THE IMPORTANCE OF INTANGIBLE OUTCOMES

Charlie French and Paul Lachapelle

Evaluating outcomes resulting from community visioning programs has beleaguered community practitioners for decades (Walzer, 1996). The challenge is due partly to the fact that not all outcomes are readily measurable. In particular, intangible outcomes—outcomes that can be neither seen nor touched—are difficult to assess. Intangible outcomes include enhanced leadership skills, increased social capital, sense of empowerment, and improved communication (French & Gagne, 2010). In contrast, tangible outcomes such as the generation of new revenue, construction of a community center, or conservation of naturally significant lands are generally more conducive to being measured and tracked over time.

Because intangible outcomes are often described by scholars and community practitioners as “soft,” meaning they are difficult to measure or quantify, more attention and focus is often paid to the tangible outcomes. Yet, according to a recent study examining the range of outcomes achieved by 45 communities that underwent community visioning in New Hampshire cities and towns between 1996 and 2006, participants’ notion of “success” is not always associated with tangible or directly measurable outcomes, such as the development of new roads, bridges, and buildings or the creation of new jobs (French & Gagne, 2010). Rather, the building of social networks and new communication channels—and resulting reciprocity and increased political and social capital by using newsletters, town websites, and community celebrations, for example—were the most important outcomes for participants.

Given that intangible outcomes are as important, if not more important, to some community visioning participants as tangible outcomes, this chapter explores the types of outcomes resulting from community visioning, identifies what outcomes matter most to participants over the long term, and demonstrates how diverse outcomes can be measured and tracked over both the short- and long-term. The hope is that this discussion will provide insight into how best to evaluate diverse outcomes, both tangible and intangible.
Traditional Measurements of Community Visioning Outcomes

Although the book *Community Strategic Visioning Programs* addresses evaluation of outcomes in a general sense, there is a dearth of scholarly research that examines evaluation of outcomes from community visioning programs, or the measurement indices and methods used (Walzer, 1996). The lack of literature is partly due to the fact that community visioning, as an organic community process, is a relatively recent phenomenon (Plein et al., 1998). Equally significant, there are diverse notions of what outcomes mean in the context of community visioning and participatory planning (Aspen Institute, 1996; Ames, 1993).

According to Green et al. (2000), outcomes are long-term measures of change in peoples’ quality of life or their community, such as decreased levels of poverty or greater acceptance of leadership roles. Outputs, on the other hand, refer to shorter-term activities that are commonly quantitatively presented, such as the number of workshops held (NCL, 1996). Yet, because the majority of visioning programs are required to document results in the same fiscal year that the visioning process occurred, program staff tend to focus on documenting short-term outputs rather than long-term outcomes (French & Fonseca, 2008).

One consequence of the focus on short-term outputs is that evaluation instruments often fail to capture intangible or indirect outcomes one to five years after the visioning process, outcomes such as enhanced leadership capacity that can result from community participants taking ownership of the visioning process. The challenge to evaluating outcomes such as increased leadership capacity, reflected in new individuals taking on leadership roles in the community, is that such outcomes may not be readily apparent for months or years (French & Gagne, 2010). Consequently, rather than evaluating longer-term outcomes, visioning programs often resort to measuring short-term outputs, such as the number of leadership workshops conducted or the number of new groups formed.

Another factor complicating measurement of outcomes is that success is defined in many different ways, making it difficult to quantify or measure with traditional survey instruments. As Beierle (2002) notes, success has many connotations when it comes to public participation, depending upon one’s perspective. He suggests that success in public participation includes incorporating public values into decisions, improving substantive quality of decisions, resolving conflict among competing interests, building trust in institutions, and educating and informing the public. Chess and Parchell (1999) suggest that individuals’ sense of satisfaction with outcomes ultimately determines success, and not necessarily what the program evaluator defines as success. At the other end of the spectrum, Weinberg (1999) defines the success of community visioning based on more visible or tangible outcomes, such as job creation and infrastructure development.

