



Northern Plains Initiative

Partnerships to expand sustainable rural communities

Evaluation Report 2007-08



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An advisory council with representatives from the eight regions which the project serves provides oversight and leadership in the implementation of the initiative. The council members are:

| | |
|--|----------|
| Jesse O'Hara, Montana State Representative..... | Region 1 |
| Johnel Barcus, Browning Community Development Corporation..... | Region 1 |
| Henry Thompson, Chief Dullknife College..... | Region 2 |
| Lynda Moss, Foundation for Community Vitality..... | Region 2 |
| Lisa Wagner, Wind River Development Fund..... | Region 3 |
| Don Aragon, Wind River Environmental Quality Commission..... | Region 3 |
| Shelly McAlpin, Serve Wyoming..... | Region 4 |
| Richelle Keinath, Wyoming Women's Foundation..... | Region 4 |
| Pat Tinjum, Burke County Job Development..... | Region 5 |
| Dennis Bercier, North Dakota State Senator..... | Region 5 |
| Al Nygard, Al Nygard Consulting..... | Region 6 |
| Kevin Dvorak, North Dakota Community Foundation..... | Region 6 |
| Tany Fidler, Four Bands Community Fund..... | Region 7 |
| Joy McCracken, Black Hills Neighborhood Housing..... | Region 7 |
| Patricia Pummel, ACE Program..... | Region 8 |
| Tracey Fischer, Oweesta Corporation..... | Region 8 |
| Major Robinson, Business Owner..... | At-large |
| Michelle Hauer, Montana Legal Services Association..... | At-large |
| Shannon Augare, Rural Dynamics, Inc..... | Chair |

The key staff for the implementation of the Northern Plains Initiative are;

| | |
|---------------------|---|
| Tom Jacobson..... | President & Chief Executive Officer |
| Sue Cassell..... | Vice President & Director of Operations |
| Tim Robbins..... | Director of Counseling |
| Deb Kottel..... | Director of Development |
| Karen Heisler..... | Director of Asset Development |
| Shannon Augare..... | Director of Public Policy |
| Jolene Bach..... | Director of Communications |
| Adam Gill..... | Program Manager |

Northern Plains Initiative

Executive Summary

The Northern Plains Initiative (NPI) is a coalition of community organizations and governmental agencies working together to create a long-range plan for economic equity for rural communities and their residents. The coalition focuses on bringing together strategically connected community leaders with key tribal, federal, and state officials to develop and implement policy. One of the priorities is to foster collaborations so that new venues for conversation and action can take place. NPI used the World Café Model to begin building quality relationships and to create positive change for the residents of the Northern Plains and their communities. The planning region consists of Montana, the western portion of North and South Dakota, and the northern portion of Wyoming. The 115 counties in the target area are economically weak, contain disadvantaged populations, offer extreme rural isolation, and have a large American Indian population. Individuals in these communities are overwhelmingly place bound.

A retrospective evaluation was completed at the end of the planning year and first year of the implementation of NPI, which is funded through a grant from the W.F. Kellogg Foundation. NPI used the ***Earn It, Keep It, and Grow It Model*** and the ***Theory of Change*** as the theoretical framework for achieving a set of short, intermediate and long term outcomes. Since the program is in its first year of implementation the evaluation design was exploratory and predictive. The exploratory evaluation designed focused on investigating and documenting the beginning stages of the initiative. It provided insight into the “discovery elements” of the initiative and identified the complexity of organizing the various components of the initiative. The predictive evaluation design addressed the additional dynamics of the initiative documenting some of the cause and effect of activities implemented during the planning and first year of the initiative. This design looked for any evidence to support common outcomes from this early phase of the initiative.

There were four broad questions used in this report to answer a set of four major evaluation questions. The four broad questions were: (1) What happened?; (2) What difference did it make?; (3) What has been learned?; and (4) How will it inform the future of the initiative?. The four major evaluation questions were:

1. Have project participants gained a voice in decision making that affects the quality of their communities and lives?
2. At the system level, has the knowledge and experience generated by NPI partners been institutionalized through incorporation into public and private policies and programs?
3. Is NPI able to sustain change efforts through funding systems other than the

W.K. Kellogg Foundation's investments?

4. Who are the partners and participants engaged in the NPI strategies?

There were three other questions asked, but there was not enough data or information collected to answer these additional questions.

