SOMETIMES TO HEAR THE MUSIC YOU HAVE TO TURN DOWN THE NOISE |

A GAME-CHANGER APPROACH TO POVERTY REDUCTION STRATEGY AND EVALUATION

MARK HOLMGREN

Noise.

Noise is often a loud disturbance. Like ambulance sirens, low flying jets, or that *honk, honk, honk* of the impatient driver behind you. Some of that noise is a necessary or understandable side effect while other noise is irritating because it is uncalled for and unwanted.

From a poverty reduction perspective, we are inundated with the voices of our clients, our funders and donors, our colleagues, governments at all levels, business leaders and their labour counterparts, and on it goes. And of course, we add our voice to the mix as well. It's like sitting in a room with 100 people who are all talking about

important things but overall the messages in the room are undecipherable.

What we all want to make and listen to is beautiful music with rich melodies and harmonies that move us and inspire us to keep creating, keep singing together. That's what this article is about: lessening the noise that envelopes us and increasing our capacity to make music together when it comes to identifying, acting on, and evaluating poverty reduction efforts.

Let's begin with measurement. Most of us are steadfast in our belief that we must measure the work we do. We are compelled to know if we are achieving our stated goals. This is what outcome measurement promised us when it first showed its face in the 1980s. It would clarify our achievement. It would prove the demonstrable differences we work so hard to bring about. It would create the music of our success.

Unfortunately, the rapid uptake of outcome measurement became rather messy fairly quickly as everyone set out to create their logic models and outcome measures. Each funder came up with its own. Each agency scrambled to meet the various and often laborious demands on their time and resources to meet the individual needs of funders. We debated – and still do – whether this or that is an outcome or an output. We became mired in the struggle to prove we were the cause of success, that the outcomes realized were brought about by us, not by someone else. We call that attribution analysis, and while we seem to understand that attribution is more myth than possibility, we keep trying to figure that out. If you think about it, proving that "my work" is responsible for a successful outcome in this day and age of partnerships and collaboration is a desire that doesn't fit with our practice.

Too often evaluation is mysterious noise. We can't discern a beat we can tap our feet to. The melody we seek is elusive. Outcomes and traditional evaluation approaches were supposed to be, or help us create, the beautiful music we so desperately want to sing and listen to. But more often than not we are swimming in noise.

When I set out to write this article, my sole focus wasn't on lessening the noise. It was not about coming up with an innovation in evaluation. Rather my focus was on making our evaluation work easier for our Vibrant Communities Canada members to participate in.

My conversations about this with folks inside and outside of Tamarack began after Vibrant Communities Canada had launched Phase I of a three-phase evaluation framework for our members – 51 of them working locally to reduce poverty. Phase I involved responding to a fairly straightforward survey that asked questions about structure, governance, partnerships, resources, priorities and so forth.

Somehow we thought that "straightforward" meant easy to fill out in a short period of time. We were wrong. We had to extend the survey deadline three times before the response rate warranted analysis. Truth is, the survey posed a significant capacity challenge for our members, many if not most of whom are doing evaluation work already and who tend to do so off the corner of their desks.

We knew we had to rethink the VCC Evaluation Framework and in particular rethink Phase II, which we already knew would be more complicated and time-consuming than Phase I because of its focus on collecting data that in effect "clearly" indicated or proved that local folks living in poverty were escaping poverty because of the efforts of local poverty reduction groups.

The more we talked about this, however, the more we realized that there was no simple fix or minor adjustments that would answer these capacity challenges. That got us to thinking about our intentions, what we really wanted, and what would

be truly helpful to our members in terms of understanding their progress as well as advancing learning and informing new or adapted go-forward strategies.

We also needed to design a process that optimally addressed evaluation elements like the reliability of data being shared, data integrity, and the consistency of participation year over year among a membership where staff come and go. As is often the case with an emerging idea, it was the mixture of all the above that resulted in the emergence of a what-if proposition.

At the time I was a part of the final days of the Edmonton Mayor's Task Force to Eliminate Poverty in a Generation. We were soon to vote on an Implementation Roadmap that would frame the work of the overall Task Force Strategy document. The work of the Task Force had involved seven working groups, two roundtables, a host of consultations and surveys, and many presentations from community leaders and practitioners. All in all, close to a thousand people were involved. From that work, 80 recommendations were identified, which collectively produced more than 400 articulated actions. Further work aggregated all of that into 28 priorities.

The prospect of going forward with a Strategy with so many priorities felt like a plan that was a mile wide and an inch deep. At one of the Task Force meetings I invoked the notion of Game Changer priorities as a way of creating focus going forward. As is the case in many such conversations, I was

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forming my ideas as I was speaking, so I am sure there was a good dose of clumsiness in my opinion.