The key point is that success is defined in many ways by different individuals. Thus, when determining what outcomes to measure, implementers of visioning programs must have a sense of the various ways that participants define success over the long term and not just focus on the immediate products generated from the process. With this caveat in mind, the following discussion delineates various intangible and tangible outcomes resulting from community visioning.

Delineating Tangible vs. Intangible Outcomes using the Community Capitals Framework

The full range of outcomes that should be considered when evaluating community visioning “success” includes changes in human behavior, social capacity, economic impact, physical conditions, and people’s knowledge (Emery & Flora, 2006). Ultimately, the short-term outcomes from community development programs and activities, like visioning, can guide and promote increased responsiveness to critical and emerging issues, opportunities, or crises over the long-term. In this regard, the visioning process promotes the “spiraling up” of assets across the community capitals described by Emery and Flora (2006), as summarized below.

- **Social capital:** manifest in the connections between people and organizations that influence the level of inter- and intra-group trust and ultimately provide the social glue that makes things happen in communities.
- **Cultural capital:** how people think and know the world around them based on their heritage, experiences, age, gender, etc.
- **Human capital:** the skills, abilities, and interests of people such as leadership, organizational, technical, interpersonal, and creative— that strengthen communities, promote positive action by individuals and groups, and enable them to access resources.
- **Political capital:** the ability of individuals and groups to access or participate in the community power structure and influence decisions.
- **Financial capital:** financial resources that enable communities to build capacity, generate new wealth, foster business ventures, and support civic engagement and social entrepreneurship.
- **Built capital:** communities' physical infrastructure, which includes roads, bridges, parks, telecommunication networks, water and sewer systems, and buildings.
- **Natural capital:** the natural attributes associated with a particular geography, including topography, weather, natural resources, and scenic amenities. Natural capital has historically served as a basis for generating built and financial capital.

According to Emery and Flora’s (2006) premise for the spiraling up of assets, investment by a community in intangible capitals—such as social capital, cultural capital, human capital, and political capital—ultimately provides a foundation for increasing the community’s assets in the tangible capitals, namely financial, built, and natural capital. Just as spiraling up can result in social capital bringing new ideas and resources into a community, members can also benefit from increased connections or interactions with others making similar capital investments.

While grouping community capitals and outcomes into two categories—tangible and intangible—may seem like an oversimplification, it provides a helpful framework
Overview of “Community Profiles” Visioning in New Hampshire

During the late 1980s, the loss of manufacturing, rapid residential development, and industrial decline motivated former New Hampshire Governor Judd Gregg to establish “The Governor’s Commission on New Hampshire in the 21st Century” to seed the development of a series of initiatives that would help New Hampshire communities protect and promote their unique and special characteristics. One initiative that emerged from the Commission was the “Granite State Civic Profile,” modeled after a visioning program developed by the National Civic League (French & Fonseca, 2008).

In 1990, the Commission ceded coordination of the program to University of New Hampshire (UNH) Cooperative Extension. With help from the National Civic League, the Upper Valley League of Women Voters, the University of Vermont Extension, and Upper Valley 2001 and Beyond, the Civic Profile was forged into what is now called the Community Profile. The overall goal of the program was to help communities better understand current trends affecting their region, identify future planning priorities, and implement a series of short- and long-term action plans. Since 1990, UNH Cooperative Extension has conducted 70 Profiles across the state (though only those conducted between 1996 and 2006 are addressed in this chapter).

Each year UNH Cooperative Extension invites New Hampshire communities to apply to the program and two to four communities are selected to receive support in planning and implementing the Community Profile program. The application process has three main criteria: (1) applicant communities must have a committee to manage the process; (2) the Select Board or City Council must endorse the application; and (3) the committee must complete a six-section community capacity survey to establish a baseline regarding community resources, infrastructure, and leadership capacity.

The capacity survey is a benchmarking tool pre- and post-Community Profile, as well as a way for UNH Cooperative Extension to assess communities’ preparedness. In cases where applicants have clear deficiencies in capacity, Cooperative Extension provides leadership and other training to build the steering committees’ capacity to plan, organize and sustain a Community Profile before accepting them into the program.

