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# A Road Made by Walking: Participatory Evaluation and Social Change

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## Key Points

- This article describes how participatory evaluation was used in a Ford Foundation–funded project to promote mixed-income housing in Atlanta.
- The project resulted in an increase in mixed-income housing, but also in social outcomes such as increased knowledge about housing issues.
- Validity and reliability of the findings are demonstrated through feedback from the community members, rather than through statistical methods.

Evaluation in philanthropy is systematic information-gathering and research about grantmaker supported activities that informs learning and drives improvement. (Woodwell, 2005)

## Introduction

Through its community development grantmaking, the Ford Foundation seeks to build vibrant, prosperous, safe, and inclusive communities and regions (Ford Foundation, n.d.). One such effort is the Mixed Income Communities Initiative of the Atlanta Neighborhood Development Partnership. This three-year program was one of several urban initiatives that aligned with the Ford Foundation's strategy of *building strong community institutions to amplify the power of marginalized people and establish working relationships that cross geography, identities, and sectors* (Ford Foundation, n.d.). Under the leadership of founder, Hattie Dorsey, the Atlanta Neighborhood Development Partnership enacted the funder's strategy by forming the

MICI Committee, a broad coalition of actors in the development and affordable housing communities, including professionals, developers, nonprofit organizations, financiers, and consultants. These individuals attended MICI Committee meetings, shared information with colleagues at these meetings, and, as appropriate, took action in their own spheres of influence to advance MICI's goal of advocating for mixed-income communities.

Evaluation of community-based advocacy coalitions such as MICI requires the identification and measurement of outcomes that are for the most part unquantifiable, produced by internal and external actors using diverse strategies to affect short- and long-term change (Aldrich, Silva, Marable, Sandman, & Abraham, 2009). When MICI's staff and volunteer leadership decided to use participatory evaluation to document the outcomes of their work, they expected the process to provide added benefits, such as increasing stakeholder commitment, engaging wide-ranging perspectives, and improving prospects for sustainability of the coalition and its work (Aldrich et al., 2009). This article describes the participatory evaluation (PE) of the Atlanta Neighborhood Development Partnership's (ANDP) Mixed Income Community Initiative (MICI) conducted by the author and her colleague, Steven Brazen, during 2005–2008.

Evaluation is broadly defined as a form of applied research and analysis that delineates a cause-and-effect connection between a program or initiative

and a desired social outcome. Evaluation reports thus serve as one of several channels of accountability between grantmakers and grantees. In a 2005 white paper prepared on behalf of the Evaluation Roundtable of Grantmakers for Effective Organizations (GEO), William H. Woodwell positioned evaluation as a transparent method of learning and growth that can increase grantmaker effectiveness and strengthen grantees' work going forward. Specifically, Woodwell recommended a process called "developmental evaluation" or "emergent evaluation" for projects in which "goals and outcomes are not defined at the start of the initiative but become clearer over time" (Woodwell, 2005, p. 14). *Participatory evaluation* (PE) is an applied research methodology that meets Woodwell's criteria for emergent evaluation. In PE, the evaluators are a team made up of facilitators and project leaders that engages in an iterative process of problem definition and strategy development (Romme, 2004), which allows leaders to extract and utilize knowledge created in the course of the work, as well at key milestones.

The objectives of MICI's PE were to do the following:

- Identify key priorities for MICI to consider as it moves forward with its work.
- Provide regular check-ins on progress, course adjustments, and documenting the activities of a diverse group of staff and volunteers.
- Document the degree to which MICI has achieved the goals set by its leaders.
- Extract lessons from experience that could be applied in future settings.

