

Towards a Livelihood

A practical approach to learning about the outcomes of women's CED

BY JANET MURRAY & MARY FERGUSON

In our travels across Canada, we at Eko Nomos have witnessed the dedication and commitment of practitioners involved in community economic development (CED) by and for women. We have heard their testimonials about the profound changes wrought in the lives of the women with whom they work.

But stories are no longer enough to show the power of connecting women to economic security. How is it possible to *prove* that women, their families, and the communities in which they live are better off as a result of the efforts and investments of CED staff and programs? CED organizations must be better prepared to answer this question, and to explain more effectively the complex steps – both forward and back – that women take on their journey towards a sustainable livelihood.

To demonstrate clearly the results they are achieving – what works, as well as what does not – practitioners need to take a strategic approach and to make space for more reflection, assessment, and learning. Learning and outcomes evaluation processes should become a regular part of the programming they undertake. By making this investment, CED organizations will be able to talk knowledgeably and confidently about their work to each other, to their communities and to funders.

Women need livelihoods, & there is more to a livelihood than just a job. A livelihood comprises a package of assets. Developing a livelihood takes time & persistence. There are many setbacks along the way. These are precisely the changes we must document if we want to alter the way funders view & sustain our work.

They will be able to show how it alters women's lives and can become a source of hope and change at many levels.

Current Evaluation Practices

Of course, a lot of CED organizations already make an investment in evaluation. But there are many drawbacks to the approaches they take.

Most evaluation is driven by funders who often pursue an "efficiency" agenda to ensure accountability for funds and results. They want answers to such questions as, "Did the money get spent according to budget?" and "Did participants get a job?" This approach reflects an overly simplistic view both of women's progress towards economic engagement and independence, and of CED itself.

Practitioners know that women need livelihoods, and that there is more to a livelihood than just a job. A livelihood comprises a package of assets that includes strong identity and motivation, social connections and support, and job and income security. Developing a livelihood takes time and persistence. There are many setbacks along the way: loss of housing, family crises, and ill health, to name a few. These are

precisely the changes we must document if we want to alter the way funders view and sustain our work.

Yet when we discuss evaluation with various CED groups, we come across many misconceptions and fearful reactions. It is too time-consuming, we are told, too focussed on numbers. It places too great a burden on organizations already struggling under a heavy workload with dwindling resources. Indeed, many see evaluation as an activity that funders force them to do, in order for them to receive support.

Some organizations, however, are breaking out of that pattern. They have become more assertive with their funders, engaging them as partners in a collaborative learning process about progress towards livelihoods. Yet to accomplish this, they need new ways to document and learn from results.

Evaluation through Collaborative Inquiry

Since 1988, Eko Nomos has been engaged in working with community-based organizations to do simple and effective evaluations of their programs by setting up basic processes to record information about the changes in the lives of their participants.

The Sustainable Livelihoods Framework



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As evaluators we do not make “objective,” external judgments about an initiative. Rather, we facilitate learning and build an organization’s capacity to do its own research and assessment. We often assist staff to plan and carry out outcomes research themselves. While we use traditional tools like the collection of statistical data, we emphasize the importance of gathering qualitative information in order to develop a more holistic “portrait” of outcomes.

Our approach to learning and evaluation has three cornerstones:

1. We emphasize *collaboration*, involving all stakeholders in the learning and evaluation process – from planning and design, all the way to research and analysis.
2. Rather than taking information *from* people, we guide a participatory learning process that respects their knowledge and culture and encourages group-based reflection and discussion. This *action research approach* allows the practitioner to shape her own understanding of the problem being addressed, to own the learning, and thereby to devise sensible “home-grown” solutions. An action research approach is more respectful to

everyone involved, and more appropriate in a complex learning process.

3. We have adapted the *Sustainable Livelihoods model* in order to offer a new way of thinking about how organizations can support women to engage in the economy and in society. (See diagram above and sidebar, over page.) The model is applied in two ways. Integrated into program documentation systems, it supports the assessment of participants’ progress. As a framework for the research, it helps everyone involved to learn about livelihoods and assess the effectiveness of the program interventions.