The Community Profile process typically begins by forming a core group of community leaders interested in creating a vision for the community’s future. This core group identifies diverse community members to serve on a steering committee charged with organizing and implementing a two-day Community Profile forum. The process of planning and organizing the forum usually takes from four to six months, depending on the size of the steering committee and the buy-in from residents and local officials. Responsibilities of the steering committee include marketing, fund raising, coordinating with local organizations, selecting a facility for the forum, identifying local facilitators, and arranging for meals at the forum.

The Community Profile forum begins with a Friday evening potluck dinner, followed by large- and small-group discussions. Anywhere from 50 to 250 residents attend the forum, representing a broad cross-section of the community. Extension facilitators lead the large group discussion and the breakout group discussions on Friday evening. However, on the second day of the Community Profile forum, Extension facilitators step back and let community members facilitate the breakout discussions. The objective is to build the capacity of community members to facilitate future dialogue in the community and build ownership over both the process and the outcomes.

By the end of the forum, the breakout discussion groups identify from four to six projects to move the community vision forward. Community-based action committees coalesce around and are charged with managing each project. After the event the committees usually meet monthly to draft action plans in line with the
community’s vision articulated at the forum. UNH Cooperative Extension helps the action committees formulate attainable action steps, access resources, and engage volunteers throughout the process. Extension also compiles the results of large- and small-group sessions into a final report provided to the community.

In terms of follow-up, Extension reconvenes community residents three to six months after the Community Profile event for a follow-up forum to help the action committees coordinate their activities, report on their progress, and identify resource needs. Extension provides support to communities for one to two years subsequent to the forum plus the six months of capacity building prior to the forum.

More than half of the communities selected to receive Extension’s assistance with Community Profiles were motivated to pursue the process to address a community crisis, such as loss of an industry, a natural disaster, or major disagreements among community residents and municipal officials. Approximately one-third of selected communities are “proactive” in the sense that they applied for assistance to identify and preserve assets that the community values and/or to improve the local quality of life. The remainder applied because of other motivations or factors.

To date, a broad geographic and demographic spectrum of towns have participated in the program, ranging from rural to urban, from those lacking in financial capital to those that are wealthy, and from hamlets with 50 permanent residents to medium-sized cities with populations of 100,000. The diversity of communities has led to a broad selection of outcomes across these communities, making New Hampshire an ideal case study.

Measuring Outcomes from Community Profiles

To provide a sense of how outcomes from Community Profiles are captured across diverse communities, the following are the program’s main evaluation components and their functions. The evaluation components include:

- baseline data collected from community applicants to the program;
- summary report for each community that underwent the process;
- participant evaluations of the visioning process;
- an e-mail survey of 340 individuals that participated in the process from 2001 to 2006; and
- follow-up interviews with steering committee and action committee.

Baseline Data

Prior to being accepted into the Community Profile program, applicants must complete an extensive application form. The application includes a community capacity assessment a six-section survey to establish a baseline of the community’s resources, infrastructure, and leadership capacity. The survey is essentially an inventory of the assets and resources in each of the following categories: economic opportunity, health and well-being, sustainable environment, cultural and historic, social networks/civic engagement, and community services and infrastructure. Multiple choice questions query the respondent about the level of specific assets and resources in each category. The tool is designed to measure relative change over time and identify potential areas of improvement prior to conducting a Community Profile more than to rate a community’s capacity.

While no community has been rejected based on deficiencies in community capacity, Extension has recommended that specific communities delay planning a Community Profile forum until they have the organizational capacity to manage the process. In fact, the Community Capacity Assessment revealed that approximately one-quarter of communities lack leaders to drive the Community Profiles process from the planning stage through the implementation stage. Cooperative Extension helps these communities recruit and develop new leaders and provides training opportunities prior to formally accepting the community into the program. Approximately half of the communities initially held back ultimately conduct a Community Profile.

