



# Evaluating social exclusion interventions in university-community partnerships



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## ABSTRACT

Most university-community partnerships (UCPs) involve elements of community-level social exclusion interventions. As such, they face substantial challenges in management and evaluation. This paper highlights the central challenges associated with evaluation of UCP and other social exclusion interventions at the community level, and suggests methods to overcome them. The main body of the paper presents a case study based on a four-year action research involving evaluation of a social exclusion intervention initiated and implemented by a UCP in Israel. The case study highlights the challenges faced by the evaluation team, the solutions provided, and the contribution of the evaluation to improvement and accountability.

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## 1. Introduction

Over recent years, social interventions in OECD countries have been subject to two important and parallel processes. The first is the growing recognition and funding of social exclusion and social cohesion interventions, many targeting specific communities, in place of the traditional anti-poverty approach (Levitas et al., 2007; Ratcliffe & Newman, 2011). The second process is the increasing involvement of academic institutions, including leading universities, in community interventions (Boyle & Silver, 2005). Concomitantly, the assessment and evaluation of these interventions have attracted heightened attention and, along with it, increasing resources. However, such evaluations often fail to overcome the intrinsic challenges associated with complexity, a lack of agreed performance indicators, and insufficient administrative data at the community level, all of which prevent the evaluation from supplying the information needed for improvement and accountability.

This paper reviews and discusses the main challenges associated with evaluations of social exclusion interventions at the community level, with an emphasis on university-community partnerships (UCPs), and, in particular, interventions where improvement demands are combined with managerial

accountability demands that call for either a contribution or an attribution approach to evaluation (see Mayne, 2011). The bulk of the paper presents a case study based on a four-year action research around the evaluation of a UCP aimed at reducing social exclusion in one city and surrounding minority villages in northern Israel. The case study highlights the challenges confronted by the evaluation team, the solutions provided, and the contribution of the evaluation to improvement and accountability. In so doing the paper contributes not only to the evaluation literature, but more broadly to the literature on both social exclusion interventions and UCPs—two topics that are interrelated, yet which are only rarely addressed together in research, though both researchers and practitioners have much to gain from their joint analysis.

The paper proceeds as follows. I first review the development of UCPs before exploring how the terms “community” and “social exclusion” are defined, and the difficulties associated with evaluating social exclusion interventions at the community level. I continue by suggesting possible solutions and approaches relevant to social exclusion UCPs. I then present the case study. I conclude by summarizing implications of the case study for research and practitioners.

## 2. University-community partnerships

The emergence of UCPs in OECD countries is a natural outgrowth of two processes: an increasing focus on communities

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and neighborhoods as intervention units, and growing competition in knowledge production and higher education. The idea that the war on poverty could be won by empowering the poorest and most excluded communities first saw light in the United States during the 1990s (Putnam, 1993, 2000), and quickly influenced Europe (Ratcliffe, 2011). Politically, this notion served both the right and the left, as it was in line with the former's agenda of minimizing the role of welfare states in favor of market forces, and the latter's agenda of cohesion and empowerment. This broad agreement laid the ground for partnerships between third-sector organizations, municipalities, and national agencies aiming to combat inequalities and exclusion in deprived communities and neighborhoods (Majo, Jones, & Cock, 2011; Strier, 2011).

These new local partnerships were appealing to universities, which were gradually losing their monopoly on knowledge to private think tanks, corporate R&D endeavors, and for-profit education firms. With this new competition, universities had to create better connections with the communities in their cities, promote a more caring social image, and supply added value in order to attract students, donors and investors (Boyle & Silver, 2005). However, it soon grew clear that forging connections with local communities offered universities more than good public relations. The knowledge produced from such interventions proved to enrich both research and teaching by minimizing the gap between theoretical knowledge and practice related to social problems (Fisher, Fabricant, & Simmons, 2005). At the same time, UCPs were perceived as having much to contribute toward generating solutions to the problems facing many communities (Silka & Renault-Caragianes, 2006; Trani & Holsworth, 2010), in particular by providing a stage for the public's (excluded) voices and opinions (Farquhar & Dobson, 2005).

While UCPs, as formal institutional entities, take various forms and have differing goals, the common thread uniting most, if not all, UCPs is direct involvement in local communities, with the aim of reducing urban poverty and social exclusion, building capacity, and promoting cohesion. I now address these somewhat vague concepts and their implications for assessment and evaluation, beginning with the term "community" itself.