The initial MICI PE team included MICI Director M. von Nkosi and other members of MICI staff, as well as the chairs of MICI working committees. This team evaluated progress toward these goals through a series of systematic reflections about shared experiences over a period of two and a half years. The facilitators supported this reflection by helping the group summarize and synthesize their observations, build consensus about the implications of these observations, and draw lessons for future activities. The four stages included the following: (1) *Front End*, where staff and board

leadership oriented the facilitators to the current situation and clarified the scope and focus of the evaluation; (2) *Formative Evaluation*, where the facilitators, staff, and MICI subcommittee chairs agreed on baselines and set goals; (3) *Process Evaluation*, where, prompted by phone calls from the facilitators, subcommittee chairs and staff provided regular updates of progress; and (4) *Summative Evaluation*, which took place at extended MICI Committee meetings, held annually, where facilitators and participants reflected on progress to date and set priorities for future work. The four stages of MICI's PE aligned with Woodwell's description of emergent evaluation (Table 1).

### Evaluation Framework

The evaluators depicted expected outcomes from MICI's four strategies using the standard evaluation tools of logic models, theories of change, and cost-benefit analysis. Following is a summary of how these frameworks applied in the MICI evaluation.

*The logic model is predicated on a trouble-free ride when, in fact, the road to social change is notoriously uneven.*

### Logic Models and Theories of Change

Woodwell illustrated the expanded view of evaluation by comparing logic models with theories of change:

A logic model is a conceptual picture of how a program or intervention is intended to work. ... Theories of change should be designed to explain how and why change happens, as well as the potential role of an organization's work in contributing to its vision of progress. (Woodwell, 2005, p. 6)

The complementarity of the logic model and theory of change allow the evaluators to maintain a broad frame of reference while doing the specific

**TABLE 1** Participatory Evaluation and Emergent Evaluation

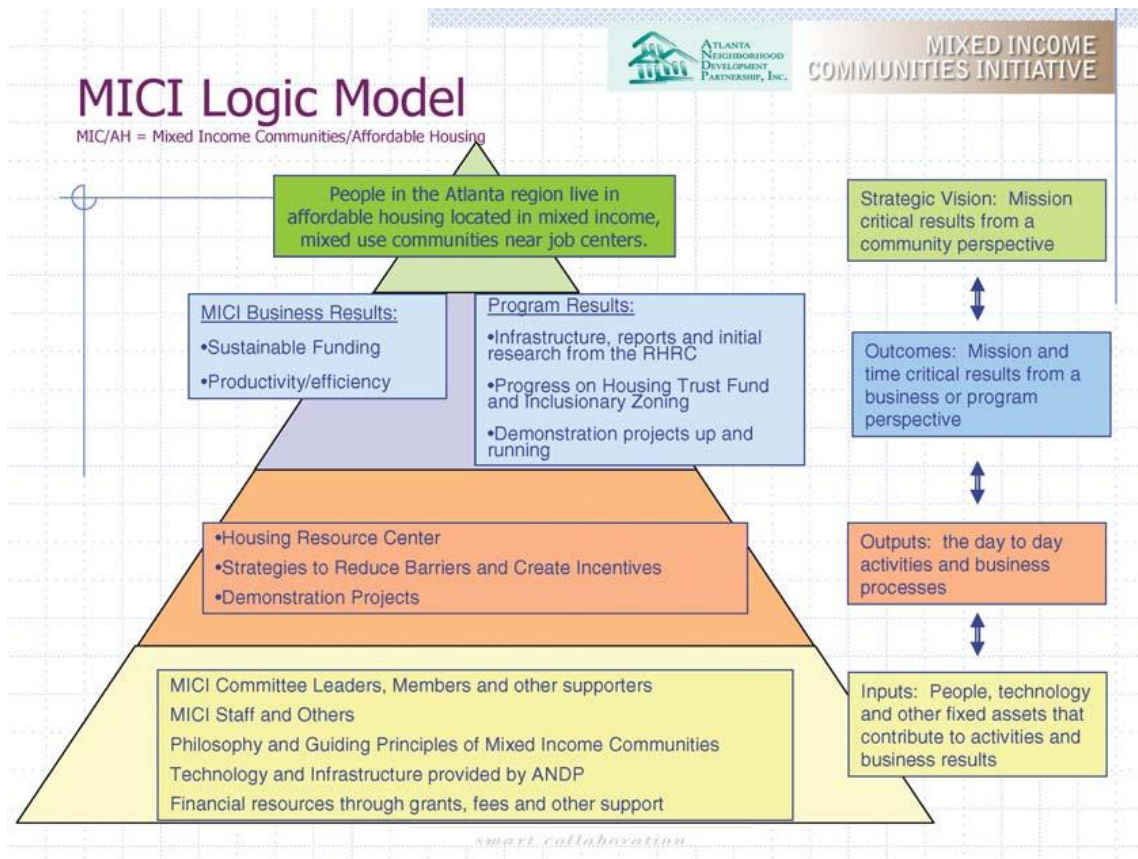
Stage of participatory evaluation	Participatory Evaluation	Emergent Evaluation (Woodwell, 2005, pp. 14–15)
Front end	Exploration of stakeholders’ reactions to the proposed projects, including their knowledge, interests, motivations, and preferences; to determine meaningful measures of outcomes, processes, and return on investment; and to identify and resolve conflicts in expectations and measures that may occur between stakeholder segments.	Clarifying priorities, aims, expected outcomes, and indicators.
Formative evaluation	Translation of these variables into a rigorous, workable, user-friendly evaluation design, in this case in the form of a comprehensive strategic direction, build the program’s information infrastructure, and test and improve the effectiveness of the evaluation program.	Investigating and describing the interplay of context and program — treating the context as part of program. Identifying key dynamics affecting change and patterns of behavior.
Process evaluation	Monthly phone calls to obtain stakeholder feedback on the project as a whole and identify opportunities for process improvement and address areas needing remediation.	Tracking patterns of activity and effects over time. Using time series analysis and thematic analysis or other means to organize information and follow trend lines
Summative evaluation	Retreats held annually to reflect on progress and help stakeholders learn from the process, evaluate outcomes, impact, and return on investment in this project, and set priorities for work going forward.	Documenting apparent lessons as the work proceeds and revising these as more information is gathered.

