THE CHALLENGE OF ASSESSING CIVIC ENGAGEMENT EFFORTS:

TOWARD A USEFUL FRAMEWORK AND MEASUREMENT APPROACHES

Prepared for the Annie E. Casey Foundation
Prepared by Organizational Research Services

What Do We Know? Thoughts and Observations

This document, prepared by ORS, reflects current thinking and observations that have resulted from the ORS/Casey team's work toward developing a measurement frame for evaluation of civic engagement efforts. Notes and observations surface and summarize important themes, including assumptions and underlying questions. Themes come out of our teams' review of literature and materials, reflections based on our consulting practice, and our small work group discussions. We see these themes as relevant to the development of an overall frame to guide measurement of civic engagement, but recognize that there is much more to consider.   In addition, we acknowledge that this document is a work in progress – it's purpose is to stimulate discussion among thought-partners. We anticipate that as we continue to review materials and hear feedback from our large and small thought partner groups, the thinking (and writing) reflected in this piece will evolve and crystallize.

A View of the Civic Engagement Landscape: The Territory is Large and Complex

Civic Engagement: History and Practice

The definitions of civic engagement are wide ranging; broadly, civic engagement is the collective work of individuals and groups directed at positive community change. Civic engagement also refers to the promotion or accumulation of knowledge, skills, values and motivation necessary to achieve community change.[1] Civic engagement occurs through both political and non-political processes. Examples of civic engagement include electoral engagement, participation in civic associations, mobilization towards collective action, direct or indirect interactions with government institutions or corporate entities, activism on behalf of policy or social change, and the ways in which individuals, groups and communities adopt common priorities, align efforts around shared priorities and take action to achieve change.[2]

Civic engagement has been a powerful strategy in many fields, including:

- Consumer protection
- Agriculture, food policy
- Public health
- Environment/Conservation
- Civil rights/racial equality

- Poverty reduction
- Crime, public safety
- Governance & civil society
- Education
- Urban planning & development

Although the ways in which civic engagement has been used as a lever for change within these fields vary, civic engagement strategies appear to be similar. Across fields, broad civic engagement strategies include: inform and educate; organize community members around their commonalities; provide conducive spaces (real or virtual) for organizing; provide forums for dialogue; build, mobilize and maximize alliances; encourage action based on shared priorities, and utilize communications strategies (including social media and other technologies) for influence and leverage.

---

[1] Erlich, Thomas (2000). Civic Responsibility and Higher Education. Oryx Press.
[2] See *Evidence of Change: Exploring Civic Engagement Evaluation* (2009). Retrieved from: www.buildingmovement.org.

Moving towards a measurement frame for civic engagement is much like moving through *terra incognita* or unmapped territory.   As a field, civic engagement encompasses a broad terrain; civic engagement efforts have been implemented within many different fields, via many types of strategies and for many different purposes. Where evaluation has occurred, it has been implemented in ways that are not always clearly documented or clearly able to be interpreted.   A strong, practical measurement frame is desired, though its development depends on a clear understanding of both position within an environment and the environment itself.

At this point, we equate our perspective of the field with that of the early explorers who came across the Atlantic to navigate and map the "new world." We have begun to navigate and document the civic engagement terrain though we recognize that our map is far from completed; the field is vast and further exploration is needed. Our current "explorer" perspective conjures an adage: *Go as far as you can see, and then see how far you can go*. Despite having documented only the "shorelines" of civic engagement, we are beginning to see the emergent landscape. This has given us an early sense about useful evaluation paradigms and approaches; we fully expect that recommendations regarding measures, tools and practical guidance will be further developed as the map grows clearer and denser.

Civic engagement has roots in community-organizing. Over the past one hundred years, since Alexander DeToqueville advocated that neighbors come together to improve their quality of life, community or neighborhood organizing has manifested in several ways. Steven Valocchi identifies three major approaches to community organizing apparent during the twentieth century: social work, political activism, and community development.[3] Common to these approaches is a focus on framing the issue at hand in partnership with the people affected; there is a deep attention to relationships, and leadership is typically nurtured from within affected community.[4] However, each approach is fueled by a unique set of beliefs and assumptions, as well as different types of roles for organizer and community members.