Lastly, and perhaps most important, the capacity assessment is a benchmarking tool to enable communities and program implementers to compare capacity in a variety of functions pre- and post-Community Profile. However, given that the capacity assessment is a new addition to the application process, there is not yet sufficient post-process data to compare pre- and post-process results to assess significant changes in capacity. The hope is that this tool will ultimately provide insight into areas in which the community has improved its capacity subsequent to the Community Profile.

Summary Report

A summary report is compiled for each community that underwent the process. The report keeps a record of discussions at each Community Profile, which are recorded by trained facilitators and recorders from the community, including consensus on key issues, goals, objectives, strategies and proposed actions. Ultimately, the report becomes an action plan to follow and becomes a baseline by which to benchmark progress. It also provides Extension with a baseline to gauge progress on key objectives, as well as compare common themes across communities.

To determine if common themes predominate across communities, objectives outlined in each Community Profile report were analyzed using NVIVO, a qualitative analysis software package, and a series of codes were created to categorize objectives into common themes. Ten distinct codes, or themes, emerged with respect to objectives. Figure 6.1 below summarizes the frequency that each of the 10 codes emerged in the 45 communities.

The most common theme that emerged was “improving communications in the community.” Between 1996 and 2006, 27 action committees formed with a primary objective to improve communications, which includes creating new opportunities for residents to dialogue, developing or improving media outlets for sharing of community information, cultivating stronger social networks, and fostering transparency.
opportunities
published
rhe
mation
th e 1dea for a town ne ws lette r to i nfo m1 residents about local even t s and activities,
begining
oppo rtuniti es for neighbors to connect, sh a r e news, and stay c urr e nt o n local issues
and subsequent intangible outco m e for one rur a l New H ampshire t own. L ack of
had
diverse mix of tangible and intangible themes regarding
next most co mmon theme involved e nh ancing pu bli c infrastructures, such
portation, utilities, and public se rvi ces (ta n gible o utcome s).

FIG URE 102

Community

Although the newsletter p e r se represented a tangible ou tput, the ultimate
resulted from the sp i raling up of human capital­
Incidentally, these outcomes, which resulted in participants' expectations being
met, all pertain to the creation of intangible capitals, namely social capital through
stronger community networks and political capital through participants feeling
empowered to act and influence community decisions.
Although the data from the participant survey do not speak directly to what
happened after the Community Profile, the data do provide evidence of whether
the process itself met participants' expectations. Thus, we use the term "process
outcomes" to describe what participants perceive to be outcomes or benefits from
the process. As Lachapelle et al. (2010) note, the visioning process itself may be as
important to participants as the outcomes that occur later. Moreover, the process
sets the tone for the community in its pursuit to achieve its future vision, goals, and
objectives.

Post-process Survey
An electronic survey was conducted of 340 past Community Profile participants
randomly selected from more than 800 individuals who had provided e-mails
(response rate of 17 percent). The goal of the survey was to garner participants'
perceptions of "success." The survey queried respondents about the greatest outcomes from the process. Summary statistics (frequencies and average ratings) were calculated for multiple choice questions, while responses to open-ended questions were coded into common themes.

The survey results suggest that intangible outcomes resulting from the Community Profile visioning process are valued to an equal, if not greater, extent than tangible outcomes. In fact, 71 percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the success of the Community Profile can be defined by intangible outcomes, while 68 percent agreed or strongly agreed that success can be defined by tangible outcomes.

When asked specifically what part of the Community Profile provided the most personal satisfaction - (a) participating in the forum or (b) helping to implement the vision - approximately 70 percent of respondents said that participating in the forum provided the most satisfaction. Only 26 percent responded that helping to implement the vision created during the Community Profile forum provided the most satisfaction. While this does not mean that implementation of follow-up action post-Community Profile is unimportant, it does suggest that the visioning forum has great value for the participants. For some, the forum is itself an outcome in the sense that it engages community members in dialogue, surfaces new ideas, and builds consensus on shared values and future vision. In effect, the Community Profile serves as a basis for building social and human capital within the community.

