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Developmental evaluation and the 'Stronger Economies Together' initiative in the United States☆

Beth Walter Honadle[a,*], Marisa A. Zapata[b], Christopher Auffrey[c], Rainer vom Hofe[c], Johanna Looye[c]

[a] Program Monitoring and Research Division, Office of Policy Development and Research, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Washington, DC, United States
[b] School of Planning, Portland State University, United States
[c] School of Planning, University of Cincinnati, United States

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ABSTRACT

This article describes a developmental evaluation and explains its impact on the Stronger Economies Together (SET) initiative of the U.S. Department of Agriculture in collaboration with the Nation's four Regional Rural Development Centers and Land-Grant universities. Through a dynamic process, this evaluation of the early phases of an initiative led to continuous program alterations based on feedback. The relationship of the evaluation team to the initiative's coordinating team enabled seamless transfer of observations, suggestions, and recommendations to decision makers. The multidisciplinary character of the evaluation team provided a diverse set of perspectives with a depth of subject matter and knowledge from relevant fields. One lesson is that developmental evaluators must be flexible, nimble, creative, and adaptive. When expected data are imperfect or nonexistent, the team must collect alternate information and make recommendations to improve data collection. As the initiative proceeded and modifications came about, the evaluation team had to recognize the changes in the program and focus on different questions. This experience with developmental evaluation provides insights into how interdisciplinary teams may need to change course and conduct a developmental evaluation when a formative evaluation was originally envisioned.

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1. Introduction

This article presents an evaluation effort designed to help improve 'Stronger Economies Together' (SET), a national initiative to enhance the capacity of rural regions in the United States to prepare economic development plans. The purpose of this article is to describe a formative-turned-developmental evaluation research project and explain its impact on SET.

In recent decades there has been a series of attempts to enact a comprehensive, well-funded rural development policy in the U.S. For a variety of reasons, these efforts have failed; predictably, some argue (Honadle, 1993, 2001, 2008, 2011). In 2002 and 2008, comprehensive agricultural legislation established titles that encouraged the formation of locally initiated regions with the promise of grant funding and technical assistance. The 2008 Rural Collaborative Investment Program, the most recently defeated bill, would have provided resources for self-identified rural regions to support the development and implementation of strategies they devised to meet their local needs. In the wake of this latest setback to advocates, the U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Development (USDA RD)[1] community and economic development staff created the Stronger Economies Together (SET) initiative in 2009 in partnership with the nation's four Regional Rural Development Centers (RRDCs) and the land-grant universities in the states.[2]

SET is a novel approach for the USDA to catalyze economic prosperity in rural America. At the time of our evaluation SET provided approximately 35 h of training, customized data (an approximately $15,000 in-kind contribution),[3] and technical assistance to participating regions. The initiative started in 2010 with eight pilot states (Arizona, Kentucky, Louisiana, Missouri,

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* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 202 402 5733.
E-mail address: beth.w.honadle@hud.gov (B.W. Honadle).

[1] In this article, the following abbreviations are used: USDA (United States Department of Agriculture); SET (Stronger Economies Together); USDA RD (United States Department of Agriculture Rural Development); Regional Rural Development Centers (RRDCs); and the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA), the Federal Partner to the Cooperative Extension System and the Regional Rural Development Centers, State Training Team.

[2] Detailed overviews of the SET initiative may be found at the USDA RD web site under Community Development (see Web references).

[3] The customized data would have cost the region approximately $15,000.

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New Mexico, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia). With multiple SET regions per state, there were twenty-two multi-county regions in the initial pilot phase (referred to as Phase I). In Phase II, eleven new states (Alabama, Arkansas, Colorado, Indiana, Michigan, Mississippi, New Hampshire, New York, Texas, Vermont, and Washington) were added and sixteen new regions were formed. In July 2012, six new states (Georgia, Nevada, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Dakota, and Virginia) joined the program and eleven new regions were being formed at the time this manuscript was submitted.[4]

In the spring of 2011, the authors of this article were selected as an interdisciplinary research team by the Southern Rural Development Center (SRDC), located at Mississippi State University, and the United States Department of Agriculture Rural Development (USDA RD) to conduct an external (independent third party) evaluation of SET. In response to the request for proposals, our team submitted a plan for a *formative* evaluation based on a variety of rigorous methods for a robust external evaluation. Our evaluation project plan included a variety of methods, including analysis of applicant data, observation of training, review of curricular materials, and social network analysis using participant data. As the project unfolded, the initial (formative) evaluation plan became irrelevant and unnecessary because of the client's urgent needs for immediate, *ongoing* feedback from our team to support adaptive program development. In this article, we describe the shift from a formative to developmental evaluation and the impact of our work on the program.

2. Evaluation approach

2.1. Developmental evaluation

In addition to the ''science, technology, and craft of evaluation'' (Morell, 2010, pp. 1–2), it is important to systematically understand how to contend with ''surprise, with situations in which programs and evaluations do not behave as expected.'' This article describes how a proposed formative evaluation in response to a request for proposals (RFP) for an *external* evaluation was transformed into a developmental evaluation approach that was very much from an *insider*'s perspective as an integral part of the design team.