---

[3] Valocchi, Steven. A Way of Thinking About the History of Community Organizing. Retrieved from: http://www.trincoll.edi/depts/tcn/valocchi.htm.
[4] Scearse, Diana (2011). Connected Citizens: The Power, Peril and Potential of Networks. The Monitor Institute, on behalf of the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation

Currently, the term civic engagement is used to describe a broad spectrum of efforts that include traditional community organizing approaches directed at community change, and also encompass social entrepreneurial efforts which often utilize digital technologies to build connections among individuals or groups, develop or harness connected ("networked") communities, foster aligned action, and create spaces for groups to innovate, address complex problems or pursue shared goals, either civic or corporate. Social entrepreneurial engagement efforts typically demonstrate transparency and diffused leadership. Examples of this type of engagement include the creation of the Linux open-source software initiated by Linus Torvalds, online "town hall" forums where citizens provide immediate input regarding local government decisions, online interest groups or wikis, and development of brand loyalists through social media channels.[5]

Important considerations regarding measurement of civic engagement are: who is engaged, and also what is the sphere of influence. Because it is possible for individuals and groups to connect with one another in many different ways, the definitions and dimensions of *community* in the world today are broad. While engagement efforts may be focused on those living within a specific geographic place or neighborhood, engagement may also occur within or across multiple (and often overlapping) community dimensions – i.e. place-based, in-person or virtual communities that are defined by shared experiences, interests, beliefs, values or ideals. Therefore, civic engagement efforts cannot be easily confined; engagement efforts may occur in multiple dimensions and in ways that are both planned and intentional as well as ways that are organic or emergent.

> **Three major community organizing approaches (Valocchi):**
>
> - ***The social work approach***: Focused on cooperatively ensuring that there are adequate resources and services to meet community members' needs. (An example of this approach is the Settlement House movement of the early 20th century.) The social work approach also assumes that those who control resources are willing to allocate (or re-allocate) resources to meet community needs.
> - ***The political activist approach***: Based on the view that the community is a political power base, and focused on shifting power dynamics within a community."[1] The work of Saul Alinsky, who many refer to as the "father" of community organizing, exemplifies the political activist approach. Alinsky's community organizing strategies sought to educate and mobilize neighbors and communities and build alliances among organizations such as churches, labor unions, and neighborhood associations. Political activism may involve mass demonstrations or protest actions to address wide spread issues such as workers' rights or force a response from those in power.[1] The approach is about identifying and addressing that which keeps power from being evenly distributed, and can lead to conflict or confrontation between communities/neighborhoods and the groups, interests or institutions who have something to lose from a shift in power dynamics.
> - ***The community development approach***: Sees the neighborhood as a space with intrinsic or commercial value. The function of organizing is simply to maintain and improve the physical and commercial value of the community, which may at times mean advocating for changes in the way spaces are used or adding spaces or services that better meet the needs of community members.

---

[5] Scearse, Diana (2011). Ibid.

Reflecting on the literature and our consulting practice, the team prepared a matrix to begin to categorize and describe different models of civic engagement, associated values and goals, and potential areas for measurement. (See accompanying document: *Overview of Civic Engagement Operating Frameworks*). The matrix was intended to be a starting point for thinking about measurement of civic engagement; based on conversations and feedback from the working group, there are additional observations and questions to explore. The matrix identifies three big "tents" that describe different approaches to civic engagement, including:

- *A Place-Based/Neighborhood Based Approach* that may focus on either *targeted system or policy outcomes* (e.g. increased affordable housing, improved public transportation) or the achievement of *broad transformation of individuals and community conditions*, including changes in relationships, reduced disparities, and increased equity.