work involved in the project at hand. The mental model underlying the logic model is like a route from point A to point B. The logic model is predicated on a trouble-free ride when, in fact, the road to social change is notoriously uneven. In reality, like trips by road, there are traffic jams, detours, breakdowns, and washouts. The theory of change is a map of the area as a whole, and as such, provides a useful starting point for PE. This more expansive view affords the flexibility needed to respond to hazards and happy opportunities alike. By supporting PE, funders endorse a perspective where detours and wrong turns can be as important as right answers when it comes to learning how do the work of social change.

During formative evaluation, MICI Committee members translated the four strategies into

a logic model used to monitor the progress of implementation (Figure 1). The inputs included staff and volunteer leaders and committee members, the thinking behind this work, and financial support from Ford Foundation, ANDP, and others. These inputs guided the work of MICI’s three subcommittees (Data, Advocacy, and Education) as they implemented the core strategies. The outcomes of this work included business criteria (sustainability, efficiency, growth) and programmatic criteria (idea infrastructure, political progress, and new demonstration projects). Using the logic behind the model, this sequence of activities would lead to the following strategic vision: *People in the Atlanta region live in affordable housing located in mixed-income, mixed-use communities near job centers.*

FIGURE 1 MICI's Logic Model



The facilitators visualized MICI's theory of change in the shape of a house (Figure 2). The foundation of the house consisted of staff and volunteers committed to the philosophy of mixed-income communities. These leaders were well-informed through access to data available at the Housing Resource Center. The walls of the house were MICI's two external relations strategies: (1) transforming this data into advocacy for policies that reduce barriers and (2) creating incentives for mixed-income communities and creating demonstration projects that provide real-world examples of mixed-income communities. Sharing the same vision as the logic model, the theory of change predicted that as a result of MICI's work, *people in the Atlanta region live in affordable housing located in mixed-income, mixed-use communities near job centers*. At the end of the next two years, MICI Committee members reflected on the evaluation findings, articulating progress to date, and updating priorities for the future. Although

the tactics shifted each year, the logic model and theory of change remained intact and provided stability and direction for the MICI efforts.