The original RFP stated that ''... the successful applicant will work closely with SRDC and the USDA RD, so some modification of your proposed activities may take place in consultation with [the client]. Also ... the External Evaluator may need ... to modify the evaluation design at one or two points during this 19-month period.'' This disclaimer turned out to be key to the entire project. Once we started the project, it became abundantly clear that what we were doing was more *developmental* than *formative*.

Developmental evaluation differs from formative or summative evaluation research. Where formative evaluation focuses on delivery and implementation and summative evaluation emphasizes outcomes, developmental evaluation instead assesses the project as it is being conducted and provides feedback throughout the project. Developmental evaluation has been described as ''an appropriate approach when innovations are in early stages, when environments are changing (or are particularly complex), when organizational learning is emphasized, or when systems (not individuals) are the change target'' (Fagen et al., 2011, pp. 649–650). Developmental evaluation might be used later to develop formative or summative evaluation research (Fagen et al., 2011).

There is limited knowledge about developmental evaluation (Gamble, 2008). As such, developmental evaluation does not have a single, prescribed methodology or set of steps. Dozois, Langlois, and Blanchet-Cohen (2010) state:

> *How is developmental evaluation practiced?* The short answer is: *any way that works*. Developmental evaluation is an adaptive, context-specific approach. As such, there is no prescribed methodology. The 'right' method is determined by need and context, and may be drawn from any number of disciplines, including organizational development, traditional evaluation, research, and community development to name just a few (2010, p. 30; emphasis in the original).

One way that developmental evaluation differs from formative or summative evaluation is the role of the team in relation to the project being evaluated. Developmental evaluators become part of the programmatic team.[5]

According to a leading authority on evaluation, the evaluator's primary function in the team is to facilitate and elucidate team discussions by infusing evaluative questions, data, and logic, and to support data-based decision making in the developmental process (Patton, 2011, p. 20).

As part of the programmatic team, evaluators develop a holistic understanding of the program and can have greater impact on the program because of the relationships they have developed with the programmatic staff and participants (Cherniss & Fishman, 2004). Developmental evaluators provide data-driven feedback throughout the life of the program with the express intent of modifying the program.

In evaluation research, interdisciplinary work has become increasingly utilized to address the complex problems evaluators seek to analyze and can play an important role in developmental evaluation. Interdisciplinary teams work together, seeking to view the problem holistically rather than breaking it down into separate sections (Jacob, 2008). Norman, Best, Mortimer, Huerta, and Buchan (2011) emphasize that because science rewards a focus on disciplinary knowledge, we know much about specific facets of problems and little about their breadth. They argue that uniting these two approaches is essential to creating programmatic activities that offer solutions to problems. Interdisciplinary work also promotes diversity in thinking by generating new ideas and considering new ways to solve problems.

To this end, interdisciplinary analysis is more credible (Muller & Subotzky, 2001). Saari and Kallio suggest that ''developmental impact evaluation may generate larger interdisciplinary projects across their knowledge silos, which may in turn have a stronger societal and client-oriented impact'' (2010, p.12). Interdisciplinary teams are argued to help address the challenges of unexpected issues (Morell, 2005).

2.2. Team approach

To answer the diverse questions posed by the funder to capture the complexity of SET, we assembled an interdisciplinary team of five faculty members. Our advanced degrees include regional science, urban planning, and public administration. For instance, attending the national training for the state training teams for Phase II regions helped us connect the training manual with what the STTs were expected to do in the field and to how they were making use of the materials. The team's interdisciplinary

[4] Nevada started earlier than the other Phase III sites and describes itself as SET 2.5.

[5] Indeed, the competitive process for selecting an evaluation team specified that the evaluator could not be from one of the SET pilot states to avoid a conflict of interest. Our proposal went a step further in claiming independence because our institution is outside the land-grant university system, which explicitly precluded our university's participation in SET.

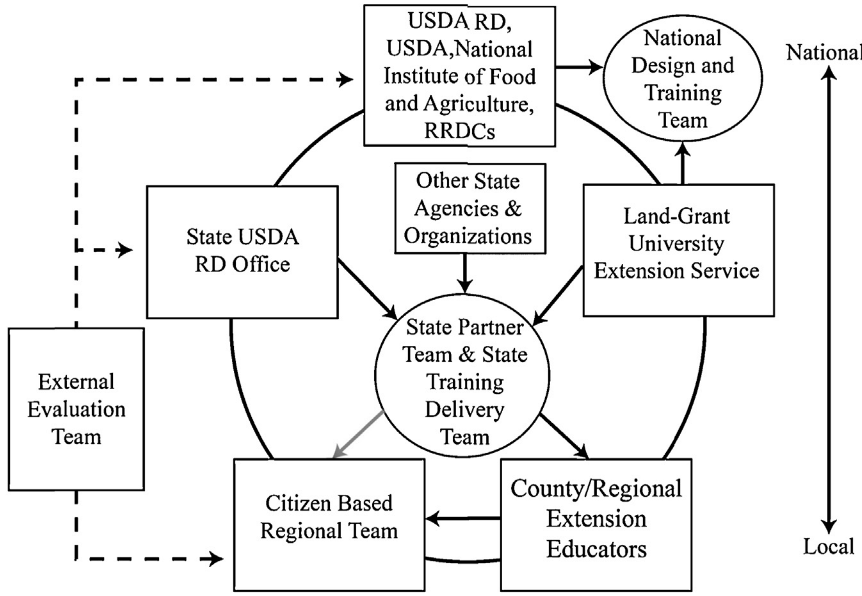

Fig. 1. Organizational structure for SET.

background allowed us to carefully review the range of topics in the training materials—from economic cluster analysis to collaborative planning networks. The team had not worked together previously on a research project.