We have found that many women’s CED organizations feel an affinity for the

Sustainable Livelihoods model. It mirrors the holistic, asset-based approach to building livelihoods that they know works best for women. They are able to create a more realistic, complete picture of the lives of women involved in their programs, and can show more clearly the whole range of changes that happen as a result of women’s participation in CED.

A New Learning Agenda

Some funders are taking action, too. They have built learning and outcomes documentation into their funding processes and are encouraging women’s CED organizations to step back and reflect on their work and, in so doing, improve it.

Integrated into program documentation systems, the Sustainable Livelihoods model supports the assessment of participants’ progress. As a framework for the research, it helps everyone involved to learn about livelihoods & assess the effectiveness of the program interventions.

The Sustainable Livelihoods Model

The Sustainable Livelihoods model focusses on understanding the context that creates and perpetuates women's vulnerability to poverty, in order to support more effective strategic interventions. Originally developed by the Institute for Development Studies (Brighton, U.K) to assess community assets, the model has been adapted by Eko Nomos to explore asset development among people engaged in CED.

The model explores the context of economic experience at two levels: that of *the individual and her circumstances*, and that of *the broader institutions and systems shaping the options open to marginalized people*. It acknowledges that while women can and do make choices that

deplete assets and make their lives less stable, there are powerful external systems and forces that combine to keep them trapped in poverty.

Assets are the building blocks of a sustainable livelihood at the individual level (and a sustainable community at the neighbourhood level). Women pursue various asset-building strategies to help them both to survive and to cope with and adapt to the context that makes them vulnerable to poverty and social exclusion. Only by increasing their access to each and all of the five asset areas do they move towards stability and sustainability.

These five asset areas offer a holistic picture of all the capabilities, resources, and entitlements that women have

invested in and developed over time. In its focus on women's assets rather than their deficits, the model avoids the negative, deficit-based approach that is so common to the social service field.

- *Social Assets*: the social connections that women can draw upon to achieve their goals. By building a foundation of networks and contacts, they find that they have enhanced their support systems, making it easier for them to develop other assets.
- *Physical Assets*: basic needs for housing and food, and access to the information and services required to build a livelihood.
- *Human Assets*: refer to how employable a woman may be, in terms of the skills, knowledge, education, health, and leadership that define her employability. Although central to all livelihood strategies, human assets alone are not sufficient to ensure progress towards a sustainable livelihood.
- *Personal Assets*: women's sense of personal and cultural identity, private values, and beliefs. Personal assets include self-confidence, self-esteem and the motivation and strength that women may be able to bring to the process of personal transformation.
- *Financial Assets*: earnings, money, and financial security (including access to financial entitlements from government). These offer an important entry-point for transformation and development. The ability to earn money and decide how it should be spent provides a powerful means of reversing the downward spiral into poverty, and of building up a wider range of assets.

Asset Categories

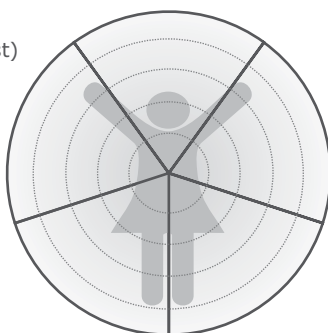
Human Assets

- My health (mental & physical)
- My ability to work
- My ability to keep work
- My skills & schooling (e.g., for volunteer experience)
- My ability to set goals & work towards them

Physical Assets

My access to:

- Housing (quality & low-cost)
- Food
- Safety
- Transport
- Child/elder care
- Recreation
- Information
- Computers



Personal Assets

- How I value myself
- How motivated I am
- My spirituality
- My cultural identity
- My ability to do things on my own
- The control I feel I have over my life

Financial Assets

- My income
- My savings & debt
- My valuable possessions (e.g., car)
- How I understand money
- My attitude to money (e.g., my right to succeed, value of my time)
- My control over my money & assets

Social Assets

- My support from family, friends, community
- My ability to balance work & personal life
- My ability to lead
- My ability to speak out for community or political change

The Sustainable Livelihoods model has proven adaptable and fruitful not just for the field of women's CED. It also benefits projects concerning the outcomes of harm reduction and the work of community service organizations in rural and urban areas.

