to understand and document. These kinds of changes are often what funders and policymakers are most interested in and that IOC efforts are typically designed to facilitate. Typical outcomes of interest in this regard include:

- **Comprehensiveness of services:** Are services or activities provided by the IOC members more comprehensive than before? Are there fewer gaps in needed services?
- **Service redundancy or duplication:** Has the total set of services provided by the provider network changed? Are these services less duplicative?
- **Numbers of clients served:** Have changes in the system resulted in greater capacity to serve more or a greater diversity of people?
- **Service accessibility:** With increased collaboration, are services more available and easier to access and participate in than before the IOC? Conversely, has service specialization among IOC members made it more difficult for some populations to access needed services?
- **Service innovation:** Has the collaborative effort spurred innovation in activities or services? Have new or improved activities been developed? Have these innovations been disseminated to or impacted the IOC's field of practice?
- **Efficiencies/cost reductions:** Have increased efficiencies resulted in overall cost savings or reduced costs per client?

How have target populations changed? Perhaps the most important goal of a social service endeavor is the realization of positive changes in the lives and circumstances of its intended target population. Unfortunately, this is also the most difficult outcome to reliably and convincingly demonstrate because there will always be environmental, personal, and other contextual factors that have greater influence on people's lives than even the most comprehensive and intensive services. As noted earlier the diffuse and systemic nature of many IOC initiatives renders the direct attribution of observed changes in individuals to IOC activities very difficult. With these caveats in mind, the examination of participant-level outcomes typically involves looking for evidence of changes in the following areas:

- **Reduced negative service system interactions:** Have members of the target population (or of the broader public) had less negative service system interactions (such as referrals to Child Protective Services) than before the IOC?

- **Changes in service utilization:** Has the target population changed the way in which it utilizes services? Are they using more or fewer services? If more, are these services beneficial and appropriate? Are they using expensive emergency services less often?
- **Changes in knowledge and skills:** How have the knowledge and skills of the target population changed as a result of their involvement in IOC activities? If the IOC is designed to help the target population by teaching new skills or by providing specific knowledge it did not previously possess, assessing the attainment and retention of such knowledge can serve as a valuable demonstration of IOC impact.
- **Changes in behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs:** How have the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of the target population changed as a result of participation in IOC services or activities?
- **Improved life and well-being outcomes:** Have key indicators of quality of life and well-being (e.g., employment, educational attainment, childhood immunizations) changed for the target group since the beginning of the IOC effort?

How has the larger community changed? Not only are IOCs affected by the context and communities in which they operate, these communities themselves often change as a result of inter-agency collaboration. In some cases such broader environmental change is the primary goal of an IOC, as in the case of an IOC designed to change child welfare laws or policies at the state or local level. Dimensions of environmental or systemic impacts that may be examined as part of an IOC evaluation include:

- **Public perceptions of IOC organizations:** Have there been changes in how others view the IOC members and their efforts, including perceptions of management, efficiency, transparency, and impact on the community?
- **Public perceptions of the issues:** Have there been changes in how the community at large thinks about the issues addressed by the IOC? Is there greater awareness of the problems, a change in opinion about the problems, or increased public pressure to deal with them?
- **Changes in state or local governments:** Have local or state laws, rules, regulations, policies, or procedures changed during the period in which the IOC has been operating, and can such changes be attributed to the IOC effort?
- **Changes in non-IOC organizations:** Have changes in the network of IOC activities or services encouraged or required changes among other organizations outside of the IOC network?
- **Social and environmental factors:** It may also be helpful to assess changes in broader social or community indicators that are not the immediate targets of IOC-sponsored services. For example, broader social and economic conditions such as unemployment and poverty may increase a community's need for services despite an IOC's efforts to increase economic self-sufficiency. Changes in these environmental factors should be tracked and documented to the fullest extent possible to ensure that observed changes in the community are analyzed in their proper context or to assess whether the IOC is associated with broader unintended effects.

Methods for Conducting IOC Evaluations

As with any evaluation effort, evaluations of IOCs may involve a diversity of data collection methods and data sources to track key process and outcome measures. These methods vary in

terms of the depth and quality of information that can be obtained from them, as well as in terms of the resources and expertise required to implement them. Data collection methods and sources that may be useful for evaluating IOCs are reviewed briefly below.

Existing Community/Population Data Sources: An IOC evaluator may find that a significant amount of community-level data already exists that are relevant to the outcomes of interest. For example, rates of reported child abuse, unemployment rates, and birth statistics are all available from government reporting sources. In addition, community organizations and foundations may already conduct regular data collection activities within the target population of interest. These extant information resources provide a low-cost and non-invasive way of collecting valuable data about the potential long-term impact of IOC efforts.