In the planning year (April 1, 2006 to September 30, 2007) of NPI, there were eight Plains Talk I sessions held. A total of 134 participants from 101 different organizations participated in the dialogues and discussion. In the first year of implementation (April 1, 2007 to March 31, 2008), NPI convened six Plains Talk II sessions. A total of 145 participants from 118 different organizations participated in the discussions. In the first set of Plains Talk, the participants were asked to address six key questions that contributed to identifying a set of core values and building a shared vision statement for their region. In the second set of Plains Talk, the participants were asked to expand upon the shared vision and discuss the possibilities and issues for moving forward with their respective regional collaboratives. A special roundtable was held on March 2008 in Great Falls, Montana focusing on American Indian issues that included natural resources, education, human services, federal and state regulations, business, and labor.

The activities for NPI included the implementation and expansion of existing programs that supported its mission and goals of creating regions of economic stability, vitality and quality of life. There was work that involved five alliances and coalitions, two councils, two conferences, and five services linked to access and information about personal finances and services.

There were many lessons learned from this early implementation phase of NPI. Some of the lessons include:

- To make public policy recommendations and change requires the input of citizens, leaders, business, non profit organizations, faith-based organizations, and governmental agencies;
- Collaborative groups have to be aware of available resources and have accurate data and information to create innovative action strategies;
- Participants involved in conversations or service activities have to balance and suspend their judgment regarding situations until all the evidence is gathered from listening to others and performing good evaluation;
- Communication and dissemination of information to other individuals and citizens within a community is a challenge and alternative avenues have to be explored.

The lessons learned from the current work is contributing to improving the building of coalitions, partnerships, and activities to achieve NPI's mission. Some of the lessons included:

- The majority of the organizations are in a competitive mode to find funding to support and sustain their specific visions and missions. Therefore, care has to

-
- be taken that a collaborative does not reduce the opportunities for acquiring financial support for local, regional, state, and national agencies and businesses.
- Building a collaborative requires time and resources for the participants. The expectations of the collaborative have to be aligned with the participants' personal mission and organizational expectations. This requires a commitment and leadership that is a blend of independence and interdependence.
 - Each of the activities identified by NPI has a specific focus and expectation that is contingent on marketing, awareness, and support from different organizations and agencies. How does NPI expand the successful activity or activities to the other regions? Is this part of the regional collaborative work?
 - There is a need for an accurate and reliable data collection protocol and information sharing to inform the partners and the various activities of successes, failures, etc. for improvement and movement of the initiative.

Based on the findings of this first year of evaluation some of the following recommendations are being proposed:

- A review of the logic model and initial evaluation questions should be completed as soon as possible. These two documents will guide the evaluation into the self-organizing evaluation design.
- A review of the protocol for collecting qualitative data from the Plains Talk sessions should take place. Currently, the information and reporting is summative, but does not address the formative areas of satisfaction, intention, and action.
- Each activity is collecting data about clients being served. A system to measure client satisfaction and effective use and application of services need to be developed.
- More information and data about the partners and staff involvement in NPI is needed to determine level of commitment and satisfaction with the initiative.
- To carry out the Predictive Design the evaluation teams needs to create a common set of instruments and procedures to measure the practices and impact of the activities and dialogues. There are many components to the NPI initiative and a common instrument will provide for comparative analyses and reporting.
- Preparation should be made to implement the self-organizing evaluation design that will investigate the emerging structures, patterns, and properties of collaborative endeavors and partnerships. When looking for patterns or changes in patterns, it is useful to attend to three features of systems: boundaries, relationships, and diversity.

Northern Plains Initiative

Overview

The Northern Plains Initiative (NPI) is a coalition of community organizations and governmental agencies working together to create a long-range plan for economic equity for rural communities and their residents. The coalition organizations are located in four states: Montana, Wyoming, North Dakota, and South Dakota that have a total population of 2,877,422 (U.S. Census, 2006). NPI serves eight regions within these four states which include the state of Montana, northern Wyoming, western North Dakota and western South Dakota. The approximate population in these eight regions is 1,589,182 (55% of the four state population) of which there are 97,548 American Indians (6.1% of the regional population). The counties contained within the region are considered frontier counties. Seventeen reservation communities are found within the area's most persistent poverty counties. The 115 counties in the target area are economically weak, contain disadvantaged populations, offer extreme rural isolation, and are densely American Indians. Individuals in these communities are overwhelmingly place bound.