When asked specifically about the most important outcomes resulting from the visioning forum, improved communication in the community and greater public participation in decision-making rated most important (91 percent and 83 percent of respondents rated them as important or very important, respectively) (Table 6.1). Examples of outcomes illustrating improved communication and greater public participation in decision-making include:

- first-time participation on Planning Boards and Master Plan Committees by Community Profile participants in 15 communities;
- development of community newsletters in over a dozen communities;
- development of town websites to publicize community meetings and events in seven communities; and
- implementation of follow-up visioning forums in five communities.

These outcomes all resulted from expanding or spiraling up human and social capital, manifested in the community's efforts to develop stronger communication networks and provide opportunities for residents to gather to discuss issues and celebrate successes. More committees focused on improving communication and civic participation (i.e., social and human capital) one year after the forum than development of new infrastructure and economic development, such as built and financial capital (Table 6.1). This finding indicates that intangibles are as important to Community Profile participants as tangible, bricks-and-mortar outcomes one to five years after the forum.

### Table 6.1 Frequency of Outcomes Rated as Important or Very Important

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcome</th>
<th>Rated as important or very important</th>
<th>Active committees one year after visioning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Improved communications among community members</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greater civic participation in community decision-making and action</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservation/preservation of open space and natural resources</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improvement of downtown (historic renovation, beautification, etc.)</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emergence of new leaders</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New infrastructure (facilities, roads, public works, etc.)</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic development/job creation</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes:
1. n = 340.
2. Follow-up evaluation data is maintained on approximately half the communities that underwent Community Profiles due to staff turnover and lack of follow-through in the 1990s.

Also important to note is that communication and public participation were commonly identified as secondary objectives by action committees whose primary objective was to enhance built or financial capital, such as creating new roads, jobs, or buildings. Thus, communication and public participation were effectively used as steps towards achieving tangible outcomes. The following example illustrates this spiraling up of intangible capitals to enhance community tangible capitals, namely preservation of natural capital.

Because of the Community Profile conducted in one southern New Hampshire town, land conservation emerged as a primary focus for participants. However, because the committee that coalesced around land conservation lacked the necessary financial and public support to conserve lands, as was their stated objective, they decided to launch a communication strategy to build public awareness about the importance of preserving open space in hopes of garnering additional financial and human capital. Their outreach and education efforts, communicated through newsletters, local media outlets, and community meetings, led several individuals who did not participate in the Community Profile to join the committee. One new member volunteered to write grants, and another offered to place a parcel of land into a conservation trust. The effective communication by the committee and greater participation by community members on the committee helped the community place approximately 800 acres of prime natural land into conservation easements within two years of the Community Profile forum.
The above case suggests that action committee members intuitively recognized the importance of building human and social capital in concert with developing the community's built, financial, and/or natural capital. Thus, given that tangible outcomes often result from the spiraling up of human, social, and political capital, surveys and metrics aimed at assessing visioning outcomes should not focus solely on directly measurable, bricks-and-mortar outcomes.

Evaluation questions should be framed in a manner that elicits peoples' perceptions of how the process engages public participation, taps into social networks, impacts the way people communicate, mobilizes community assets, and increases the community's capacity to enhance tangible outcomes. Information on intangible outcomes is often best captured through narratives and testimonials that describe how the visioning process leads to the creation of social, political, and human capital resulting in greater built, financial, and natural capital.

**Follow-up Interviews**

An important finding from interviews with chairs of Community Profile steering and action committees is that success is in the eye of the beholder. Some chairs claimed the Community Profile a success if the process served to build sense-of-community (social capital) through the cultivation of social networks, exchange of viewpoints and ideas, or increased participation by diverse community members. Others were more concerned with the physical outcomes (financial and built capital) resulting from the process, such as new buildings and protection of natural resources and/or parcels of land. More often than not, definitions of success involved a mix of tangible and intangible outcomes, with human, social, or political capital typically serving as a way to enhance financial, built, or natural capital, as suggested in survey results.