For a more detailed description of the model, go to the website of the Institute for Development Studies, www.livelihoods.org. ■

One such funder is the Canadian Women's Foundation (CWF). Together with Eko Nomos, the CWF has been working for seven years to develop outcomes research among its grantees. Our role in the process has been to provide a framework, a learning process, and tools for the research, based on the Sustainable Livelihoods model; to help organizations organize and document their findings; and to assist in analyzing and drawing out learning from this information.

We want to set a new agenda for learning in which organizations ask such questions as:

- Have we been successful in building livelihoods and improving women's quality of life?
- How do women make progress towards economic self-sufficiency? What are their livelihood strategies?
- How do organizations make the most impact in their work? How do they support women's livelihood strategies?
- Do women end up having more control over their income and their lives?
- How does their progress affect their families and communities?
- What are the policy issues that hold women back? What are the opportunities for policy change?

The design of this research process is grounded in extensive investments in learning and outcomes documentation that have been made over the last eight years by two funding collaboratives organized and managed by the CWF, the

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Women and Economic Development Consortium and the CWF Economic Development Collaborative. (See the article in this edition, p. 44.) Grants from these funders have enabled ten CED organizations to document and analyse the changes that their programs effected in women's lives over periods of three or more years.

As a support for this research process, Eko Nomos adapted the Sustainable Livelihoods model to gain a better understanding of the profound effects of social exclusion on the lives of disadvantaged women. We identified a holistic range of assets that women combine to build their economic security and independence and achieve social inclusion.

Eko Nomos has continued to define and develop participatory, outcomes-based tools in co-operation with CWF and a range of other funders. The CWF Collaborative Fund and Eko Nomos are now supporting the development of a package to help practitioners use the Sustainable Livelihoods approach in

documenting the outcomes of their work. This user-friendly outcomes package involves both the collection of "traditional" statistical information, and a more detailed process of inquiry to capture the "soft" outcomes of women's participation in their programs:

- Solid baseline information about the women is gathered through statistical methods and case notes. The statistical information includes basic demographics, social assistance history, employment, training and education, primary and secondary income sources, housing status and quality, the percentage of income spent on housing and current health status.
- The women's livelihood assets are "mapped" at the outset of involvement, and at specific stages during and after the program.
- "Portraits" of a sample of the women are created on the basis of friendly, informal interviews conducted before, during and after involvement in the program. These portraits bring about a