- *A "Networked Communities" Approach* that may focus on fostering, inspiring or generating lasting support for a cause or a brand – one that is either civic or corporate – or bringing together people and ideas, mobilizing collective action or developing collective solutions.

- *A Participatory Democracy Approach* that focuses on addressing broad change within civic, social, political or economic structures and conditions, and/or the redistribution of power and resources.

While the work group confirmed that the broad "tents" and related values and areas of change outlined in the table made sense, they noted that the table format makes civic engagement and related change seem (falsely) linear. For example, members of the work group commented that the big tents of place-based civic engagement, networked communities, and participatory democracy may not be separate or mutually exclusive. Therefore, it may also be useful to document where there are relationships between the different approaches, or create some sort of hybrid as a descriptive organizing frame.

Inherent complexity means that a frame for measuring civic engagement may be more accurately portrayed as a prism or a kaleidoscope rather than a flat, two dimensional matrix. Civic engagement involves overlapping theories, pathways, and goals as well as a mix of planned and unpredicted elements. Advancing toward a measurement frame is intended to help sort out theories and pathways – not to set hard boundary lines, but rather to help both funders and communities better understand what they are trying to achieve, and how they are getting there.

While we believe that a portrayal of the overall civic engagement landscape and frameworks in use is important to identifying potential measurement approaches, we also recognize that there is opportunity to dig in much more deeply with regard to understanding useful measurement in relationship to specific philanthropic efforts. For example, what is a useful measurement approach for a philanthropic effort that strives for transformational change in a particular place or community will undoubtedly address different questions and involve different kinds of approaches than measurement for efforts that focus on strengthening a particular network, or those that seek to develop spaces for participatory democracy.

Again, the civic landscape is complex, and we expect that our thinking about how best to characterize the field will continue to evolve. We believe that being able to articulate civic engagement using some type of broad tents or organizing categories will be helpful, though it is not yet clear what the associated product (or products) will be. By extension, it is unclear what type of product or products can help frame measurement of civic engagement in a universal sense. It may be that a measurement frame for civic engagement (and, similarly, tools and measurement approaches) is best understood as considerations, principles, or guiding choices.

Civic Engagement Landscape: A Tangle of Underlying Assumptions and Beliefs

Within the civic engagement landscape, there are many types of players including individuals, community groups, advocates, corporations and foundations. Similarly, there are many different views about the relevance and importance of civic engagement particularly, perhaps, among different foundations. Among foundations making investments in civic engagement, some may do so either as a strategy to achieve a particular policy or social change, or as an end in itself – i.e. a means to promote knowledge, skills, values, motivation for change or shared priorities for change. Different philanthropic assumptions and beliefs are specifically explored in this section.

Some foundations may invest in civic engagement as one strategy (of perhaps many) to achieve a particular policy win or set of wins. Investment may rest on an assumption that civic engagement can be directed in a very targeted or surgical way. Thus, foundations may employ a directive or prescribed approach and an "end goal" orientation; the purpose is to engage community members or citizens around an already identified goal.

Other foundations may view civic engagement as part of the fundamental core philosophy of their investments. Investment may be predicated on at least two important assumptions. First is the assumption that connections, shared views, balanced needs or equivalency of power among residents or citizens are necessary to enduring, lasting and sustainable change. In other words, it will require more than just policy wins to achieve lasting, sustainable change since policy wins can be temporary, or can be quickly reversed. A second assumption underlying this investment perspective is that effective civic engagement and strong connections are achieved only in an environment of shared values, trust, collaboration, mutual participation, respect for differences and authentic civic demand. From this viewpoint, the real results of civic engagement can be seen in the process of developing knowledge, connections, trust, mutual participation, a common set of priorities, etc. and in interim outcomes that reflect changes in relationships and community structures, not just in end goals that reflect policy change or broad community change.