The following aptly illustrates the merging of tangible and intangible capitals in participants' definition of success. In one community, frustrations that conservation measures were not sufficient to preserve vital soil and water resources (natural capital) led a group of Community Profile participants to form a volunteer development committee designed to foster new participation in activities to preserve local natural sets. The chair of this committee noted:

> Our efforts ultimately engaged community members who had never really engaged in the community before. With their help, we were able to gain enough community support to make changes to the Master Plan, which now specifically prioritizes the preservation of ridgelines, steep slopes, and aquifers from development. This has led to the protection of a key aquifer in the town and has helped to maintain the scenic character that our community is so rooted in.

The interviews also revealed that definition of success is likely to change throughout the process. An action committee chair stated,

> When we started this process over a year ago, I hoped that one of the outcomes would be the creation of a town center that would help unite the community. But I soon realized that sense of community is more about connecting with each other and less about building something.

Further, this person recognized that the community must build social capital first if it is to succeed in collaborating around projects that enhance the community's built capital.

What resulted from the interviews was a sense that the outcomes perceived to be most important by community visioning participants one year after the forum are often inadvertent, in the sense that they were by-products of the process rather than planned-for outcomes. For instance, one participant came to the forum with a specific agenda to stop the development of a new housing subdivision, and was ready to do battle with those who opposed his viewpoint. However, he left the forum with a sense of empathy and surprise to find that he had common ground with others holding alternative positions. He stated, "I thought that the new development would be the beginning of the end of our nice town, but now I understand how it might actually provide opportunities for our children to live here affordably."

Since the forum, this person has become an advocate for a balance of diverse housing opportunities and conservation in the community. When asked about the most important outcome of the Community Profile one year after the forum, he suggested that it was the opportunity to connect with people with different views and ideas. If not for the social capital built during the forum through social networking and the exchange of ideas, this person might not have become as involved in efforts to balance housing needs with conservation.

Another example of an inadvertent outcome is in a suburban community that established a committee to tackle two infrastructure-related projects, yet failed to gain traction on either one due to lack of leadership and the committee's inability to convince local decision-makers that the projects were important. Rather than give up, committee members decided to focus first on building human and political capital in the community by cultivating new leaders, instituting leadership training, and developing a mutual support network. Out of this vision grew a local leadership academy, which continues successfully three years later. Not only did the committee build its leadership capacity and gain the confidence to revisit the infrastructure projects, but the academy has resulted in new community members running for elected office, as well as the formation of a new local organization to provide community services. Perhaps most importantly, the academy has fostered greater use of participatory processes on a range of community issues, which has essentially increased town local access to political capital. As the academy's founder noted, "Without the leadership academy, we wouldn't have seen the number of the great things going on today."

The lesson learned is that if the interview process had focused solely on progress on the objectives set during the Community Profile, a host of intangible and often
inadvertent outcomes would not have shown up in the evaluation results; this is the reason why interview protocols should explicitly include broad questions to capture other outcomes.

**Sustainability of Tangible vs. Intangible Outcomes**

While the data from the above-outlined evaluation components suggest that both tangible and intangible outcomes are important to community visioning participants, there is also compelling data to suggest that certain intangible outcomes are more likely to be sustained over the long term than tangible outcomes. To determine if certain outcomes have a greater likelihood of being sustained, steering committee chairs in all 45 communities were asked how action committees were progressing with the objectives set during the Community Profile. Overall, the interviews revealed that fewer than half of the action committees were active one year after the Community Profile. Those no longer active either achieved their original objectives and disbanded, or they dissolved before achieving their initial objectives.

Of the approximately 45 active committees that could be tracked one year after the Community Profile, nine focused on improving communications in the community (social capital), eight focused on developing plans and policies to preserve open space and/or outdoor recreation opportunities (natural capital), six focused on improving civic participation in community activities (human capital), and five focused on developing new leaders in the community (political capital). Yet, only two committees pursued projects pertaining to enhancing “public facilities and utilities” (built capital), in spite of the fact that this was the second most common theme emerging from the analysis of Community Profile objectives (Figure 6.1). Only one committee actively pursued economic development and job creation one year after the Community Profile (financial capital) was completed.