However, the conversation took hold and it wasn't long before we understood the notion of a Game Changer as a big change priority that if adequately addressed produced benefits and outcomes that cascaded into other areas. For example, we knew that optimally addressing the need for more safe and affordable housing would have positive influences on socialization, community participation, stabilization of health problems, job hunting, and access to support services.

So our task force came up with six Game Changers which served as a statement of superordinate priorities that, if addressed well, would make huge gains in poverty reduction. As I reviewed the Implementation Plan draft, my re-acquaintance with Edmonton's six Game Changers prompted me to pose this question: *What if we focused the VCC evaluation on Game Changers?* Our Phase I survey had accumulated our members' priorities, and a review of them offered support to the notion that many of these Game Changers were shared among members.

**Edmonton's Six Game Changers
for Poverty Reduction:**

- Eliminate Racism
- Livable Incomes
- Affordable Housing
- Accessible and Affordable Transit
- Affordable, Quality Child Care
- Access to Mental Health Services and Addiction Supports

Initially we limited our view of Game Changers to a way of designing our evaluation, but we soon understood that an overall Game Changer mindset about poverty reduction could offer us so much more.

It could offer a different if not new way of seeing priorities, strategies, funding, resource allocation, and innovation. It could provide a frame for decision-making, a way of focusing in on big change

possibilities, and it would allow us to communicate more effectively about what is happening across the country to significantly address poverty.

The potential consequences of this approach were also considered. Saying yes to Game Changer priorities and devoting more attention and resources to them meant we were saying no to other priorities, or perhaps more accurately meant reducing some current priorities to a type of secondary or tertiary status. That said, we also acknowledged that when we operate with a plethora of priorities and strategies, we run the risk of thinning out the overall impact of our work.

GAME CHANGER THINKING AND IMPLICATIONS

From our conversations and additional thinking, we came to this understanding of what a Game Changer looks like, within the context of poverty reduction:

> *A poverty reduction Game Changer is a priority area or strategy that not only aims to deliver on its own specific goals or outcomes, but also elicits an array of other significant, positive outcomes that cascade both within and outside of its area of emphasis, and consequently profoundly impacts the course, character, or extent of poverty experienced by human beings, both individually and collectively.*

As touched on earlier, this emerging definition not only creates focus on the big impacts that matter the most, it allows us to turn down the noise and avoid the mess of trying to craft strategies and their corresponding evaluation efforts for the hundreds of actions we undertake address poverty. To be frank, this means that a Game Changer priority or strategy is more critical to tackle than others that lack this cascading effect and that fall short of profoundly impacting the course of poverty in our communities.

Not only does taking a Game Changer stance create focus for priority setting and strategy building, game changer thinking offers the potential to do the following:

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Clarify and Advance Collective Impact Efforts

Bringing together multi-sector players to work on a shared aspiration that offers the potential to have large scale and hopefully sustainable impact clearly has growing traction across communities. However, each player brings along its own evaluative obligations to local funders, donors, or customers/clients. More often than not each organization faces varied reporting protocols, timelines and tools from numerous funders, meaning they enter the VCC evaluation effort already burdened with the weight of current obligations. This makes one of the key conditions of Collective Impact – shared measurement – difficult to pull off.

Imagine a widely adopted Game Changer mindset about poverty reduction which not only clarifies the work of the Collective Impact efforts but that also shifts how funders and service deliverers think about purpose and strategy. All funders are faced with rising demand for limited resources. Better understanding Game Changers and their full reach as poverty reduction priorities could very well simplify priority setting, funding streams, and better frame the work of those funded.

Emphasizing Progress Over Proof

As much as we like to evaluate and as much as we continue to seek proof of achieving stated outcomes, it seems that proving such achievement is more elusive than conclusive. The nature of poverty reduction work cannot be fully understood in annual cycles and quarterly reports. Getting to a particular result can take years and often in the formative days of such work, data that demonstrates change in people's lives is not as evident as it might be later on – note the stress on *might be*. It takes time to change systems and policies, to realize economic or workforce changes, to increase income levels, and so on. One can argue – and we are – that emphasizing progress more so than proof not only makes sense, it may very well be the best we can do.

By focusing on progress, outcomes become much more than an element of evaluation. They become

visions and explicit aspirations with strategic imperatives that are used for planning, organizing, innovating, and allocating resources. Outcomes become not so much what we are trying to prove across an endless landscape of efforts, but rather more about our strategic intent or our commitment to allocating more of our limited resources to strategic imperatives.