### Cost Benefit Analysis

Funders have historically tried to use cost benefit analysis to evaluate a social program with a mix of tangible and intangible outcomes (Selameab & Yeh, 2008). An effective cost benefit analysis requires the monetization of program costs and outcomes. However, social outcomes such as amplification of power or strengthened working relationships do not lend themselves to expression in monetary terms. This is largely because "social outcomes are not traded in markets (or are traded in very imperfect markets) and, therefore, there is no market-determined willingness to pay that could be used to estimate the value of those programs" (Selameab & Yeh 2008, p. 303). MICI's market was *mixed-income housing* that included housing accessible to low-, middle-, and high-in-

FIGURE 2 MICI's Theory of Change



come people, as a subset of the larger market for housing in the metro Atlanta area. At the outset, the MICI Committee and the ANDP board of directors expected that a cost benefit analysis could be conducted by tabulating changes in the availability of mixed-income housing, as specified in the initial grant proposal. As the MICI Committee began to work through this model during the formative stage of PE, the number, range and potential interactions of the numerous factors (e.g., political will, economic incentives, legal and policy constraints and imperatives), combined with complex and occasionally unknowable costs, suggested that cost benefit analysis did not tell the whole story. As a result, MICI Committee members and staff extended their initial list of outcomes (e.g., physical assets) to include less tangible outcomes (e.g., intellectual assets and leadership assets) that advanced the funder's strategy. This is a prime example of how PE can clarify the meaning and measurability of outcomes in a complex environment.

**MICI Outcomes**

Data for measuring outcomes was collected through discussions with the leaders of subcom-

mittees charged with implementing the strategies identified in the logic model. The summary report (Table 2) is an inventory of outcomes for the three impact strategies from the perspectives of *Physical Assets, Intellectual Capital, and Leadership/Social Capital*. Following is the summative evaluation of progress reported at the end of the evaluation.

*Strategy 1. Fully Implement the Regional Housing Resource Center (RHRC)*

The Data Subcommittee led MICI's effort to gather and disseminate high-quality information of interest to all stakeholders in the community. Their initial deliverable was a definitive study of challenges and opportunities related to housing affordability in metro Atlanta: *Making the Case (2004)* (referred to as *MTC1*), published in 2004. This was followed by *Making the Case 2 (2008)* (referred to as *MTC2*), published in 2008. The first study painted a picture of Atlanta's housing situation and explored the implications for residents, employers, and policymakers. The second study updated the statistics and focused on matters of health and its connectedness to transportation and the location of affordable housing. The

MICI Web site featuring these reports continues to be heavily visited. The Data Subcommittee also created a Regional Housing Resource Center Web site (<http://atlantaregionalhousing.org>), which offers a comprehensive set of data (updated and expanded regularly) for use by advocates and developers.

*Strategy 2. Reduce Barriers and Create Incentives for Mixed-Income Housing*

Acting as leaders in other settings, MICI staff and volunteers on the Advocacy Subcommittee were public proponents of policies supported the creation of significant mixed-income and affordable housing agreements with several proposed developments, such as Inclusionary Zoning and the creation of a Housing Trust Fund. At least one of these efforts came to fruition shortly after the evaluation concluded: MICI began advocacy for changes in Georgia's homestead exemption in late 2007, while the contents of this evaluation were being finalized. On May 14, 2008, the governor signed legislation passed by the Georgia legislature that ratified the changes MICI and ANDP had advocated, an event noted in this report even though it occurred outside of the timeframe of the evaluation. The proposal will now go to a ballot referendum: MICI plans to continue its efforts to inform voters about what the homestead exemption means to them.