NPI has focused on bringing together strategically connected community leaders with key tribal, federal, and state officials to work on its vision of collaboration and cooperation in the development and implementation of public policy priorities. It recognizes the importance of regional interconnections, and values personal, community, and organizational relationships that are built upon integrity. It seeks to nurture a continuing sense of pride, hope, and belief that both community and regional potential can be achieved through deliberative dialogue and empowerment of citizens. The vision of NPI is to create a region where all people have the opportunity to thrive in the community they choose, where diversity is cherished, the environment is respected, and where community pride leads to rooted generations.

The interventions used by NPI fall into five strands that are based on specific regional needs and choices: (1) economic vitality, (2) resources to build better communities, (3) housing opportunities and choices, (4) preserving our environment, and (5) access to affordable healthcare services. These strands are aligned with the ***Earn It, Keep It, and Grow It Model*** that provides a framework for developing partnerships to engage citizens in exploring, developing, and implementing policy, capacity, and program initiatives to fulfil the vision and expectations for healthy individuals and communities.¹ As part of the exploratory and planning

¹ Rubiner, B. (2007). *By the numbers: Using data to drive action on behalf of children and families*. Strengthening Rural Families. Baltimore: The Annie E. Casey Foundation.

phases, NPI has convened a series of community meetings in the eight regions, called **Plains Talk**, for residents to discuss and identify key policy steps important to them in order to address the five strands necessary for economic equity and vitality within all the participating rural and reservation communities.

In this report the NPI evaluation process uses an outside perspective to show if a link exists between “the planned features of the initiative (e.g., actions, events, relationships, concepts, and values) and the intended outcomes.”² Since this is the first full year of implementation of the initiative, the achievement of all of the anticipated outcomes will be in the initiative’s preliminary phases. Therefore, an exploratory component and design will use four broad questions to guide the evaluation:³

1. What happened?
2. What difference did it make?
3. What has been learned?
4. How will it inform the future of the initiative?

Theoretical Framework

There are two major frameworks being used for the NPI work: the **Earn It, Keep It, and Grow It Model** and the **Theory of Change**. The **Earn It, Keep It, and Grow It Model** was developed by the Annie E. Casey Foundation in order to assist in the development of more promising futures for vulnerable rural communities, families and children by improving the present circumstances. This model is sometimes referred to as the **Rural Family Economic Success framework** which offers strategies to help families increase their income (“earn it”), stabilize their financial lives, (“keep it”) and acquire assets and build wealth (“grow it”).

Using the **Earn It, Keep It, and Grow It Model** NPI has associated its identified strategies and programs to the three components. **Earn It** strategies help families increase their income through support in three areas: readiness to earn, opportunities to earn, and “patching” strategies. In education and retraining programs, workers learn new skills to respond to the changing job market. Coordinated workforce and economic development systems match skilled workers with high-quality jobs.⁴ Patching supports, such as the Northern Plains

² W.K. Kellogg Foundation (2007). *Designing initiative evaluation: A systems-oriented framework for evaluating social change efforts*. Battle Creek, MI: Author, p. 19.

³ Ibid. p. 14.

⁴ The Annie E. Casey Foundation (2006). *An overview of rural family economic success: Earn it, keep it, grow it*. Strengthening Rural Families. Baltimore: Author.

Cooperative Asset Formation Project efforts to increase access to the *Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC)*, *Voluntary Income Tax Assistance (VITA)*, and *Individual Development Accounts (IDA)* help rural communities and families close the gap between what they earn and the cost of covering the basics for their families. Other NPI strategies include the *Bridge To Benefits* program which is a web-based tool to help community organizations screen individuals and assist them with a variety of financial assistance resources and the Northern Plains Family Economic Security Exploratory, which is a State of Montana demonstration project to assist families that have received welfare assistance in the last 24 months and are still 200% below poverty to receive career training and home ownership assistance.

Keep it strategies help families retain more of their earnings. One strategy is finding ways to decrease the extra costs for a working family (e.g., transportation and child care) and helping them to provide basic necessities, respond to emergencies, and still build a nest egg. Additional NPI strategies include addressing the issue of predatory lending, increasing community capacity to address specific socio-economic disparities and issues, and providing affordable alternatives to payday loans. Keep It strategies also include efforts to improve family financial literacy, increase access to fair financial services, including enforcing anti-predatory legislation, refunding the anticipation loan act, creating credit card security legislation, and introducing anti-predatory home loan legislation.