Different understandings and different associated beliefs with regard to civic engagement reflect important philosophical differences, and help illuminate fundamental questions. Is civic engagement an opportunistic and effective tactic for reaching an end goal or impact? Or, is civic engagement a strong core strategy which contributes to broad, sustainable change – i.e. change that is rooted in shared community and democratic values, the certainty that vulnerable children, families and others are well cared for, the certainty that the environment is protected and conserved and that there is equity throughout society?

For foundations, there are many ways to engage with communities around civic engagement work. The continuum spans from funders acting as full partners (i.e. funders are willing to cede ownership and leadership of long-term change strategies to others) to funders acting as external architects of a long-term change strategy and/or collective impact (i.e. funders act as leaders, conveners, directors).[6] For the success of philanthropic efforts, as well as effective measurement, transparency about these issues seems to be of paramount importance. Clearly establishing the roles and relationships of funders, community members or other participants up-front can help create conditions for success of efforts, and ensure that both party's expectations and evaluation needs are met.

Defining the role of the foundation as architect or partner is critical to civic engagement, and thus, to evaluation design. Funders may not always be clear about their assumptions and rationale for funding civic engagement. In particular, it may not be clear whether civic engagement is intended to be a means to a particular end or, whether civic engagement is an acceptable end in itself. Development of a measurement framework and pilot-testing may help illuminate and offer ways to address this issue.

Measurement of Civic Engagement: Funders have Different Interests and Needs

Often, the evaluative questions that are most relevant to funders are predicated on assumptions. One assumption is that measurement of civic engagement, like measurement of other discrete programs or efforts, is external and rigid. This assumption situates civic engagement and its evaluation as:

- Finite
- Time–bound
- Replicable and scalable, e.g. implementing a proven practice from another community
- Determined through "hard measures" and benchmarks

This assumption may align with a foundation's particular approach to civic engagement - i.e. the belief that civic engagement efforts can be targeted or directed in service of an end goal, or that there is a clear pathway by which civic engagement will lead to an end goal.

However, even if implemented as a specifically targeted strategy, civic engagement is not likely to happen in a prescribed or predictable way. Civic engagement efforts are subject to many unpredictable dynamics – e.g. differences among "engaged" individuals and groups, or rapidly pr radically changing priorities regarding end goals in the face of economic swings, natural disasters, global politics, celebrity

---

[6] See: Block & McKnight (2010). Soul of the Community. See also: FSG's thinking re: Collective Impact.

actions or other news headlines. Thus, civic engagement seems by definition to be organic or community driven, and not something that can be easily steered or controlled by philanthropic investment. This presents an inherent question: when investing in civic engagement, do foundations believe that they are acting solely as stewards of their investment dollars and their mission? Or, do they believe that civic engagement requires a "letting go" of mission, or of the need to have ultimate authority or decision-making power? This question may cause discomfort among foundation trustees and decision-makers who assume it is their duty to be stewards of an intentional and planned strategic investment. This question also has significant implications for measurement.

In terms of a strategic investment, civic engagement and its organic and community-driven nature stands in contrast to other types of policy and social change approaches such as communications and lobbying. Often, these strategies can be controlled to a certain extent. For example, a foundation may seek to influence communications or messaging around a particular issue through a strategic investment that helps publicize more extreme views surrounding an issue in order to highlight the "middle" viewpoint as more rationale and sensible. Or, foundations may support legislative advocacy efforts that focus on delivering a specific message to specific decision-makers to achieve a specific policy end.

With a civic engagement approach, a foundation may have an end goal in mind. However, since civic engagement may necessarily involve sharing power and/or giving over power to communities, it is not always possible to predict where the strategy will take you. And, the strategy of empowering individuals and communities to join together around common interests may lead down unanticipated pathways and even to pursuit of changes that are at odds with a foundation's desired end goal.   For example, the Northwest Area Foundation was involved in a community change effort to ameliorate poverty, its end goal. Civic engagement was a strategy within their overall effort, and the NWAF brought together residents and citizens to mobilize around this goal. As a result of foundation-supported efforts, community members got themselves well-organized and empowered, and identified their own goals. Community members then ended up suing the NWAF when they did not receive a long-term grant.   The suit alleged that the community had executed a planning grant in good faith, thinking that a long-term funding commitment would follow, but it did not – in part because the community's stated goals did not match what NWAF saw as most important.