So why do some objectives appear to be more actionable than others? Tracking action committees that focused on bricks and mortar projects showed that activities were often curtailed due to the difficulty in securing resources. As an example, one community set as its primary objective construction of an all-ages community center. The committee focusing on this objective was the largest of all the committees and managed to generate considerable excitement in the community. Subsequent to the Community Profile, potential funding sources were identified, architectural plans were drawn, and a site was selected for the center. However, when it came to securing funds to build the community center, the committee was not able to generate any viable leads. Consequently, the community quickly lost interest and the committee subsequently dissolved.

Committee members later conceded that they should have started by cultivating the necessary human and political capital to support the project prior to generating the necessary financial capital resources to construct the building. In addition, the committee should have engaged the community in a discussion about uses for the community center.

An analysis of outcomes resulting from Community Profiles also suggests that the bricks-and-mortar projects that tend to be sustained after the Community Profile visioning forum are typically smaller in scope and less intensive regarding the financial capital needed. Examples of tangible projects with a greater likelihood of success include downtown beautification, such as planting flower beds along the main street, or construction of welcome signs at the entrances of the community. In essence, communities tend to gain more traction around small projects, or projects that do not require large material or financial inputs over the long term.

The fact that fewer than half of the action committees are solvent one year after the Community Profile suggests that factors limit the extent to which certain activities can be sustained. Several action committee chairs suggested that the objectives of some committees, especially those focusing on developing new built capital, were too ambitious at the onset and that committee members were frustrated at not being able to achieve their objectives in the short-term. In other cases, leaders failed to emerge to take charge of the process, suggesting more emphasis is needed to develop leadership capacity prior to implementing a Community Profile. As mentioned earlier, some committees simply did not have the capacity or the resources to follow through with their initial goals.

Conversely, the projects that tended to gain traction a year or more after the Community Profile process were those that defined the scope of their project or activities in realistic and manageable terms. Also, they tended to require less in the way of fiscal resources and they leveraged existing financial, cultural, and political capital within the community. For instance, projects that focused on developing social capital, such as establishing a venue for community residents to share information or the creation of forums where people can share ideas, had a higher likelihood of surviving after the first year.

Measuring and tracking outcomes resulting from visioning programs has challenged organizations and institutions that implement community visioning. Aside from the enormous time commitment involved, the difficulty in measuring and tracking outcome data is partly due to the fact that there is such a wide array of outcomes, ranging from those with a physical manifestation to those that cannot be directly seen or touched.

Intangible outcomes are especially difficult to manage because of their often indirect and unspecific nature. This fact may help to explain why evaluation reports from community visioning programs focus on tangible, directly-measurable outcomes, such as the amount of revenue generated, jobs created, natural habitats conserved, and foundations laid.

In spite of the challenges of documenting intangible outcomes, data from the recent evaluation study of community visioning in New Hampshire suggest that participants often value the intangible outcomes to an equal, if not greater extent, than tangible outcomes. Intangible outcomes include improved communication and networking among community members (social capital), greater public participation in community activities (human capital) and emergence of new leadership (political capital). Not only were these intangible outcomes rated among the most important outcomes
by participants, but follow-up interviews with action committee chairs showed that the cultivation of intangibles such as social, human, cultural, and political capital were key to enhancing a community's ability to achieve tangible, bricks-and-mortar outcomes, namely the enhancement of financial, built, and natural capital. Emery and Flora (2006) refer to this phenomenon as the "spiralizing up" of community capitals.

The evaluation results also suggest that committees focusing on intangible outcomes, such as fostering greater community networks and civic engagement in community activities, were more likely to be active one year after the forum than committees that immediately set out to tackle major infrastructure projects relying on heavy investments in built and financial capital. As noted earlier, communities often use these newly-developed human, political and social capacities to generate wealth, build infrastructure, and preserve the natural and cultural amenities that are highly valued by community members. One committee chair noted:

[w]e felt that strengthening the community’s human assets was a more manageable goal than tackling longer-term projects such as the development of a community center. Ultimately, we hope to build our capacity to the point where we can some day tackle these bigger issues.