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Game changer outcomes do call for Game Changer indicators. We still need indicators because we still need to measure, but the implication here is that we choose to measure fewer things in order to better assess progress toward the big changes called for by our visions and purpose statements.

From Attribution toward Contribution

The incessant struggle we have with attribution analysis cannot be ignored in a Game Changer approach to priority setting and evaluative work that is about assessing progress rather than proof. We are choosing to sidestep the attribution challenge, which we think is too messy to be assessed reliably, especially across the VCC network. Instead we are choosing to focus on contribution as the key driver behind understanding the progress being realized. While assessing contribution is not a simple thing to do, its emphasis is different from that of attribution in distinct ways:

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Attribution Analysis	Contribution Analysis
Focuses on whether or not the desired outcome was achieved by the organization or its program/service.	Focuses on the extent to which the organization or its program/service contributed to the realization of the outcome.
The emphasis is on causation and on identifying "causal links" that indicate the program/service is the cause of the final outcome.	The emphasis is on identifying the program/service's involvement in or influence of the final outcome.
Attribution tends to be more about reaching a definitive assessment of the program/service's causal effect, measured within a defined timeline (e.g. annually).	Contribution can happen in various levels (e.g. minimum, moderate, high) and over various time periods (e.g. episodic influence, strategy-defined time-lines).
Tends to measure data against a benchmark (e.g. LICO or LIM) and offer comparative data over time. The very nature of attribution analysis is to concentrate on the identified program/service, not the larger mix of efforts.	Sees the achievement of outcomes as being brought about by a complexity of efforts by known and unknown players. The goal is to understand one's impact on the overall achievement.

One argument against contribution analysis is that it may be overly subjective, vulnerable to over-claiming one's contribution and under-reporting the contribution of others. I agree. There is that risk. That said, attribution analysis is primarily a subjective undertaking as well, replete with the same, if not more, risks.

Evaluation of poverty reduction efforts does not typically provide objective results. It may be time to accept the subjectivity of such efforts and work together to ensure our subjectivity is rational, that how we see our work has integrity, and that the claims we make are reasonable and defensible.

Policy and Political Possibilities

A network of local communities focused on local and network-wide Game Changers will not go unnoticed by governments, funders, or the public. Advocacy efforts could then hone in on Game Changer systems and policies. All parties may see more possibilities and clarity in how systems reform or policy changes can support, and even create, game-changing benefits for citizens.

Game Changers: Potential Movement Makers

There is a growing understanding of how a movement to end poverty can resonate with the public and lead to the kinds of actions that go well beyond what is possible by organizations, funders, and formal collaborations. The public won't rally behind a plan with dozens of priorities and myriad strategies and actions. Changing public perception and understanding is one thing, but engaging the general public in a compelling cause that, while complex, is easy to understand, is quite another matter, and perhaps is what really matters.

Learning is Paramount

The richness of the learning that evaluations can provide is at least as important as assessing progress toward game-changing aspirations. Evaluations should point to what is working, what needs improvement, and what needs to stop or slow down; they should offer data, information and stories that are fertile ground for innovation. Our eventual success doesn't just benefit from learning; it requires it. In the Game Changer context, the learning focus is concentrated, more focused on the big change actions we are undertaking than on everything and anything.

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GAME CHANGER EVALUATION

As mentioned previously, we will identify Game Changers from the list of priorities shared with us by our members, and we will reference research and other materials that support the classification of a priority area as having a cascading effect. We are not yet done with this investigation, but have

identified two examples: Affordable Public Transportation and Safe, Affordable Housing (see the final pages). They are intended to provide a good sense of where we are headed in terms of articulating Game Changers, sharing cascading potential, and presenting some early thinking on possible indicators of progress.

This article is a work in progress. We anticipate there will be challenges and perhaps criticisms, as well as those who wish to add to this thinking. We welcome all of it. My hope is to offer ideas that are "roughly right," an expression I first heard from my friend and colleague, Mark Cabaj, and which I have stolen on many occasions.

Reducing or ending poverty is the music we want to create and listen to. Working with complexity involves turning down its noise, making yes and no decisions, and creating transformative instruments to play the song we want to sing. Orchestras, choirs, and other performance groups make beautiful music together. The expression of their talents and skills involves making choices about what they can and cannot include in their repertoire. We understand they can't perform everything. They can't appease every player or every audience member. Perhaps there is a lesson in that for all of us doing poverty reduction work.

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ABOUT MARK HOLMGREN

Mark Holmgren joined Tamarack in January 2016 to lead its Vibrant Communities initiative and sits on Tamarack's team of Directors. His background includes providing executive leadership to two Edmonton-based, inner city human service agencies focused on addressing poverty and homelessness, as well as providing consultation to a many groups on issues relating to social housing development, organizational change, strategy development and leadership.