### 3. Communities, social exclusion, and problems in measurement and evaluation

UCPs, as their name suggests, initiate and implement interventions at the community level. But what are communities? Politicians and program planners may find it convenient to see communities as a set of people sharing a unitary set of values and interests, whether because they share social and ethnic affiliations and/or because they live within some geographically delineated area, such as a neighborhood. Yet closer scrutiny reveals difficulties with this definition. As Edwards (1997) maintained, "even in socially and ethnically homogeneous housing estates, it would be naïve to assume that everyone's interests were common and it certainly would not be plausible in an ethnically and racially mixed area" (p. 832). Others concur that even apparently outwardly homogeneous "communities" can include diverse subgroups with varying sets of interests and concerns (Shirlow & Murtagh, 2004). This is especially true for underprivileged communities, which are characterized by the lack of local interests, little sense of belonging, and which are not represented by any specific entity (Meegan & Mitchell, 2001). Hence, both ethnic/cultural designations and spatial designations such as "neighborhood" are not necessarily helpful: One neighbourhood or ethnic group can encompass several "communities," and one "community" can include people from different ethnic groups and neighborhoods. This lack of clarity has consequences for the measurement and evaluation of

UCPs, as without a clear unit of analysis, it becomes almost impossible to gather reliable performance data and, therefore, to demonstrate outcomes and impacts in a valid way (Hart & Northmore, 2011; Rossi, Lipsey, & Freeman, 2004).

The term "social exclusion," too, is inherently ambiguous and open to a range of definitions, making it difficult for evaluators to agree on definitive performance indicators. Some definitions (and hence sets of indicators) treat social exclusion as a subset of poverty, while others see it in terms of social cohesion (e.g., Ratcliffe & Newman, 2011), and still others attempt to address it as a stand-alone concept (e.g., Estivill, 2003). Most definitions of social exclusion refer to multiple topics and multiple units of analysis (individuals, processes, societies, etc.), which tends to make them abstract and empirically imprecise (Levitas et al., 2007). Another prominent weakness of many social exclusion definitions is the failure to differentiate between risk factors and outcomes. Levitas et al. (2007) seek to resolve this problem by defining social exclusion as "lack or denial of resources, rights, goods and services, and the inability to participate in the normal relationships and activities, available to the majority of people in a society, whether in economic, social, cultural or political arenas" (p. 27). This definition treats structural issues of inequality, polarization and mobility (c.f. Ratcliffe, 2011) as determinants of social exclusion rather than symptoms of it. Yet while this definition tackles the significant aspects of exclusion, thus providing a basis to addresses some of the issues that hamper evaluation efforts, it has not been widely adopted, and social exclusion remains a broad term that is being used differently by various actors.

A related problem is that OECD countries still do not have effective performance measurement systems to measure social inclusion in general, and at the community level in particular. First, quantitative indicators in most measurement systems are embedded within a politics of accountability, focus strongly on control, subsequent to manipulations and thus have very limited contribution to improvement of policies and programs (Pollitt, 2008). Second, performance measurement systems are insensitive to the existence of diverse identities and cultural differences within and across communities (Ratcliff & Newman, 2011)—a problem which relates back to the difficulty of defining "community" discussed above. Third, existing measurement systems are not adept at exposing or analyzing the complex web-like relations that can arise between communities and between individuals. Fourth, measurement systems often focus on what is easy to measure, such as unemployment rates, income, size of the labor force, education, etc. These data are measured consistently (though figures are often outdated) in all OECD countries, but have little to offer in assessing inherent exclusion parameters such as individual feelings and the inability to participate in relationships and activities (Levitas et al., 2007). Fifth, social exclusion data suffers from low validity and reliability, because it is often collected through perception surveys of individuals, and indicators easily become catch-all terms (Fuller, 2011). Finally, while performance measurement systems collect administrative data at the national and municipal levels, we do not have concrete information on communities and smaller units of analysis at the project level. Although surveys can target audiences within specific neighborhoods and even specific streets and households (Harper & Mayhew, 2012), these are often irrelevant to community interventions which are not congruent to any geographical definitions (as discussed above).

A few pioneering social inclusion surveys have overcome some of these challenges. Notable examples include the 1999 survey of Poverty and Social Exclusion in Britain and its later iterations (Bradshaw & Main, 2010; Gordon et al., 2000) along with the Bristol Social Exclusion Matrix (in Levitas et al., 2007). These surveys question respondents on multiple exclusion dimensions,

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