Thus, the evaluation team[6] relied on developmental evaluation to study the SET initiative while the program was just getting off the ground. SET itself has a complex organizational framework with a number of teams and subteams. Fig. 1 shows the dynamic environment within which the SET evaluation proceeded.

The diagram portrays a system where there was mutual feedback between the national government (USDA RD and the National Institute of Food and Agriculture) referred to as the National Coordinating Team and the field operations comprised of both the community-based regions and local extension educators (“extension agents”). At the center of this complex system were state-based teams who coordinate and provide training to the SET regions within their states using materials developed by the national coordinating team, which consists of experts in economic development and strategic planning drawn from the Federal government, the RRDCs, and the nation’s land-grant universities. The state training teams attended workshops where they both learned and were trained to teach the content of the SET program (a series of nine modules). They then returned to their states to implement the initiative in selected regions.

The evaluation team reported to two “bosses” (collaborators) simultaneously. One was the Director of the SRDC, who was the PI in charge of implementing SET nationwide on behalf of the USDA RD. Our team was a subcontractor to the SRDC, which was a contractor to USDA RD. The other “boss” was the senior advisor and spokesperson for SET nationally at USDA RD.

The evaluation team was connected to all parts of the initiative. Our findings were informed by focused observation that was facilitated by our access to the array of participants ranging from the national team to the regional teams involved in SET. As a part of the team (virtual members), we offered constant feedback on decision making during the implementation of the project. The national coordinating team wanted to hear what we had to say during the process and chose whether or not to act on what we shared (we discuss what actions they took later on). We provided input to the national coordinating team through quarterly reports, email correspondence, conference calls, responses to specific requests (e.g., following site visits, we often received requests for immediate feedback and lessons learned regarding that site) (Honadle et al., 2012).

Once the evaluation was completed, the Principal Investigator (PI) administered a questionnaire to the co-investigators (the authors of this article) and the clients (key clients at USDA RD and the SRDC) to solicit their impressions of the developmental approach to evaluation.[7] This *post mortem* on the project provided systematic reflections on the evaluation which went in unanticipated directions from the initial conception of the project as a formative evaluation project.

2.3. Field visits (See Fig. 2 for a graphic of the field visit process.)

We relied on a variety of data sources to conduct the evaluation (see Table 1). The range of data allowed us to develop a holistic view of the program and how it functioned.

The field visits to selected regions from the different phases added contextual depth to the program evaluation. Because of field visits’ importance and relevance to the developmental nature of the evaluation, we detail the field visits’ role below.

The external evaluation team selected eight sites in consultation with the sponsor. We sought a variety of cases using the following criteria to generate a diverse sample of SET regions for site visits:

- Geographic dispersion. The team visited at least one SET region per national region or RRDC (Northeast, North Central, Western, and Southern). In particular, we suspected that the larger distances, lower population densities, and remoteness of many rural regions from a major city would make SET regions in the West face different challenges from other regions.
- SET phase. The external evaluation team selected some Phase I regions; however, we placed emphasis on Phase II sites. We assumed that some of the challenges faced in the initial model

[6] One could argue that “external evaluation” and “developmental evaluation” are oxymoronic. Indeed, since the essence of developmental evaluation is that the evaluators are integrally involved in the team designing and implementing the program being evaluated, that seems self-evident. However, in the case of this project, the title of the project (contractually) is the external evaluation of the Stronger Economies Together (SET) initiative. But, for all intents and purposes, it became developmental.

[7] The results of this were summarized and presented in Honadle (2013).

Table 1
Data sources.

Documents
Site specific program documents
SET applications
Training modules for various phases
Participant demographic profile survey
Meeting attendance
Participant evaluations of training sessions
Plans
Interviews (formal and informal)
National coordinating teams
State training teams
State partner teams
Regional participants
Participant observation (on site, conference calls, webinars)
National training
Conference calls with national coordinating team as well as national SET calls with regions
Webinars
Onsite observations of training sessions
External data sources
Census/Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS)

would probably have been addressed. Although it was too early to visit multiple Phase III sites, the funder encouraged us to visit a region that was starting up in the current phase of implementation so that we could see the most current iteration of the training modules.

- Stage of implementation. The team visited regions that had completed their work as well as regions whose work is ongoing or just getting under way. Sites that were still working through the training, might have been struggling with particular issues (such as sustaining momentum or dealing with attrition) or regions that were further along might be in a better position to reflect on what went wrong or right in hindsight if the project was complete. Either finding would provide insights for the national coordinating team.
- Diverse population. The evaluation team made the conscious decision to visit regions with predominately minority populations or with significant racial or ethnic diversity in the region. This deliberate choice allowed the team to examine cultural implications for the program.