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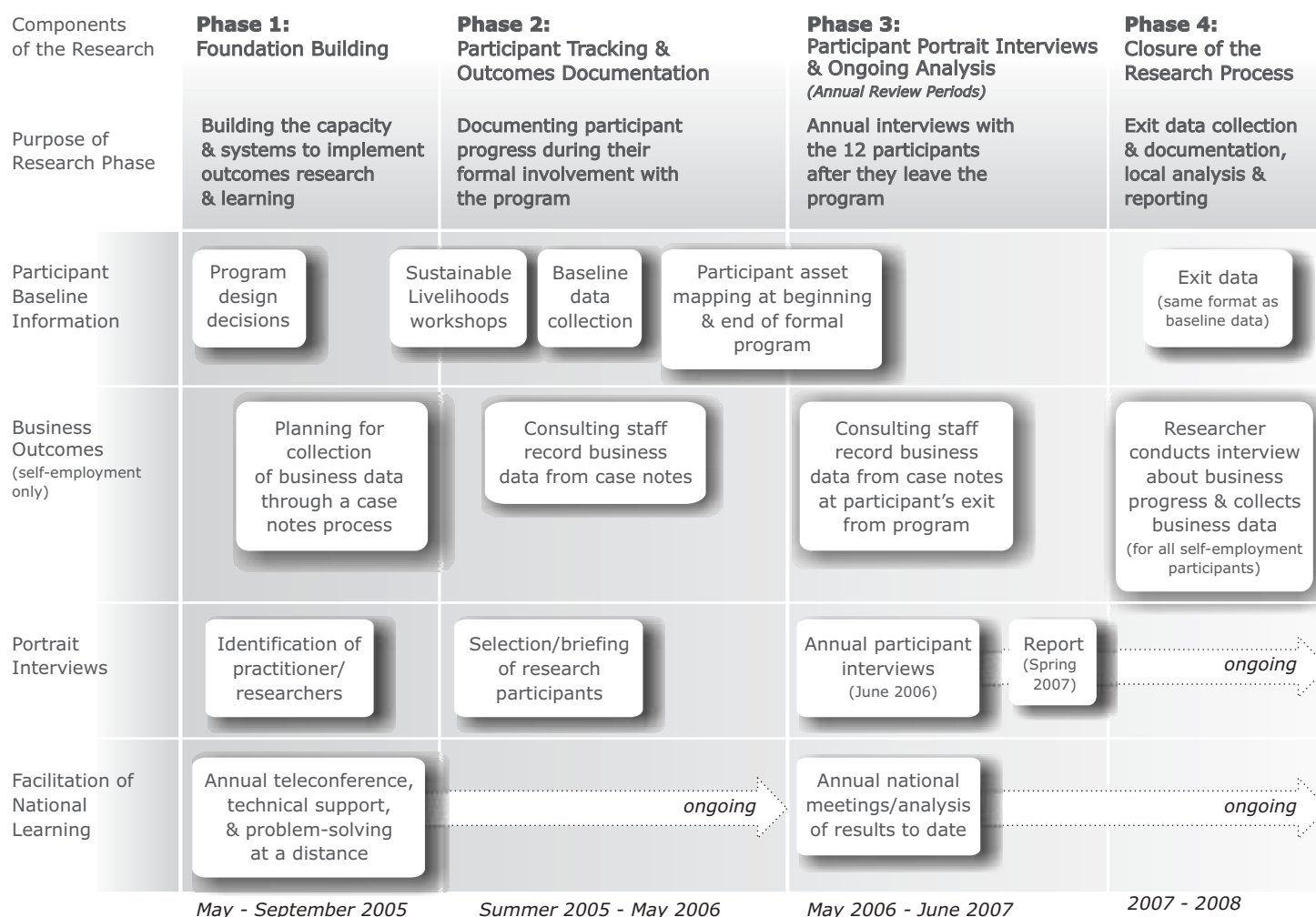


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more detailed, well-rounded understanding of changes in their lives. (See chart, above.)

One exciting aspect of this process is the fact that the organizations themselves do the research and learning. Practitioners are having ongoing conversations with participants about their current situation, their hopes, and their progress. Over the years to come, these diverse organizations will be able to share with each other both statistical outcomes and the less tangible results of their initiatives with women.

The Sustainable Livelihoods model has been highly influential in promoting a more women-focussed, holistic approach to program delivery in the field of

women's CED in Canada. The results of this work as it unfolds will be published over the next few years. To find out what we are learning and to get access to the tools that are being used, contact the Canadian Women's Foundation or Eko Nomos.



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Some recent publications by Janet Murray and Mary Ferguson that use the Sustainable Livelihoods model are:

- *The Business of Inclusion*. Toronto: Toronto Enterprise Fund. March 2004, 31 August 2005 <<http://action.web.ca/home/uwgt/reports.shtml>>
- *Women in Transition Out of Poverty: An asset-based approach to building sustainable livelihoods*. Toronto: Women and Economic Development Consortium. February 2001. 31 August 2005 <<http://www.canadianwomen.org/eng/3/3h.asp>>
- *Women in Transition Out of Poverty: A guide to effective practice in promoting sustainable livelihoods through enterprise development*. Women and Economic Development Consortium. January 2002. 31 August 2005 <<http://www.canadianwomen.org/eng/3/3h.asp>>