



Improving EPA's Performance with Program Evaluation

Evaluation of Community-Based Environmental Protection Projects: Accomplishments & Lessons Learned

Series No. 5

By continuously evaluating its programs, EPA is able to capitalize on lessons learned and incorporate that experience into other programs. This enables the Agency to streamline and modernize its operations while promoting continuous improvement and supporting innovation. This series of short sheets on program evaluation is intended to share both the results and benefits of evaluations conducted across the Agency, and share lessons learned about evaluation methodologies in this evolving discipline. For more information contact EPA's Evaluation Support Division at www.epa.gov/evaluate.

At a Glance

Evaluation Purpose

To evaluate the effectiveness of the Regional CBEP process.

Evaluation Type

Process Evaluation

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Partners

Office of Policy, Economics and Innovation, EPA Regions 3, 4, 7, 8

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Web Links

<http://www.epa.gov/ecocommunity/pdf/evaluate.pdf>

Background: Why was an evaluation performed?

Community-based environmental protection (CBEP) refers to an integrated, place-based, participatory approach to managing the environment that simultaneously considers environmental, social, and economic concerns. The CBEP process "brings together public and private stakeholders within a place or community to identify environmental concerns, set priorities, and implement comprehensive solutions. CBEP considers environmental protection along with human social needs, works toward achieving long-term ecosystem health, and fosters linkages between economic prosperity and environmental well-being." (U.S. EPA, February 1999)

EPA supports and participates in an array of CBEP efforts throughout the United States. EPA conducted an evaluation of five place-based projects in which the Agency participated, either as a project leader or in a supporting role. The objective of the evaluation was to identify: (1) the advantages and disadvantages of the community-based approach; (2) the benefits that would not be realized under traditional environmental management programs; and (3) based on EPA's experience, ways that the Agency can tailor its participation and support of community initiatives to help produce the best results.

Basic Evaluation Approach: How did they do it?

The evaluation required five steps, outlined below.

Step I: Development of basic criteria to select CBEP projects that were the subject of the evaluation. The criteria included geographic diversity, diversity of mission (e.g., ecosystem management versus public health protection), a range of EPA roles (e.g., lead versus support role), and projects that encountered institutional challenges.

Step II: Development of a basic set of questions that served as a foundation/framework for the interviews.

Step III: Collection of data through phone interviews (EPA managers, staff from partner agencies, non-governmental organizations, and citizen participants) and from a wide variety of written material (project reports, online project descriptions and internal tracking materials).

Step IV: Analysis of data.

Step V: Development of report findings and recommendations.

Step VI: Peer Review

Evaluation Results: What was learned?

In general, the evaluation suggests that the CBEP approach can enhance the success of environmental protection efforts, provided that the process is carefully designed to organize the input of key participants and delineate clear roles and responsibilities. CBEP can also yield a variety of benefits that traditional regulatory approaches may not. These spinoff benefits include creation of new partnerships, enhancement of EPA's image among key constituencies, and development of local capacity to address environmental issues independently. Finally, the evaluations suggest that EPA plays an important role in promoting CBEP, both through funding and through technical support and management of multi-disciplinary initiatives. Additional findings are

presented below.

How Does the CBEP Process Affect the Achievement of Project Goals?

The evaluation's findings illustrate that:

- a meaningful geographic boundary can enhance projects success;
- CBEP projects require carefully designed decision-making processes;
- clear roles and leadership responsibilities are essential; and
- CBEP projects may require special time, resource, and leadership commitments.

What Value-Added Benefits Does CBEP Create?

The evaluation's findings illustrate that:

- clear performance indicators are essential to project management;
- CBEP can yield new forms of integration and coordination;
- CBEP provides partnership benefits that extend beyond the project;
- CBEP promotes capacity-building and sustainability;
- CBEP efforts create legitimacy and signal community support; and
- CBEP can influence broader public policy.

Approach for this Evaluation

Step I

Develop CBEP Selection Criteria

Step II

Construct Framework of Questions

Step III

Collect Data through Interviews and Literature Reviews

Step IV

Analyze Data

Step V

Prepare Report Findings and Recommendations

Step VI

Peer Review

How Can EPA Best Support CBEP?

The evaluation's findings illustrate that:

- EPA funding, and how it is provided, is of crucial importance;
- in its CBEP involvement, EPA should play a “niche” role; and
- EPA may be uniquely equipped to organize diverse interests around multi-disciplinary issues.

Evaluation Outcome: What happened as a result?

EPA's Office of Policy and Economic Innovation (OPEI) plans to distribute the report to key stakeholders for review, and share it with others as a model for community-based approaches.