Aside from these stated criteria, there were practical issues. These included cost, convenience, and cooperation on the part of the region to host the external evaluation team. We had a limited time frame to complete the fieldwork. Thus, it was important for us to have the cooperation of a contact in each region who could assist us in gaining access to informants and give us advice on logistics.

2.3.1. Interview guide

With input and comments from the national coordinating team, the evaluation team devised a semi-structured interview questionnaire. The team tested this data collection instrument in two regions in one state in January 2012. The PI and team members visited two sites with different pairs of evaluation team members. Having the PI on both trips ensured consistency in administering the instrument. These initial field visits served dual purposes. First, they helped refine and improve the instrument for subsequent field visits. Second, the findings gained on these field visits were incorporated into the evaluation.

The finalized instrument was divided into five topical areas: identifiable outcomes of SET in the region; individual respondents' experience with the regional economic development portion of the SET training sessions and the SET training manual; planning capacity in the region and the relationships among and between organizations and stakeholders in the region; relationships created through the SET initiative in the region; and the overall effectiveness of the SET initiative in the region.

2.3.2. Field visits

We subsequently sent pairs of researchers/evaluators to each region. We concluded that the cost of sending more than two team members was not necessary to capture the necessary data. To initiate the visit, one of the national team leaders sent an introductory letter to a lead person in the region (usually a member of the state training team from extension or the land-grant university) explaining that there was an external evaluator and asking for cooperation from the site team to help arrange a productive visit. Once this initial contact was made, the prospective visitors from the evaluation team worked with the lead contact person in the region to develop a schedule. We told the lead contact that, optimally, we wanted to meet with small groups of people representing the following categories:

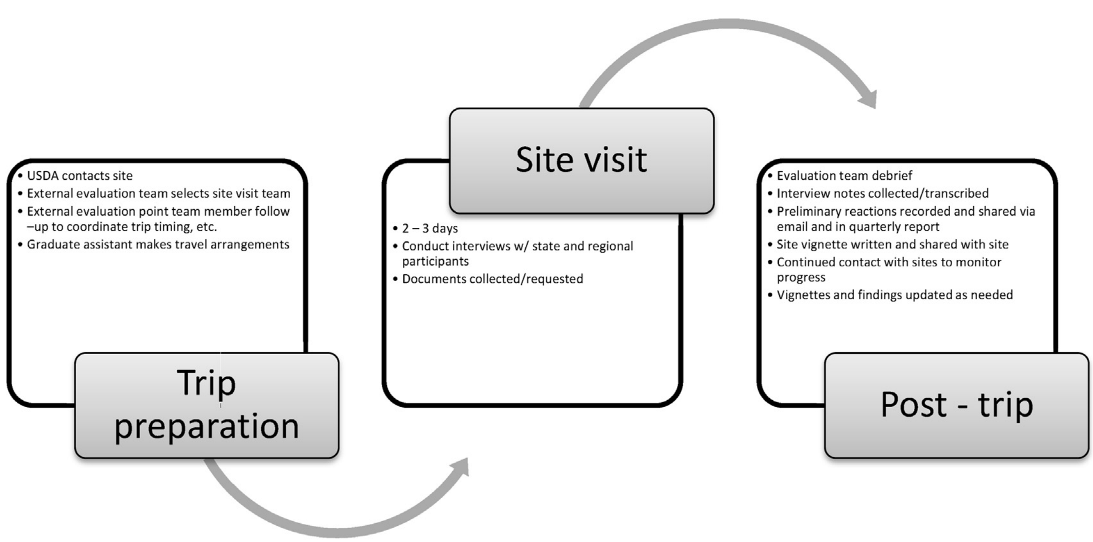

Fig. 2. Site visit framework.

- "*Instigators*" – those who were the driving force behind the SET application submission as we wanted to understand why they initially thought the project was a worthy pursuit.
- *Participants* in the training (trainees) to hear about the quality and usefulness of the content and its delivery.
- *Trainers* – the SET training team that arranged and delivered the training to gather observations about their experiences delivering the SET content and about the effectiveness of the initiative.
- *State-level* USDA RD and extension administrators with knowledge of the selection of the region and training implementation to learn about how they viewed SET and their knowledge of its implementation.

Site visits lasted two to three days. We conducted interviews with instigators and administrators one person at a time. Interviews with trainers and participants generally included multiple people at once. Grouping participants allowed us to speak with more people during the visit, collecting a broader range of perspectives and experiences during our visit. Group sessions also allowed participants to respond to one another's ideas and perspectives.

During the site visits, the research team had the opportunity to share meals with members of the regional SET team. During meals, regional team members, most often the convening organizations in the region (e.g., extension), would provide more background about how SET was initiated and implemented in their state and region(s); clarify or respond to issues raised in the interviews we wanted to discuss; and tell us more about the region.

2.3.3. Managing and analyzing the field data

Over the course of two days in a region, patterns and lessons emerged after consistent and repeated statements expressing similar experiences or observations. For instance, in Texas the significance of inviting a specific person who worked on housing issues proved important to the outcome of the project. Over and over, people talked about a single individual's notable contribution to the dialog and outcomes. As numerous people had been hesitant to work with this individual, the site learned the lesson of reaching across divides for the betterment of the region.