*Strategy 3. Create and Promote Demonstration Projects That Model Successful MIC Strategies*

Under the guidance of the Education Subcommittee, the demonstration project strategy was in the early stages of implementation at the time of the evaluation. The subcommittee sought to provide feedback that can identify and ultimately showcase models that can be replicated by other developers by creating a template to analyze the relative strengths and weaknesses of mixed-income developments. The committee has begun to evaluate several projects and will select three to four to use to promote mixed-income development during the coming year. Over the next few years, ANDP has developed or was scheduled to develop five different demonstration projects with a total of 867 affordable and some mixed-income housing units.

The evaluation indicated that MICI made more progress in some areas than in others. The dynamic relationship between planned activities and actual deliverables reinforced the importance of strong working relationships between foundations and grantees. In MICI's case, the participation of Ford Foundation project officers ensured that the learning was mutual as, over the life of the grant, ideas became reality.

*The evaluation indicated that MICI made more progress in some areas than in others. The dynamic relationship between planned activities and actual deliverables reinforced the importance of strong working relationships between foundations and grantees.*

The evaluation identified measurable increases in the number of mixed-income communities (Table 2). Although ANDP and others developed new housing units during the time of the evaluation, additional developments had to do with the MICI Committee members' increased activity in advocacy for mixed-income and affordable housing in their various spheres of influence. These activities represented increases in intellectual and social capital that could, in the future, lead to increases in the stock of affordable housing, as predicted by MICI's theory of change. Evaluators look for what they set out to find: by taking the logic model and theory of change into account, the evaluators were better able to appreciate and articulate the complexity and richness of MICI's contribution to the field of mixed-income communities. This experience is consistent with Woodwell's observation that evaluation can go beyond "definitive judgments of success or failure ... when goals and outcomes are not defined at the start of an initiative but become clearer over time" [and] "the

**TABLE 2** Summative Findings — May 2008

<b>Strategic Vision: Working people in the Atlanta region have access to affordable housing (AH) located in mixed-income communities.</b>			
	<b>Physical assets</b>	<b>Intellectual capital</b>	<b>Leadership /social capital</b>
1. Fully Implement the Regional Housing Resource Center	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· The site went live Quarter 2, 2008, with a comprehensive set of data (updated and expanded regularly) for use by advocates and developers.</li> <li>· The site allows stakeholders to dig deeply and clarify what AH is and what related efforts are needed to resolve an issue (i.e., transportation).</li> <li>· This is the only one-stop shop in the region to get housing data for policy making or development.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· MICI published two editions of Making the Case (2004, 2008) (MTC1 and 2), creating a baseline and providing sophisticated arguments in support of affordable housing and mixed-income communities.</li> <li>· Increased partnership base has created a richer and more relevant data field.</li> <li>· The site uses user-friendly interactive technology.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· The engagement and funding support of multidisciplinary organizations such as the Urban Land Institute, the Greater Atlanta Homebuilders Association, and SouthFace Energy Institute has enhanced the process started by DCA, ARC, ANDP, and Georgia State University.</li> <li>· Volunteers drive the effort, staff supports it.</li> </ul>
2. Reduce barriers and create incentives for mixed-income housing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Ft. MacPherson base closing plan includes substantial homeless and affordable housing set asides.</li> <li>· MICI contribution to the City of Atlanta/enterprise land assembly project.</li> <li>· Affordable Housing set-asides in two intown DeKalb County projects: Clifton corridor plans for mixed-use and workforce housing, particularly in relationship to the needs of Emory University employees, and Sembler Company's project N. Druid Hills included MIC set-asides</li> <li>· TAD efforts encountered setbacks when state Supreme Court disallowed use of school tax funds.</li> <li>· MICI Committee members contribute to establishment of new \$75 million City of Atlanta Housing Trust Fund.</li> <li>· Inclusionary zoning (IZ) template developed for DeKalb County, City of Atlanta, and Fulton County.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Trust fund model positioned for possible replication.</li> <li>· IZ model legislation.</li> <li>· Report card being developed by ARC with specific housing input from MICI.</li> </ul>	<p>MICI played a nurturing or assisting role with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· LCC plank on housing choice</li> <li>· Georgia State Trade Association of Nonprofit Developers (GSTAND). advocacy role</li> <li>· Atlanta Housing Association of Neighborhood Developers (AHAND) leadership role with inclusionary zoning.</li> <li>· ANDP board member and MICI member gifts \$5 million to fund the Terwilliger Center for Workforce Housing as MIC partners.</li> <li>· LCI process including AH in planning process.</li> <li>· MICI members and DeKalb County Commissioners Jeff Rader and Larry Johnson put policy focus on expanding workforce housing in DeKalb County (Workforce Housing Ordinance and TAD set-asides).</li> <li>· Former ANDP board member Shirley Franklin creates affordable workforce housing plan informed by MTC research.</li> <li>· Active role of Homebuilders Association.</li> </ul>