Grow It strategies focuses on building an asset base for economic growth and sustainability. Long-term family economic success depends on stable employment and sound financial investment. The NPI strategies help families increase their assets to build secure financial futures for themselves and their children. These include the Northern Plains Individual Development Account, Financial Literacy Education in Public Schools, and affordable, quality health care. In addition, these strategies look to the larger community, sparking efforts to create and sustain business growth and development that is connected to the regional economy.

The **Theory of Change (TOC)** is a tool for developing solutions to complex social problems such as those identified by Rural Dynamics and the Northern Plains Initiative. A basic TOC explains how a group of early and intermediate accomplishments sets the stage for producing long-range results. A more complete TOC articulates the assumptions about the process through which change will occur and specifies the ways in which all of the required early and intermediate outcomes related to achieving the desired long-term change will be brought about and documented as they occur.⁵ Community initiatives are sometimes planned without an explicit understanding of the early and intermediate steps required for long-term

⁵ Anderson, A. (2005). *The community builder's approach to theory of change: A practical guide to theory and development*. New York: The Aspen Institute Roundtable on Community Change.

changes to occur; therefore, many assumptions about the change process need to be examined for program planning or evaluation planning to be most effective. A TOC creates an honest picture of the steps required to reach a goal. It provides an opportunity for stakeholders to assess what they can influence, what impact they can have, and whether it is realistic to expect to reach their goal with the time and resources they have available.⁶

In implementing the TOC the stakeholders have to be clear about what they want to produce through a specific program, initiative or project. The next step is for stakeholders to think about all of the preconditions—the building blocks or requirements—that must exist in order to reach their long-term goal. They then need to consider, in light of this big picture perspective, which of these preconditions (otherwise known as outcomes) they will take responsibility for producing.

Usually there is just a subset of outcomes that they can influence. Some preconditions are beyond the sphere of influence of any single initiative, such as needing a stable economy to produce enough jobs to reach an employment goal. Others may be beyond one program's influence, but stakeholders could suggest ways that a particular program may be able to influence other programs to act, or they could identify areas for strategic collaboration or partnerships.

A logic model is a tactical explanation of the process of producing a given outcome. It outlines the program inputs and activities, the outputs they will produce, and the connections between those outputs and the desired outcomes.⁷ Alternatively, a TOC, as it is defined, is a strategic picture of the multiple interventions required to produce the early and intermediate outcomes that are preconditions of reaching an ultimate goal.

Once a precondition (or outcome) has been identified through the TOC process, a logic model can be used to explain how that outcome will be produced. Thus, one TOC could actually be linked to a number of logic models, because a logic model could be constructed to illustrate how to produce each outcome in the TOC map. The TOC summarizes work at a strategic level, while a logic model would be used to illustrate the tactical, or program-level, understanding of the change process (Appendix A).

A theory of change approach, and the causal links it depicts, ought to be highly responsive, as long as all views are considered and thoughtfully weighed.⁸ Therefore the evaluation process becomes critical in being responsive to the various stakeholders as they contribute to the development of any theory of change. The theory of change approach goes

⁶ Harris, E. (2005). An introduction to theory of change. *The Evaluation Exchange*, 11 (2).

⁷ W.K. Kellogg Foundation (2004). *Logic model development guide*. Battle Creek, MI: Author

⁸ Schön, D. A. (1983). *The reflective practitioner*. New York: Basic Books.

beyond simple involvement to using credibility among stakeholders as the touchstone for assessing a theory. Laying out a theory a priori makes potential causal relationships explicit. Thus, it seems that a theory of change approach should increase the objectivity of causal judgments. Measuring the effects and consequences are contingent upon the stakeholders recognizing their active role in TOC. Experience shows that different stakeholder perspectives lead to reporting a wide range of responses.⁹ These experiences and responses can be classified as cognitive and emotional, but overall these biases systematically influence the way individuals and community contribute to change within their lives and community.

The Theory of Change (TOC) for the Northern Plains Initiative (NPI) is stated in its proposal as:

*If regional partners identify collective values and a vision for their future, they will become motivated and actively engaged in strategic initiatives to achieve their vision. The collective vision can only be achieved through multiple strategies working together at both the local and regional level. Once engaged, partners will work collaboratively to implement these initiatives across the region. Together, these strategies will bring about the region's collective principles of economic vitality, quality community infrastructures, housing opportunities, environment preservation, quality education, and community interconnectedness.*¹⁰

Evaluation Questions

On page 6, there were four broad questions that surfaced for this evaluation report. They were:

1. What happened?
2. What difference did it make?
3. What has been learned?
4. How will it inform the future of the initiative?