Upon returning from the field visits, team members used interview and field notes to identify lessons, implications, and potential recommendations and develop them into a "vignette" describing the experience with SET in each particular region. The vignettes were then sent to the relevant region's main contact(s) to review for accuracy and clarification. Unless the site could provide objective data to justify changing our stated findings, the reviews were generally used to identify any factual inaccuracies.

3. Findings from and impacts of the evaluation on the SET program

The evaluation team provided feedback to the SET national coordinating team from the beginning of its involvement. Part of this feedback occurred in quarterly evaluative reports to the client as part of the contract. The SET national coordinating team gave serious consideration to all recommendations in the evaluation team's quarterly and ad hoc reports. Some were implemented; some will not be implemented (based on logistical considerations, resource constraints, and so on). In response to each quarterly report, the director of USDA RD's Regional Innovation Team has sent responses to our recommendations to the national SET team for consideration or implementation. Table 2 includes a representative list of our recommendations and USDA RD's responses. Below, we discuss themes that we found during the visits and USDA RD's responses. The themes include (1) clarifying program purpose; (2) responding to individual site needs; and (3) building capacity.

3.1. Clarifying program purpose

In the Phase I pilot regions there was confusion about the purpose of SET that resulted in fundamentally different ideas about the project. The two main points of confusion were the expectation from the national team that the regions would produce a regional economic development plan and, on the SET regions' part, that there was funding attached to the program.

3.1.1. Creating a plan

The national coordinating team intended for each region to have a well-developed plan; however, not all of the Phase I regions created plans. The national coordinating team, already aware of some of the confusion, addressed this issue by developing a guide to what a "high quality" plan looks like. Based on the site visits to the Phase II participants, we found that the sites understand that a plan should be developed; however, not all of them saw the plan as their top priority.

3.1.2. Site funding

Some regions believed that funds were forthcoming when they were designated to participate in SET. Much of this confusion seemed to stem from miscommunication between the state teams and the regions. The national coordinating team worked to clarify that there is no funding tied to the program. Based on the Phase II field visits, we found that the new sites understood SET was not tied to funding. At the same time, the national team was aware that sites were contributing their own funds to keep the training going. One of the themes we heard repeatedly is that providing even nominal financial support for SET regions would provide more impetus for completing the program. Such funding (in the range of about $5000) could be used to defray out-of-pocket expenses for travel and supplies, and used to leverage other resources.

At present, the national coordinating team is concentrating on the need to prepare a high quality plan as an incentive to keep the regional teams engaged throughout the SET process. They are also considering providing some sort of financial support. The evaluation team expressed skepticism about using the plan only to serve as an incentive. How well the sites will be able to implement their plans was not clear at many of the sites. While the sites saw the process as worthwhile for a range of reasons, the development of a plan and its implementation was not necessarily what they value most.

3.2. Feedback to individual regions

The most consistent issue that was raised on our site visits was the need to understand and respond to the training context for each region. The participants in SET regional training typically included professional economic developers who had experience and specialized expertise with community and economic development techniques (cluster analysis, shift-share, location quotients, and the like), as well as non-economic development professionals, politicians, and lay leaders. The challenge for SET has been to provide training that is challenging and worthwhile for both the economic development experts and novices. We recommended the following.

3.2.1. Create different levels or "tracks" of SET training offered

For instance, prepare two separate sets of manuals: one for people with no or little rural economic development background and a second one for people with years of experience. So far, the initiative's managers have deemed this too expensive a solution to the problem. Alternatively, we suggested that more elementary

Table 2
External evaluation team's immediate impact during the course of the evaluation our team was required to submit quarterly reports highlighting recent activities, findings, and recommendations. These reports were submitted to the national SET team for feedback and application. The table displays proposed action items from the USDA SET Team in response to our findings. The majority of the observations were made at most of the sites.