TABLE 2 continued

Strategic Vision: Working people in the Atlanta region have access to affordable housing (AH) located in mixed-income communities.			
	Physical assets	Intellectual capital	Leadership /social capital
3. Create and promote demonstration projects that model successful MIC and AH strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Model for the evaluation of projects as potential MIC developments.</li> <li>MICI itself is a model with several replication efforts underway in suburban counties.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Several projects, including all of the new Atlanta Housing Authority (AHA) mixed-income projects, were identified that could act as model developments.</li> <li>Development of a rubric for analyzing the relative strengths and weaknesses of the developments.</li> <li>The committee has begun to evaluate the projects and will select three to four to use to promote MIC development.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Urban Land Institute (ULI) is using its technical expertise (Technical Assistance Panel [TAP]) as a partner in the ANDP's Adamsville Place development.</li> </ul>

evaluation function centers on monitoring what emerges from the work” (Woodwell, 2005, p. 14).

portant lessons for future wanderers, detailed below.

**Lessons From MICI’s Experience**

These findings suggest that for advocacy coalitions such as MICI, the path between intention and outcomes is more journey than destination. The winding path that leaders of democratic processes use to create public policies that favor mixed-income communities is much different from the more direct, interest-bearing path a developer follows to create a new project. The path taken by volunteers may be influenced by the pathways followed by the organizations they represent. The power of collaboration is limited by the amount of time partners have to invest in walking together, getting to know one another, and shaping a shared vision of outcomes. The overriding lesson for an advocacy coalition like MICI is, as Antonio Machado (1978) observed:

wanderer, there is no road,  
the road is made by walking.

After three years of making the road by walking, MICI has discerned a path as well as im-

*Balance Research and Consensus Building With Strategic Action*

While fostering agreement on key issues was helpful in engaging a broad base of support, the glacial pace of consensus building tended to alienate MICI Committee members who had a strong focus on action. At the outset, MICI emphasized building a conceptual infrastructure with its focus on research and publishing *Making the Case (2004)*. The time needed for this work and the relative inactivity in other areas frustrated some participants, who were volunteers with many other opportunities to exercise their leadership. On the other hand, the MICI model of building consensus around research-based positions proved to be helpful in attracting diverse stakeholders concerned about broad-based issues. Future leadership coalitions like MICI should be deliberate about identifying early wins (e.g., actionable proposals with high likelihood of success), while also investing time and resources in research and tools to use in attracting and educating new participants.