Implications for Community Development Academics and Practitioners

So, what can other visioning programs gain from the experiences in New Hampshire regarding evaluations of outcomes? Four key lessons seem especially important. First, consideration must be given to local capacity to plan, organize, implement and follow-through on visioning programs. Many such programs, including the Community Profile, use a survey instrument prior to the visioning process to assess capacity in key functions, such as leadership, civic infrastructure, and community organization. Capacity assessments can greatly facilitate the identification of gaps in social, human and political capital prior to instituting a visioning program, given that success often hinges on emergence of strong community leadership to drive the visioning process. In cases where leadership or other human and social capital deficiencies are identified, community development practitioners may need to provide capacity-building training and resources to build the community’s capacity to successfully initiate and complete a community visioning program.

Second, it is important to benchmark communities’ progress over time in terms of stated objectives at the community visioning forum(s). If objectives established by communities and/or action committees are recorded, these objectives can be used as a baseline for documenting community activity and progress towards achieving the stated objectives. With that said, communities often need assistance in framing objectives to make them SMART: specific, measurable, actionable, realistic, and timely. Furthermore, communities should engage in the process of benchmarking progress to help guide their actions and to ensure they are addressing the right objectives.

Third, it is important for evaluators to understand that community participants' definitions of success may change over time. Often, inadvertent outcomes, such as the creation of stronger social networks and new venues for neighbors to gather, are what community visioning participants value most subsequent to the visioning forum. As illustrated by the current research and a growing body of scholarship, community visioning participants seem to recognize that these outcomes—creation of social, political, and human capital—tend to foster the cultivation of tangible outcomes in the form of built, financial, and natural capital over the longer-term.

Last, it is essential to incorporate intangible outcomes into the evaluation process. Because intangible outcomes are often difficult to measure using surveys and quantitative measures, semi-structured interviews with visioning program participants and key community leaders one year after the visioning forum(s) can be an effective way to generate qualitative data.

In the case of Community Profiles, the semi-structured interview transcripts were analyzed using the community capitals framework to help distinguish the various types of outcomes and map the interactions between them. These data were then used to construct textured portraits of what success means to particular individuals and communities. These textured portraits, or case studies, are powerful tools for illustrating the nuances of success and for providing in-depth explanation of why certain outcomes gain traction while others do not. Perhaps more important, evaluative tools that explore intangible outcomes can begin to highlight the “spiralizing up” of assets across the community capitals, from social to cultural to political, and can help validate the time and effort that community members invest in a process, especially if tangible “successes” are not realized.

The reality is that the dividing line between tangible and intangible outcomes is not always crisp and clear, given that many outcomes have both a tangible and an intangible face. Therefore, a key challenge for practitioners and residents involved in community visioning programs will be to borrow from the wealth of tools, techniques and frameworks that already exist—such as the community capitals framework and various community capacity assessment instruments—and incorporate them into the community visioning outcomes evaluation process.

References

Community visioning brings together local people to debate and articulate local community values, identify current issues and future opportunities, and develop specific plans to achieve their vision.

(Cuthill, 2004, p. 429)

All of us, regardless of who we are or where we live, engage in conversations with neighbors and friends on our hopes and dreams for the future of our community. These conversations occur in the grocery store, at a high school sports event, outside churches, and over the back fence. The discussions about the future are framed within the stories of “who we are” and how our community came to be as it is seen today. Listening to and understanding the stories of “who we are” provides a basis for understanding how we think about “what we can become” and “what we can do.” Furthermore, the stories that residents tell of who they are as a people and a community influence relationships within the community and with those outside the community.

Since 1993, 28 counties/communities in Kentucky have engaged in participatory community visioning processes. The same basic four questions have been asked in each activity and nearly 6,000 persons have been involved. The counties/communities are geographically distributed across Kentucky and are also distributed across the rural/urban continuum.

This chapter has three objectives: (1) to situate the participatory visioning process within community development; (2) to describe the visioning process used in these communities; and (3) to assess the value of the process for the communities.