For efforts where funders are full partners in civic engagement, a useful measurement frame may be one that tracks practice in a way that recognizes the value of the "work behind the work." This type of measurement focus could represent a significant departure from the assumptions held by many funders of this work. From the "funders as partners" vantage point, effective civic engagement involves an entire constellation of measures that are very different from those related to implementation and results. Measures that reflect "the work behind the work" include the values, relationships, essential properties, facilitating elements or structures that are needed or that are in place in order to bring communities together towards shared goals and long-term transformation. Measurement of the "work behind the work" requires tools and approaches that are embedded into the civic engagement work up front, or integrated from early on. These kinds of measurement tools are necessary to provide a transparent view of the work itself, and the degree to which the "key elements" of successful engagement are present – e,g, trust, mutual respect, shared priorities, hope, willingness to work collaboratively, able leadership, and the like.

Unpacking assumptions about measurement uncovers a key question: How can a measurement frame comfortably accommodate the fact that civic engagement takes place in an adaptive and flexible environment? How can measurement planning and data collection processes reflect this reality?

HOW MEASUREMENT OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT HAS HAPPENED

"Reductionist" View Versus "Anything Goes"
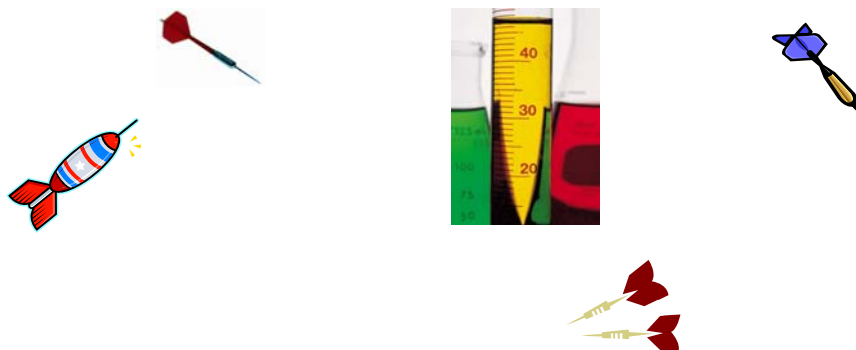
Philanthropic funders, in order to understand progress or results of civic engagement investments, have tended to gravitate towards a "reductionist" approach where the focus for measurement of civic engagement is on particular and discrete elements or indicators, e.g. frequency with which neighbors talk with one another, participation in certain kinds of community events, trust.[7] However, measures from a list may not always align tightly with what the foundation is seeking to achieve through its investments or with what the grantee is actually doing, or may be affected by dynamic community circumstances or conditions.

We have found that within philanthropic efforts, civic engagement is being measured in the following kinds of ways:

- ■ Via a prescribed, static set of identified indicators (e.g. indicators of social capital indentified by the Saguaro Seminar and Robert Putnam; indicators of political involvement identified by CIRCLE.)

- ■ Via interim outcomes—i.e. changes on the way to desired long-term change.

- ■ Via exploration of process or implementation elements, such as the inclusiveness of civic engagement efforts, when/whether certain kinds of strategies are employed, etc.

- ■ Via a common reporting frame which captures logic model-based measures as well as organic, qualitative reflection (an example is Making the Case, a tool developed by the Women's Funding Network.)

- ■ No bounded categories or specific measures at all. In this case, the lack of clarity with regard to what should stand for progress can lead to an "anything goes" approach to

---

[7] There are a number of "lists" of these types of indicators, including those developed by Putnam et al (The Saguaro Seminar), CIRCLE and CIVICUS.

measurement. While this approach may have potential for learning, it may also undermine discipline, intentionality and focus with regard to alignment between strategies and long-term outcomes/goals, "activity traps," or meandering strategy ("death by opportunity").

