Act later, plan now: how one Atlanta-based food funder is using evaluation to address equity and structure the organization around impact

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FOOD WELL ALLIANCE

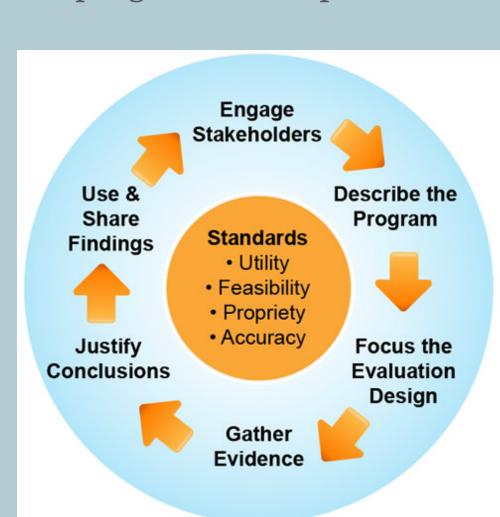## Food Well Alliance's evaluation journey

Our mission at Food Well Alliance is to join those leading Metro Atlanta's local movement in their work to build thriving community gardens and farms.

In 2018, FWA went through a significant transition, shifting from focusing on building community with broad activity areas, to being led by food movement leaders working to create defined programs and strategies, each with their own evaluation plan aligned with an organizational theory of change. One important driver of program development was the evaluation process.

Key Evaluation Team Members:

- Executive Director
- Impact Manager
- External Evaluation Consultant

The CDC's evaluation framework grounds the evaluation.

Starting with a theory of change

The evaluation process began with a theory of change.

2019 DRAFT THEORY OF CHANGE

The meetings themselves to develop the theory of change proved to be the more valuable part of the process, as staff co-created and sought alignment toward a common understanding of the organization's long-term outcomes and what it would take to get there.

Three distinct program areas emerged through this process:
1) Resource Center
2) Events & Experiences
3) Policy & Advocacy

From counting event attendees to understanding program impact

Each program area defined the problem experienced by a key stakeholder group, as well as the proposed solution:

Program (Stakeholders)	Problem	Solution
Resource Center (Farmers & Gardeners)	There is a lack of resources for urban farms & gardens in that resource are not being coordinated or prioritized to support & protect community farms & gardens	Provide centralized funding, training and resources to build a supportive ecosystem for thriving community gardens & urban farms
Events & Experiences (Community members)	Community members are disconnected from where their food comes from and have a lack of awareness about the value gardens and farms bring to their communities	Design and execute unforgettable events, stories and educational experiences that connect communities to where their food comes from
Policy & Advocacy (Policymakers)	There is a need for policies that prioritize urban agriculture as cities grow and develop	Empower local government leaders to develop inclusive policies and plans that include resources for gardens & farms to ignite a regional coalition for urban agriculture

Logic models as a tool for both program planning & evaluation

With each program's problem and solution defined, a **logic model** was then developed, detailing unique inputs, activities, and participants, as well as short, intermediate and long-term outcomes desired.

Inputs → Activities → Participants → Outcomes

Evaluation is a tool in service of equity[1]

As FWA began to develop program level logic models and evaluation plans, staff began to ask more in-depth questions about who they were serving and the desired results. Each program area created **evaluation questions**, indicators and data collection methods that began to move toward understanding and addressing the root causes of inequities within the metro Atlanta food system.

Questions to be addressed at the organizational level:
- How is FWA defining equity? How is equity addressed in FWA's mission statement?
- What are FWA's priority communities?
- How is FWA ensuring equitable distribution of resources?
- How have racist policies led to race-based inequities for growers and community members?

Evaluation questions

Each program reflected on their logic model to identify and prioritize evaluation questions, as follows.

Resource Center:

1. To what extent does FWA understand community garden needs?
2. To what extent does FWA understand urban farm needs?
3. To what extent are targeted audiences served? Why or why not?
4. To what extent does FWA understand existing resources for farms and gardens?
5. To what extent do staff have capacity? Are skills / roles being utilized effectively?
6. To what extent does FWA have increased participation by farms and gardens in its programs?
7. To what extent is the resource center delivering high quality, high equity programs?

Events & Experiences:

1. How strong is FWA's brand?
2. To what extent are we sharing the stories of those doing the work?
3. To what extent are we building & maintaining community & media relationships?
4. To what extent do staff have capacity? Are skills being utilized effectively?
5. To what extent have we promoted FWA programs?
6. To what extent were targeted audiences reached? Why or why not?
7. To what extent are FWA staff & board equipped with the tools to be voice / spokespeople for the work?

Policy & Advocacy:

1. To what extent did we design an equitable & replicable selection process in the pilot phase for cities to participate in City Agriculture Plan (CAP)?
2. To what extent was CAP's community engagement phase successful?
3. To what extent was the planning phase of the CAP successful?
4. To what extent were opportunity grants used for community-based purposes?
5. To what extent did we equip new & existing Atlanta Community Compost Council members with tools & information?
6. To what extent does participating in City Agriculture Planning & the Atlanta Community Compost Council benefit growers?

Methods

Each program is using a combination of methods to collect both quantitative and qualitative data. Data collection methods include:

- Document review (e.g., grant applications, sign-in sheets, meeting notes, partner databases, etc.)
- Interview
- Survey
- Sense-making / intense period debrief

Process Results

- Organizational theory of change
- Three defined program areas
- Three program logic models, updated annually
- Three program evaluation plans, updated annually
- Monthly learning & evaluation meetings with each program
- Monthly learning & evaluation meetings with directors
- Evidence of increased evaluative thinking throughout the organization
- Deeper understanding of evaluation tools and processes amongst staff
- Shared evaluation language across the organization
- Systematic data collection & analysis
- Data collected and learnings captured from COVID19 emergency response
- Equity is being integrated in program planning and evaluation
- Increased focus on historical, root causes of racial inequities within the food movement
- Increased commitment to co-developing and evaluating programs with marginalized communities served
- Increased definition around program vs. organizational functions and evaluation
- Recommendations for how to evaluate organizational functions and capacities

Conclusions

- **Need to prioritize.** As teams set out to create their first ever evaluation plans, everything seemed to be high priority. As we work through results now, we will be able to determine which evaluation questions are essential and need more focus vs which can be sidelined until we have staff capacity to take on new questions and data collection efforts.
- **Evaluation as a process** was embedded into the organization, and is an increasingly shared responsibility.
- **Internal & external evaluator roles** continue to be clarified. Having both has allowed for continued focus on evaluation capacity building while implementing evaluation processes.
- **Evaluation as a tool in service of equity.** Developing and implementing distinct programs and evaluation plans has allowed program staff to identify and focus on root cause questions around equity, systemic racism, marginalized and historically resilient communities and more.
- **Continuous improvement.** Programs were created in 2018, and monthly learning and evaluation conversations allow for ongoing defining and refining of program activities, participants, and outcomes.
- **Adaptive capacity.** Evaluation systems and capacity built allowed for adaptation during covid19 emergency response.
- **Programs vs. organization.** Different tools are needed when it comes to assessing programs vs organizational functions. The evaluation process has helped identify the need for an organizational assessment and capacity building process in areas such as marketing, development, operations & evaluation.
- **Leadership alignment.** Discussion of these evaluation questions and preliminary results has been useful for prompting board/staff alignment on goals.

Acknowledgements

1) https://www.equitableeval.org