Evaluation team findings	USDA action items
Site visit observation: • Discovery that some trainers were reading verbatim from the PowerPoint slides. This was attributed to (1) some trainers had the impression that they could not deviate from the script; (2) some trainers did not feel that their knowledge or experience level was sufficient in certain topics or was adequate to veer from the PowerPoint slides.	*Proposed action:* • Put in place a system to better assure that the STT trainers are solid, both in terms of (a) subject matter expertise; and (b) training skills (i.e., the trainer is able to make the training interesting and interactive, fully engaging the trainees). • Sites will be asked to "(1) tell the SPT that they must do a good job of choosing and (as needed) monitoring the trainers (and provide some written guidance to the SPTs on how to choose, coach, and monitor the trainers); (2) design and deliver a "how to teach effectively" webinar for the trainers; and (3) (for some key modules, at least) offer a consulting service on the subject matter, so that less-than-expert trainers can receive some coaching (the Jan 25 webinar on module 6 was one step in this direction)."
Site visit observation: • Program confusion in two areas: (1) about whether SET was about training and building capacity or about creating a regional plan, expected outcomes; and (2) whether SET was tied into funding	*Proposed action: clarify purpose of SET:* • Some key aspects of SET have not been perfectly clear to some of the regional teams. They should be clear from the time that they join SET on the following: (a) the regional team will need to produce a high quality regional economic development plan; (b) one purpose of SET is to increase the region's economic development expertise; (c) one purpose of SET is to build a stronger regional team; and (d) participation in SET does not guarantee any funding.
Site visit observation: • Address varying degrees of rural economic background knowledge (novice to expert).	*Proposed action: better serve mixed audience (experience level):* • Develop some written guidance for the STTs on ways they might deal with this issue. For instance, we might suggest that the trainer should call upon some of the more experienced persons as local experts on the topic, asking the local expert to please provide some useful local examples or other input. • Part of the training session might involve breaking into small groups; the more experienced person in each group might be given a lead role. • The trainer might involve the more experienced persons in preparing for the training delivery on the topic. • All of this would be designed to acknowledge the extra level of expertise/experience that these persons bring to the table and to try to engage them in helping to train the less experienced persons on the regional team. • This would involve developing two levels of SET training for some (or all) modules: (a) training aimed at novices (novice persons mainly, but perhaps to some extent novice regions); and (b) training aimed at the experienced (experienced persons mainly, but perhaps to some extent experienced regions).
Site visit suggestion: It may be useful to have some members of the larger team form a sub-team to work on more advanced issues that only they understand. For example: advanced economic profiles.	*Proposed action: use sub-teams:* • Point out to the STTs that this is an approach that may be a good way to go in certain circumstances. A written document that included a couple of good examples might be useful.
Site visit suggestion: • Careful attention should be paid to how rooms are set up in order to foster direct communication between participants and bringing in outside facilitators could be a good option.	*Proposed action: provide room set-up guidance:* • Send out a simple written reminder, including (a) avoid lecture-style seating; (b) provide places for the trainees to roll up their sleeves and work, especially in small groups.
Site visit suggestion: • The monthly SET conference calls appear to provide a valuable resource for regions to share information about what works. Reports on speed networking and spending time reviewing existing economic development plans (to show how the SET effort differed) offered valuable information for other regions struggling to develop cohesive and invested participant teams.	*Proposed action: capture and disseminate a broad range of tips:* • Ask each presenter of a good insight/tip to write it up and post it on the SET Forum (when we have it in place).
Site visit suggestion: • We recommend working more carefully with the sites so that they understand why the data are important and how they directly connect with demonstrating what worked or did not work at their site. Many of the sites refer to the importance of relationship building and networks; however, when talking with them, they are not making the link to the data being submitted. As Phase II and III regions near completion, we recommend touching base with them about the role and importance of the partnership matrix.	*Proposed action:* • Work with regions and SPTs to get stronger data submissions.
Site visit observation: • Is SET appropriate when a region has already done what SET is about (working on a regional plan). • Would like two approaches (one for regions who need a plan and one for regions who already have a written plan)	*Proposed action:* • Think about how to use SET in a different way in a region that already has a plan in place. (And does this depend upon how closely that existing plan matches our concept of the high quality plan?).
Site visit observation: • In Texas, five high school seniors get involved. It was beneficial to get them involved, but should have included them earlier. They significantly changed the discussion on workforce needs.	*Proposed action* • Remind all SPTs, STTs, and regions about the advantages of having youth on the regional team.
Site visit observation: • Participants in MCEDD enjoyed that the counties rotated hosting. They stated that it was beneficial to learn things about their region that they did not know before.	*Proposed action* • Remind all SPTs, STTs, and regions about the advantages of rotating meeting locations.

material be taught only to those with little economic development experience. The national coordinating team was considering using small groups led by people with more experience to keep people of all levels of ability engaged.

3.2.2. Find mechanisms to help the participants stay engaged

Use sub-teams to help the regional team keep moving forward when some members differ substantially from others in terms of time available, or have an interest in a particular aspect of the SET work, and/or expertise. In some regions, there was significant attrition because some participants perceived that their time was not being used effectively.

3.2.3. Determine appropriateness for SET

We also suggested considering whether SET is appropriate when a region already has a regional plan in place, but there appeared to be potential for further growth through participation in SET. The opportunity to participate in SET (i.e., the funding) should go to where there is potential for the greatest impact. The least developed regions, even though they may already have a plan in place, need the most help.

4. Discussion

Because this was a developmental evaluation project, we provided feedback based on our observations and interpretations on an ongoing, real-time basis rather than saving what we found for the next quarterly report. We now detail specific examples of how our recommendations went from actionable items to implemented recommendations within some of the key areas unique to developmental evaluation: (1) evaluation team; (2) organizing and interpreting data; (3) flexibility; and (4) formative evaluation.

4.1. Evaluation team

As Patton discusses, the external evaluation team became embedded into the SET programmatic team (2011, 1994). For instance, one of the first tasks for the evaluation team was to attend the STT national training in Detroit. While at that training, we provided feedback on the training of the trainers and raised concerns about some of the materials such as the economic development modules. We also worked with the national training team to refine one of their data collection instruments and to develop a high quality plan document.