These questions will help to guide this evaluation report, but the proposal had stated a set of specific questions and a subset of follow up questions. They were:

- 1 Have project participants gained a voice in decision making that affects the

⁹ Tetlock, P. E., & Belkin, A. (1996). Counterfactual thought experiments in world politics. *Social Science Research Council* 50(4), 77-85.

¹⁰ Rural Dynamics. (2006). *Beyond the two step: Partners leading the way through systemic change*. Great Falls, MT: Consumer Credit Counseling Service.

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- quality of their communities and lives?
 - 1.1 Did NPI connect community to policies?
 - 1.2 Did the partners develop models to demonstrate ideas that allowed communities to redesign delivery of public and private services in a way that meets their vision and expectation to promote economic and community development?
 - 2 At the system level, has the knowledge and experience generated by NPI partners been institutionalized through incorporation into public and private policies and programs?
 - 2.1 Did NPI communicate their success to key policy makers?
 - 2.2 What is the depth and breath of NPI's networks and relationships?
 - 2.3 Has NPI assisted in the development of traditional and non traditional leaders?
 - 2.4 Did NPI provide forums for stakeholders to find common ground for systemic change?
 - 3 Is NPI able to sustain change efforts through funding streams other than through the W.K. Kellogg Foundation's investments?
 - 4 Who are the partners and participants engaged in the NPI strategies?
 - 4.1 Who participated and who are the targeted beneficiaries?
 - 4.2 What are the strategies used with and without NPI?
 - 4.3 What was accomplished by each of the strategies at the end of the program year?
 - 4.4 What lessons were learned and how are they being addressed?
 - 5 What are important values guiding the indigenous participants' world view and ways of assessing merit and worth?
 - 6 How were these values used to informed tribal and rural applications and practices as a consequence of the NPI work?
 - 7 What are the values guiding the indigenous participants approach to sustainability of vibrant communities?

Methodology

In this retrospective program evaluation report, an emphasis was placed on using exploratory and predictive evaluation designs that focused on qualitative and quantitative methods and processes. This approach is aligned to the W.K. Kellogg Foundation's framework for evaluating the interactions of three types of dynamics within a social system: unorganized, organized, and self-organizing.¹¹ This framework did not replace other evaluation techniques and methodologies, but rather it provided a broader framework for the evaluators to study and inform stakeholders about the successful or non successful changes within the NPI's complex social system.

The exploratory evaluation design was used to review and to document the various aspects of the NPI that were not completely organized, understood or articulated in the planning phase. Through the use of Plains Talk I in this planning stage, NPI attempted to test its model of data collection, design an organized approach to reach individuals and communities, and provide a creative opportunity for public engagement and action. The results from this design contributed to the theory of change indicating desired direction for the initiative. In this design, environmental scans were performed with a review of related literature, other similar practices, and analysis of quantitative and qualitative data collected during this initial phase.

The predictive evaluation design was used to study the cause and effect dynamics within the initiative. It focused on the planned features of the initiative and the intended results or outcomes. It used data collection methods similar to the exploratory evaluation design but with a phenomenological inquiry approach describing the essence of the experiences encountered by the staff and participants. "This design is useful for looking at common outcomes across individuals, groups, organizations, and larger systems in fairly stable situations."¹² The predictive evaluation design will offer the leaders and staff results and accountability that documents on one hand the challenges of implementing NPI, but at the same time information about how to improve upon this complex system of change being implemented.