Key Informant Interviews: One of the most straightforward ways to collect data regarding organizational changes and community impacts is to directly ask key people involved in the IOC's implementation. Using key informant interviews, evaluators can systematically collect data by talking directly to agency leaders, government officials, and community leaders. Such interviews can collect a wide variety of information, including details regarding the activities of IOC member organizations, changes that member agencies have made to services and operations, and the perceived effectiveness of the IOC.

Facilitated Discussions/Focus Groups: In addition to collecting data one-on-one with key informants, information can also be collected in facilitated group settings. In many cases this can be done efficiently by collecting data from IOC members during regular advisory group or committee meetings. In some circumstances a discussion or focus group involving members of the IOC's target population or representatives from organizations not directly involved in the IOC's implementation may be used to collect in-depth information on issues such as service accessibility or the perceived value of the IOC's efforts.

Surveys: Written surveys and standardized instruments serve as one of the most common methods for collecting quantitative data. Surveys can be administered separately by IOC members, or in coordination with the entire IOC network, to collect data directly from agency representatives, service participants, or other stakeholders affected by the IOC's efforts.

IOC Documents and Other Written Materials: Any evaluation of IOC efforts should make use of the significant amount of written material that will likely be produced as part of the collaborative process, such as meeting minutes, memoranda of agreement, work plans, committee reports, and similar materials. These materials provide a basis for documenting the collaborative process and for understanding the context in which decisions were made. Similarly, information resources from individual IOC members, such as annual reports, can provide valuable information and should also be utilized. To study the potential effects of an IOC at the level of individual service recipients, detailed case record reviews can provide insights into changes in knowledge, skills, behaviors, or circumstances that may have occurred as a direct or indirect result of IOC activities.

Structured Observations: The direct observation of IOC activities, programs, and services can provide immediate insights into the personal and organizational dynamics underlying a collaborative initiative and its possible impacts on institutions and people in the target community. For example, interactions among IOC members during meetings and community

events, as well as interactions between service recipients and service providers within the IOC network, can serve as valuable subjects of carefully structured observational protocols.

Final Considerations and Additional Resources

Evaluations of IOCs may vary in their sophistication and in the effort required to implement them, but they are almost always complex undertakings that require high levels of cooperation among IOC members. When evaluating complex systems embedded in real and evolving communities it can be difficult to assess the extent to which the outcomes and performance of a single organization are attributable to its involvement in an IOC. Furthermore, it can be difficult to determine the extent to which the outcomes of an IOC's efforts are attributable to IOC activities themselves or to other factors.

For these reasons it is essential to implement the most rigorous evaluation possible and to establish a reliable process for sharing information and coordinating data collection activities among IOC members. If an evaluation demonstrates that an IOC has been poorly implemented, any observed changes in the larger community are probably not the result of the IOC. Conversely, if a well-designed evaluation detects strong evidence of successful IOC implementation it is reasonable to assume that observed positive changes were due at least in part to the IOC's efforts. The inevitable complexity of any collaborative initiative involving multiple organizations speaks to the importance of involving qualified evaluation professionals from the very beginning of the IOC planning process to ensure that the implementation and outcomes of the IOC are captured and articulated as accurately and comprehensively as possible. Readers are encouraged to consult the following resources for additional information relevant to planning and conducting IOC evaluations:

- 1) [Organizational/Partnership Functioning and Change Readiness - 24 Assessment Tools](#) (National Child Welfare Workforce Institute, 2011): A compilation of organizational collaboration and partnership assessment tools compiled by the National Child Welfare Workforce Institute. Available online at: www.ncwwi.org/docs/Organizational__Partnership_Assessment_Tools_March_2011.pdf.
- 2) [Building Dynamic Groups: A Collaboration Checklist](#) (Ohio State University Extension, 2009): A self-evaluation tool that examines 13 factors that can influence collaborative processes within organizations. The information collected using this tool provides insights into an IOC's strengths and challenges as it works to achieve common goals. Available online at: http://hostedweb.cfaes.ohio-state.edu/bdg/pdf_docs/b/B02.pdf.
- 3) [Collaboration Assessment Guide and Tool](#) (United Way of Canada - Centraide Canada, 2007): Developed for community collaborations associated with United Way of Canada, this guide offers resources to help organizations assess the effectiveness of their internal structures and processes. Available online at: <http://www2.unitedway.ca/uwcanada/content.aspx?id=105&langtype=1033>.
- 4) [Community Research Collaboration Partnership Assessment Tools](#) (University of California, n.d.): A compilation of articles and partnership assessment tools assembled by the California Breast Cancer Research Program (CBCRP). Available online at: www.cbcrp.org/community/CRCPartnershipAssessmentTools.pdf.

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