### *Leadership and Coordination Are Critical Success Factors*

Unlike many other coalitions, MICI had an administrative infrastructure that included staff and support services from a parent organization. During the evaluation, MICI's director and his boss (the founder of the parent organization) took new jobs, and John O'Callahan and Susan Adams assumed the roles of president and CEO and MICI director, respectively. At the same time the MICI Committee underwent planned turnover through volunteer leadership succession, with three chairs during the time of the evaluation. By clarifying the strategic focus of the project and providing regular check-ins over time, PE provided continuity and made it easy for a variety of participants to describe and act on the MICI Committee's vision. While individual staff members and committee volunteers readily contributed time and energy to the development of MICI, funder support for convenings, research, publications, and technical assistance helped maintain continuity and momentum.

### *MICI as a Mediating Variable*

At the end of the evaluation, the MICI Committee had made significant progress on all of its goals, reporting a perceptible change in the content and level of interest in the ongoing community conversation about affordable housing. Given that committee members were leaders of a wide variety of related initiatives, the evaluators were hard pressed to say that MICI alone was the author of this change. Instead, it appeared that MICI was a mediating variable, a factor that describes *how* rather than *when* effects will occur by accounting for the relationship between the independent and dependent variables. A mediating relationship is one in which the path relating A to C is mediated by a third variable (B). This logic is consistent with MICI's theory of change: an increase in the prevalence of mixed-income communities (Variable A) results, in part, from an increase in the number of informed, committed leaders who advocate for mixed-income communities (Variable C). MICI (Variable B) is the mediating variable that is (in part) causing the increase in informed advocacy (Variable C). Observations from this evaluation suggest that the relationship

between variables B and C may be developmental rather than causal: MICI educated leaders about the issues so that when they went into the community they were well-informed, persuasive advocates. The resource constraints and time requirements, the erratic pace of change, and the dynamic nature of processes that advance an initiative of this type affirm that MICI's evaluation tells the story of a community's evolution from idea to action, rather than a story of cause and effect. Additional research will be required to understand the outcomes that emerge and the factors that contribute to the long-range impact of such an evolution.

### *Questions of Validity and Generalizability*

Because PE is research in service to social change, the evaluators (in this case the facilitators in partnership with the MICI Committee) are at once the researchers and the subject of the research. With roots in the evaluation of social programs in developing countries, PE values a process of learning through experience that is accessible to everyday people, rather than the strict province of those with graduate degrees. In this context, the evaluators must demonstrate validity (e.g., the absence or presence of bias) and generalizability (e.g., utility to larger populations) (Crishna, 2006). In the MICI evaluation, the primary test of validity and reliability was the member check, a review of findings with participants during the annual planning meeting. In general, MICI Committee members agreed that MICI's primary direct impact was through advocacy and education, and that in turn influenced committee members' involvement in the broader community. The MICI Committee acted as a forum for substantive discussions about affordable and mixed-income housing where members debated priorities, exchanged ideas and support, and coordinated implementation plans. Thus armed, MICI Committee members proceeded to shape other institutional efforts. The capacity to trace community outcomes back to the work of the MICI Committee was also evidence of validity in this participatory evaluation. At the same time, such provenance is clearly not exclusive to MICI, since the members of the MICI Committee participated in a wide range of discrete activities. In-

TABLE 3 Evolution of MICI's Goals

Timeline	Activity
Activities identified in the original proposal to Ford Foundation, 2003	<p>Activity 1: Making the case for equitable distribution of affordable housing development in the Atlanta region.</p> <p>Activity 2: "Building consensus": Developing a communications capacity that can provide powerful messages for equitable development and engage key constituencies and policy players.</p> <p>Activity 3: Developing strategies and supporting public policy initiatives that will result in the actual development of affordable and mixed-income housing (ownership and rental) throughout the region.</p>
Strategies identified in MICI Committee first-round planning goals, 2004	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Develop a Regional Housing Resource Center</li> <li>2. Establish a Regional Housing Coalition</li> <li>3. Develop and adopt a Regional Fair Share Plan</li> <li>4. Introduce inclusionary zoning</li> <li>5. Connect housing with local land use plans</li> <li>6. Account for the transportation cost of housing</li> <li>7. Implement a regional housing trust fund for metro Atlanta</li> </ol>
Strategies identified in formative evaluation, 2005	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Fully Implement the Regional Housing Resource Center</li> <li>2. Reduce barriers and create incentives for mixed-income housing</li> <li>3. Create and promote demonstration projects that model successful mixed-income community and affordable housing strategies</li> <li>4. Ensure optimal use of staff, volunteers, and material resources</li> </ol>

deed, to some extent, the evaluation process itself increases the likelihood that committee members will attribute their newfound knowledge to the MICI experience.