As we continue to develop a frame, we want to explore the measurement spectrum that goes from a prescribed list of narrow measures to complete open-endedness. Similarly, we want to explore the purposes of measurement in the area of civic engagement, including the need for accountability and assurance of meaningful impact, the desire to understand incremental progress, and the desire for learning.   We hope to identify useful categories, guidance or principles that address different measurement purposes and support both funders and communities in understanding what is happening, what progress has been made and what may be needed to achieve desired goals.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MEASUREMENT

Begin with a Theory of Change
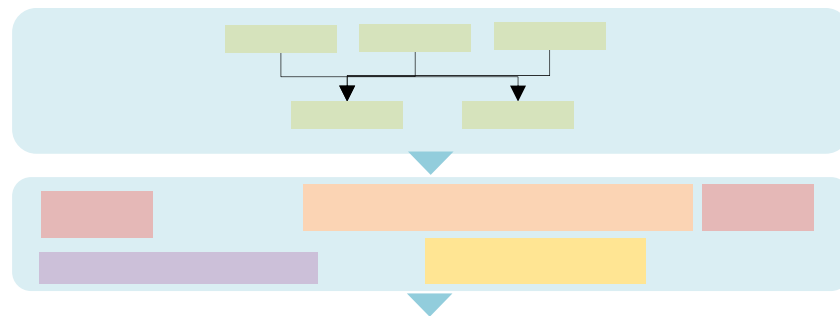
Like measurement of other complex community change, system change, policy change and advocacy efforts, measurement of civic engagement absolutely needs to leave room for fluidity and adjustment to changing environments.   That said, as with other community, social and policy change efforts, measurement of civic engagement can benefit enormously from articulation and agreement regarding a theory of change.   A theory of change can, for example, help clarify:

Who or what is the unit of change to be measured. Civic engagement is associated with many different units of change – individual/family change; changes in systems; changes in policies; changes in investments; changes in physical conditions; changes in social or economic conditions. Different types of changes may be relevant individually and/or in tandem. Similarly, theory of change can help clarify what is a "community." While community can be defined in physical or geographic terms, communities also exist in many forms beyond physical/geographic space. Through the many available digital tools, virtual communities are able to rapidly connect, communicate, self-organize and act. Thus, virtual communities have the potential to be a viable forum for civic engagement-albeit not one that is likely to be based on personal relationships and inter-personal relationships.

The beliefs and assumptions about how long term change will occur. There are many different "strategic pathways" that are believed to lead to some of the core long-term civic engagement outcomes. Core outcomes include optimal conditions, processes and structures. Very broadly, these pathways include: community organizing, community asset strengthening, advocacy/policy change, urban planning, elections, governance, promotion of shared values and beliefs. While they are complex, many of these pathways can be "fleshed out" and described via a theory of change. Foundations often invest in one or more of these strategic pathways, though the degree of intentionality with regard to where a Foundation's investments are targeted, what is expected, and how target investments may connect to broad goals is not always clear.

Whether civic engagement is a strategy to achieve a desired change, or an end in itself. As discussed previously, the term civic engagement has many, many meanings and associated beliefs. It refers to both the strategies employed to achieve certain changes (e.g. through civic engagement, we will transform and overcome oppressive or exclusionary power structures; through civic engagement, we will build or strengthen a social movement) and the processes by which increased engagement is achieved.

While strategic pathways outlined in a theory of change may be unpredictably influenced by dynamic factors and forces, a theory of change can still serve as a road map so that foundations and communities can keep their eyes on the "*so thats*" of civic engagement (e.g. how are people coming together, how are people acting together towards change in communities?).

Theory of change can help clarify for all involved partners what are end goals, as well as what are the pathways to achieve goals. However, goals may be moving targets within a dynamic external context. This can have implications regarding the timing and the approach to measurement, especially measurement that is most focused on end goals.