Another illustration of how we are integrally involved in program planning was discussion about setting up a "coaching" system. In this system exemplary members of SET state training teams from Phases I and II visited all of the Phase III sites to observe, provide feedback, and technical assistance to prevent problems and help them improve their performance. The national coordinator invited the PI to participate on a conference call with the top four people leading the SET initiative nationally to discuss this concept. The PI listened to the concept being proposed, asked questions, and provided critical insights from her experience on teams doing field visits. The day after the conference call, the Rural Innovation Team Director circulated a draft proposal for the coaching concept to the participants on the conference call, asking for review and soliciting comments. Informed by her direct observations of how teams operated in the field, the PI immediately provided written comments, including suggestions for improving and adding to the indicators coaches would use to assess how well teams were working. The following morning, a program manager at the SRDC used the PI's version of the document to add comments. The rapid acceptance of the PI's feedback also reinforces what Cherniss and Fishman (2004) discuss regarding the role of trust between the client and the evaluator.

4.2. Organizing and interpreting data

As developmental evaluators we became very involved in working with program-relevant data. In addition, we experienced a specific challenge related to data for one part of the project. The original proposal was for our team to analyze the relationships between and among SET partners, using data about these relationships from the surveys, interviews, and grant applications. The approach to doing this social network analysis (SNA) was predicated on having those data. In reality, several issues beyond our control rendered the initial plan for SNA unworkable. Due to an OMB delay on releasing data collection instruments, Phase I sites were not given ample time to complete the survey (called a partnership matrix) to collect information about relationship development. Further, where the instrument was shared, there was a limited response rate because of data collection fatigue in the regional sites and confusion about the instrument and its purpose.

Nevertheless, through our work we were able to identify data needs and develop realistic methods for measuring partnerships using participant attendance data from SET meetings for most sites. The attendance data were used to model the social networks as opposed to using participant survey data that would capture changes in relationships. While the attendance data cannot capture how participants view the changes in their relationships, the attendance data did demonstrate which participants attended most frequently. This is considered a weaker measure for demonstrating relationship development; however, it did help demonstrate the network itself. Mapping who attended meetings most frequently could identify key individuals in sustaining the program after the conclusion of SET.

We also recommended working more carefully with the sites so that they understand why the data are important and how they directly connect with demonstrating what worked or did not work at their site. Many of the sites referred to the importance of relationship building and networks; however, when talking with them, they were not making the link to the data being submitted. While the national coordinating team worked on this and one of the evaluation team members has participated in one of the monthly national SET conference call to further emphasize this, at the time of this writing survey response rates were still not high for Phase II.

4.3. Flexibility

Our experience in developmental evaluation has underscored the need for the evaluation team to be flexible and resourceful. Being resourceful means such things as taking advantage of opportunities to observe the program in a relatively informal way. For example, an official from USDA RD noted that a regional SET meeting would be taking place very near where the PI would be on vacation and suggested that this might be a good occasion to sit in and watch a team at work and discuss the team's experiences with SET.

Some of the external evaluation team's contributions were at the request of the national decision makers. Thus, the developmental evaluation necessitated readjusting priorities throughout the project *while never losing focus on the fundamental purpose of our role as external evaluators*. This balancing act is illustrated by an exchange between the external evaluation team and the national team. After the external evaluation team had submitted one of its quarterly reports with commentary on one of the content modules in the SET training module, a national official with SET suggested that perhaps the team member who wrote this analysis and made those suggestions should be asked if he wanted to "participate in developing the next draft/version" of the module in question. The PI responded by stating, "that would be outside the scope of the evaluation, right? We're trying to stay on the side of the line that is commenting/critiquing/suggesting, but not doing."

This kind of candid and open discourse between the external team and its sponsor was important for keeping the project on track and preventing drift into work that is not evaluative. One of the national team leaders stated:

> The evaluation team worked on far more activities than we had originally expected. So, that was very helpful and meant that our dollars were being stretched to cover more.... The reports provided tangible products for us to study and respond to. The intangibles is the discourse/conversations/discussions we had that helped us work on making needed improvements.

Moreover, when the national SET team was drafting guidance for state teams on how to write "high quality plans" (an essential expectation for each SET site), the external evaluation team provided several rounds of suggestions. One member of the external team used a listserv to solicit examples of good plans and conducted a quick, focused literature review to support this effort. This had not been included in the RFP or the proposal we submitted.

4.4. Developing formative evaluation

At this juncture, the SET initiative is embarking on its third phase. It is now beyond the initial pilot phases, but the developmental approach to evaluation continues as the experiment evolves. Over time, the evaluation will incrementally become less developmental and more formative (Benzie, 1999; Brown & Gerhardt, 2002; Brown & Kiernan, 2001; Ekundayo, Bronner, Johnson-Taylor, Dambita, & Squire, 2003; Furstenberg, Carter, Henderson, & Ahles, 2002; Hix & Hartson, 1992; Maslowski & Visscher, 1999; Quinn, 2001; Weston, 2004). With formative evaluation, the evaluation objective will shift incrementally from developing the model to identifying best practices for implementing a model that has been adopted. As discussed by Fagen et al. (2011) developmental evaluation may become a natural segue for formative evaluation. For instance, we are already identifying measures related to the social network analysis that could be followed longitudinally to better answer some of the questions the national coordinating team had about the impact SET has had on regional economic development capacity. Creating a formative evaluation from the developmental evaluation is a natural progression. Emphasizing this transition as well as the development nature of this team's evaluation, one of the national team members stated:

> The disadvantage of the developmental evaluation approach is that the external evaluators are now, in essence, part of the SET design team. This has been extremely useful during this early developmental stage of SET. But that means that the University of Cincinnati evaluation team members will now essentially be disqualified from playing a role (5–10 years from now) in a more traditional evaluation of SET (since they would be, to some extent, evaluating their own work).