For the past few years, Mark has been developing and putting into practice what he calls, "Upside Down Thinking," a mindset and tool to disrupt our tendency to hold onto the status quo. He has put this type of thinking to practice in the development of social programs aimed at reducing poverty and homelessness, community development, and organizational management.

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Tamarack is a connected force for change. We believe that when we are effective in strengthening community capacity to engage citizens, lead collaboratively, deepen community, and innovate in place, our collective impact work contributes to building peace and a more equitable society. Learn more at www.tamarackcommunity.ca.

GAME CHANGER EXAMPLE:
AFFORDABLE AND ACCESSIBLE TRANSPORTATION

Why is Transportation a Game Changer?

Transportation impacts communities economically, environmentally, and socially. It is vital for community members to access employment, and for employers to find good employees. Affordable, accessible transportation also supports improved physical health and well-being.

Investments in public transit are good for the environment and allow people opportunities to fully participate in their communities. Access to needed, relevant health care is enhanced. Increased capacity to shop for goods and services is facilitated. When a community's transportation system is accessible and affordable and covers sufficient geography to make it viable, doors are opened to education and training, child care, quality food, recreation, and other basic services.

A robust public transportation system not only works to eliminate the barriers facing people living in poverty, it helps connect people, and deepen one's involvement in community life. It is one of the golden keys to a better, more active and healthy life for citizens.

Lens	Possible Indicator(s)
Provincial	Dollars contributed to municipal transit systems (e.g. directly or via gas tax revenues and/or through cost sharing of low income subsidies).
Municipal	Dollars allocated to public transportation (e.g. directly or via property or gas taxes).
	Cost of a transit pass as a percentage of minimum wage.
	Accessible transportation policy in place.
	Plans to expand the current public transit system for persons with extraordinary needs (e.g. seniors and/or persons with disabilities).
Community	Number of people accessing discounted transportation passes and/or subsidies.
	Number of people able to access employment, health care, education, social or recreational activities due to discounted transportation passes and/or subsidies.
	Additional monthly disposable income available to people due to discounted transportation passes/subsidies.
	Number of people accessing innovative rural transportation options (e.g. dial-a-ride, fixed-cost one way rides and/or car sharing initiatives).
Other	In addition to the above indicators, we will inquire about work/progress made on innovations, key cross sector partnerships, and public sentiments about poverty reduction work. Key as well will be asking members about what they have learned through their work within a Game Changer priority area, how their work has been impacted, and how they are using that learning to foster new strategies.

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GAME CHANGER EXAMPLE:
SAFE AND AFFORDABLE HOOUSING

Why is Housing a Game Changer?
Housing is a core component of social infrastructure, plays an essential role in supporting economic and social well-being, serves as a stabilizing resource, and is one of the most basic requirements for health. Access to affordable housing lowers government costs on social services, and supports people's resilience to housing market fluctuations.

Access to safe, secure, adequate, affordable, and suitable housing is fundamental to living a decent life, and can help people escape poverty, experience less unemployment, and participate fully in their communities.

Once people find stable housing, they can focus on other important areas of their lives, such as education and employment, and can build strong futures for their children. It frees up their resources for other essentials such as nutritious food and recreation, and can reduce stress, decrease exposures to allergens and toxins, enable patients with chronic diseases to access needed care, and protect people living with mental illness from experiencing relapses.

Lens	Possible Indicator(s)
Provincial	Affordable housing strategy in place
	Dollars invested in social housing AND dollars invested in developing, or in supporting municipalities to develop affordable housing strategies
	Number of social housing units existing/built AND impact on wait lists.
	Funding of initiatives that house people living in poverty.
Municipal	Affordable housing identified as a priority by City Council, Major Funders….
	Housing First or affordable housing strategy in place
	Dollars invested in social housing (e.g. from property taxes, grants, etc.)
	Policy in place that new developments must have a mix of market and social housing
	Zoning and regulatory changes made (e.g. that support inclusionary zoning, or creation of secondary suites)
	Land designated/provided by municipality at low or no-cost for affordable housing
	Incentives or funding for landlords to maintain affordable market housing
Community	Change in monthly shelter/housing costs
	Homeless Count or equivalent
	Number of emergency shelter beds per number of homeless individuals
	Private/public/non-profit partnerships in place to operate affordable housing
	Rent banks (e.g. for rent, utilities and emergency repairs) available
	Interventions to prevent evictions in place
	Number of supportive housing units available

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