Identify Purposes for Measurement, Make Choices
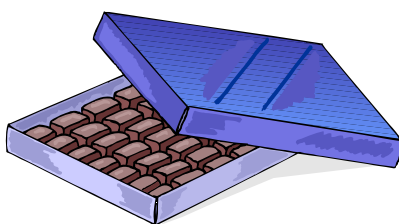
For foundations interested in pursuing measurement of civic engagement, it will not be possible to measure everything - choices will be necessary. To help guide choices, clarification of values and overall approach and a clear theory of change will be useful. It will also be important to determine purposes for measurement.

The purposes of measurement may be different based on a foundation's goals:

Learning   **Accountability**

Impact
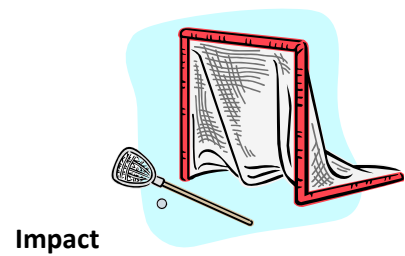
In regards to useful measurement of civic engagement, the needs of investors and community members may be different. Two frameworks that identify the common purposes for measurement include:

- ■ *Mark, Henry and Julnes (2000)*. The purposes of evaluation include identification of merit and worth ("proof of concept"), accountability, monitoring/operational improvement and field building.

- ■ *Keystone Accountability*. Evaluation can be directed to address any of six different purposes. These are: to improve programs, to inform strategy, to educate the public, accountability, to build capacity, and to demonstrate impact.

Before implementing measurement approaches, foundations are likely to be well served by identifying the main purposes for measurement.   Owing to its complexity, measurement of civic engagement is likely to necessitate making choices about approaches or tools. Determining what purposes for measurement match most closely with a foundation's goals will help guide selection of useful and appropriate measures.

It is important to consider that measurement of civic engagement may be framed in different ways within an overall (long-term) effort, or may be implemented at different points in time for different reasons.   It is also important to consider that due to the complexity of civic engagement and its highly organic nature, useful measurement is likely to be adaptive rather than static. Other considerations are likely to relate to how measurement generates immediate feedback, how measurement supports learning/adjustment of efforts, and whether measurement provides a "good enough" level of evidence when gauging effectiveness.

Many Types of Measurement Approaches are Valuable

Measurement of civic engagement can help foundations and grantees to introduce more discipline around whether or how efforts are contributing to achievement of desired goals. Measurement may help foster greater clarity among foundations and grantees about the logic and "so that" connections between immediate strategies and tactics and desired interim and long-term goals.

Importantly, useful measurement of civic engagement is likely to include both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Similarly, measurement may include both retrospective and prospective or developmental approaches. In addition to documenting certain individual or community indicators,

evaluation might help answer questions like: What is the context? What strategies are most effective? What outcomes are most relevant or meaningful? How are we doing in terms of progress towards long-term goals? Are we still comfortable investing here? Given strategies and desired goals, what are relevant interim outcomes? Are we making progress on interim outcomes?

Evaluation, as seen from this perspective, encompasses community members and foundation partners learning how to work together, learn together, solve problems together, and contribute both to community and foundation-level learning. In order to fully utilize evaluation as a tool, measurement would ideally be integrated into civic engagement efforts. Evaluators or data collectors would be partners—not adjunct staff or consultants. This is a departure from conventional thinking about measurement and implies a need for capacity-building so that a broad spectrum of community members or civic engagement partners can be involved in evaluative efforts. This has implications for the different roles around data collection, the uses of data and when measurement is introduced to civic engagement efforts.

Need for Pilot Testing

Early exploration has steered us towards some initial categories, principles and guiding choices for measurement. As a frame for measurement of civic engagement takes shape, we are hopeful that at least some aspects or approaches can be applied and tested in real-world settings in order to affirm, adjust or further inform thinking