#### *The Evolution of MICI's Goals*

MICI's strategy and goals evolved over the course of the evaluation (Table 3). While MICI maintained a consistent focus on its original commitment to Ford Foundation, the specific activities changed based on available opportunities, emerging capacity, and the interests of leadership. As several subcommittee members reiterated, "MICI is like a large and inclusive table which brings many different parties together in a common mission." The longer list of strategies that emerged from the 2005 planning process was shortened when the MICI Committee became a regional housing coalition (Item 2) and *Making the Case (2004)* identified the transportation cost of housing (Item 6). The MICI Committee modified its approach to the Regional Fair Share Plan (Item 3) because of the lack of receptivity to regional equity among community leaders, choosing to focus instead on elements of regional equity rather than

the big picture. Thus the evolution of MICI's goals and strategies reflects the interests of parties at the table, as well as the original conception at the time of funding.

#### *A Note About the Role of the Facilitator*

One of the conventions of evaluation is the claim of neutrality and objectivity by third-party evaluators who identify and track measures of progress and outcomes (or lack thereof). In PE, facilitators are colearners with project stakeholders, so neutrality is less well-defined. In the MICI evaluation, the facilitators provided technical assistance, leadership, and staff support for the evaluation process. Technical assistance involved providing expert knowledge of the PE process, facilitation, and communications among participants. Leadership activities included presentations to the MICI Committee and the board of Atlanta Neighborhood Development Partnership (ANDP, the sponsoring organization), group process design, training for stakeholders in their roles and responsibilities, and ownership of the overall strategy for evaluation. Staff support included logistical activities such as scheduling meetings

and interviews, data collection, transcription, and documentation.

By channeling the spirit and intent of the project, the facilitators worked in partnership with the stakeholders to “tell the story” as it unfolded. As work progressed, the facilitators were increasingly part of the story as well as storytellers. Over an extended period of evaluation, the facilitators were challenged to maintain a level of objectivity, freshness, and openness that allowed expected and unexpected observations to emerge. In some ways the role was that of “pushy colleague,” where the facilitators were at once members of the team and at the same time outsiders. As a result, facilitators of PE were obligated to disclose their own biases and blind spots to other stakeholders in the evaluation and their reports included comments by the facilitators describing how their relationship to the study evolved over time.

## Conclusion

From the outset, MICI assumed the importance of engaging people with diverse and sometimes conflicting interests as part of promoting social change. Although the logic model and theory of change continued to serve as an accurate portrayal of the initial design, practice over the period of the evaluation was considerably less linear, influenced as much by the nature of real-time opportunities as by the initial vision. As one MICI Committee member commented, “When you are doing this work, it’s hard to predict what will be important on any given day. We’ve got to work those opportunities even while we keep our eye on the overall goal.” PE permitted sufficient richness and depth of reflection to support this leadership view by depicting the complexity of the MICI experience. The challenge will be for funders, grantees, and facilitators (a) to ensure sufficient rigor so that PE findings are valid and reliable, (b) to make more rigorous evaluation frameworks (such as theories change and logic models) accessible and meaningful to nonevaluators, and (c) to take into account the predictable outcomes *and* the surprises that emerge from a study of this type. With a systematic approach to information gathering and

regularly scheduled opportunities for reflection, PE can facilitate learning and growth for grantees and grantmakers alike.

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