5. Conclusion

This paper aims to advance the understanding of developmental evaluation by showing how findings from an external evaluation team are being turned into actionable agenda items for consideration by a national team. Based on our experiences, developmental evaluation, adapted to the program's context, proved useful for meeting the client's needs. It also allowed us to develop a closer relationship with the program team than might otherwise have been expected, allowing an easy flow of information and data sharing.

This evaluation reminded us of key differences between evaluation and so-called implementation analysis and why those distinctions are important. Citing work by Browne and Wildavsky (1987), Patton, Sawicki, and Clark (2013) make the point that "When evaluation becomes indistinguishable from implementation ... the broad vision of the evaluator is sacrificed....[E]valua-.[E]valuation is concerned with the causes of outcomes, while implementation focuses on utilizing causal knowledge to alter outcomes." (p. 345). Thus, as a collaborative team of external developmental evaluators, our work broadened the knowledge the SET initiative's managers used to make decisions that may change the ways in which the program is implemented.

Two things made the developmental evaluation of SET an example worthy of consideration by evaluation and program planning scholars and practitioners. The relationship of the external team to the initiative's coordinators team meant that as the evaluators learned, so did the decision makers. Second, the multidisciplinary character of the evaluation team provided a diverse set of perspectives with a depth of subject matter and knowledge from relevant fields. The expertise of the individual team members allowed the team to focus on specific evaluative questions with authority. A regional economist concentrated on the content of the regional economic parts of the training manuals and another team member used knowledge about social network analysis to examine the development of relationships with SET teams.

One of the lessons from this evaluation is that developmental evaluators must be flexible, nimble, creative, and adaptive. When expected data are imperfect or nonexistent, the team has to collect alternate information and make recommendations to improve data collection. As the initiative proceeds and modifications come about the evaluation team has to recognize the changes in the program and focus on different questions. Constant communication with the client is imperative because this helps the team know how the initiative is changing. Through ongoing dialog, the developmental evaluators are in a position to challenge and recommend to the coordinating team in real time so that the results of the evaluation have immediate impact. This experience with developmental evaluation provides insights into how interdisciplinary teams with knowledge about both the content being delivered and the agency responsible for the formulation of the program can undertake an evaluation program that is dynamic.

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Beth Walter Honadle (Ph.D., Syracuse University) is Director of the Program Monitoring and Research Division in the Office of Policy Development and Research at the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development in Washington, DC. She was Principal Investigator on the External Evaluation of the Stronger Economies Together Initiative, which was conducted while she was a Professor at the University of Cincinnati. Previously she has been a professor at the University of Minnesota and Bowling Green State University and she was a researcher and national program leader at the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Her research interests include policy analysis, program evaluation, community and economic development, and intergovernmental relations. The views expressed in this article are the authors' and are not official positions of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Marisa A. Zapata (Ph.D., Regional Planning, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign) was an Assistant Professor in the School of Planning at the University of Cincinnati at the time of this project. Her research interests include collaborative planning, social equity, and plan-making. She has professional experience in public planning, policy and health, domestically and internationally. In Fall 2013 she joined Portland State University as an Assistant Professor in Planning.

Christopher Auffrey (Ph.D., Urban, Technological and Environmental Planning, University of Michigan) is an Associate Professor in the School of Planning at the University of Cincinnati. He is a co-investigator on the external evaluation of the Stronger Economies Together Initiative. His research interests include fiscal impact analysis and healthy urban planning. Professor Auffrey has professional experience with urban revitalization projects in Los Angeles and an environmental consulting firm in Washington, DC.

Rainer vom Hofe (Ph.D., Regional Science, Cornell University) is an Associate Professor in the School of Planning at the University of Cincinnati. His research activities focus mainly on urban and regional economic analysis and spatial statistical modeling. Professor vom Hofe has professional experience with fiscal impact analysis and economic impact studies for local governments as well as private entities in the larger Cincinnati MSA. He is a co-investigator on the external evaluation of the Stronger Economies Together Initiative.

Johanna W. Looye (Ph.D., Urban and Regional Theory, Cornell University) is Associate Professor, School of Planning, University of Cincinnati. She is co-investigator on the External Evaluation of the Stronger Economies Together Initiative. She has considerable experience in field research, including work for the U.S. Economic Development Administration, for the City of Cincinnati, work conducted while a Fulbright Scholar in Brazil, work funded by the North-South Center, by the ILO in Brazil, and by the Ford Foundation in Brazil. She is currently PI for a U.S. Department of Education FIPSE grant entitled "Urban Sustainability and the Built Environment: A US-Brazil Consortium."