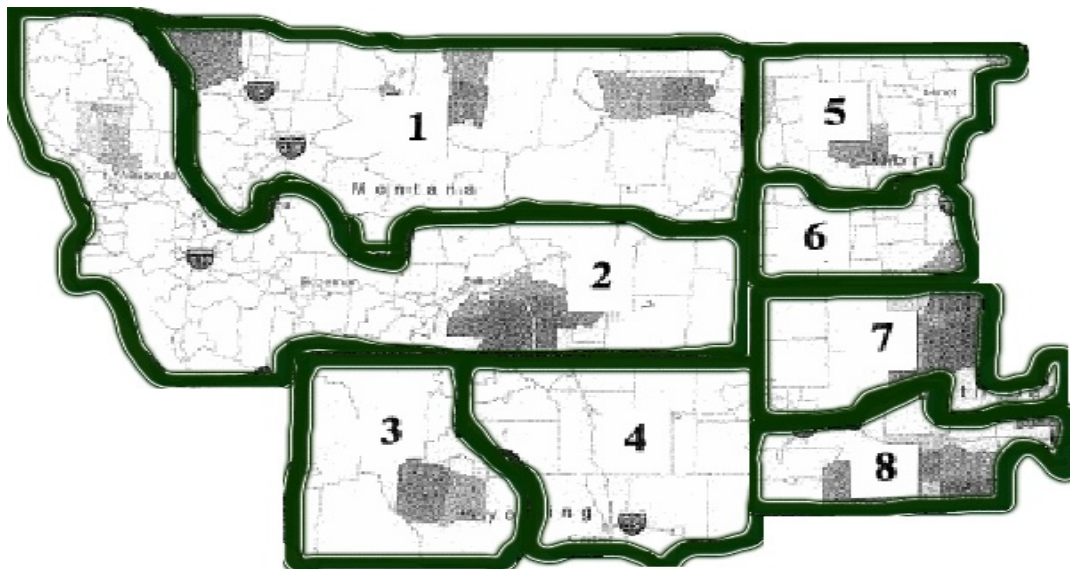
The NPI Logic Model was used to organize NPI implementation and expectations in a linear format. It depicted the relationship among resources, planned short-term and intermediate-term project activities, desired outcomes and goals. The logic model was used by the evaluators to determine what aspects of the intervention, inputs and outputs contributed to the achievement of short-term outcomes. [*NPI has not been in existence long enough to collect data and information to measure the achievement of intermediate-term or long-term outcomes.*]

¹¹ W.K. Kellogg Foundation (2007). *Designing initiative evaluation: A systems-oriented framework for evaluating social change efforts*. Battle Creek, MI: Author, p. 7.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 19.

Only the preliminary stage of the predictive evaluation design was used in this report. Since there were no surveys or other quantitative data collected using pre and post surveys or questionnaires, inferential statistics and other relevant analytical methods were not used. The emphasis at this point of the evaluation was on qualitative methods that included focus groups, interviews, and demographic information. Interpretations and implications of the findings were also limited since the majority of the work at this point was still exploratory and emerging into formalized practice and applications.

Another aspect of the evaluation process is collecting and analyzing data from the American Indian participants in a variety of tribal and reservation settings (n = 17). Sensitivity to the ways of assessing merit and worth based on traditional values and cultural expressions were noted throughout the evaluation process. Wherever possible the above designs and methodologies were responsive to indigenous individuals and communities in ways that provided opportunities for learning and using acquired information to enhance and apply tribal traditions and values in the emerging rural, state, national, and global communities. The evaluators attempted to balance acceptable social science evaluation protocols for participants who have different cultural assumptions which could have posed, at the very least, some problems in communication. “More seriously, it may lead the evaluators to inadvertently violate certain tribal customs, which results in the failure of the study and a loss of trust from the tribe for them and other outsiders.”¹³



¹³ Tigges, L. & Zastrow, L.M. (1981). An evaluation of the Santa Clara Pueblo Headstart Program: Alternative model for program evaluation of cultural based communities. *Journal of American Indian Education*, 20 (1).

Findings

What Happened?

Evaluation Question 4.0:

Who are the partners and participants engaged in the NPI strategies?

In the planning phase of NPI (2006-07), a series of objectives were identified to identify and explore a common vision and plan for meeting a set of short, intermediate, and long range outcomes. Using the World Cafe model to foster collaborative dialogue from citizens residing in five communities representing the eight regions in a four state area, questions were asked focusing on current and future needs, actions, and policies to help their respective communities address issues related to economy, education, health, home ownership, and infrastructure. The process was identified as Plains Talk. Table I summarizes the sessions held and the number of participants.

Table 1
Plains Talk I Sessions

| Location | Date | Participants | Number of Organizations |
|-----------------|-----------------------|--------------|-------------------------|
| Great Falls, MT | June 14-15, 2006 | 29 | 21 |
| Casper, WY | July 6, 2006 | 17 | 14 |
| Rapid City, SD | September 14-15, 2006 | 15 | 12 |
| Dickinson, ND | October 3, 2006 | 17 | 16 |
| Sidney, MT | October 5, 2006 | 10 | 8 |
| Browning, MT | October 6, 2006 | 7 | 5 |
| Great Falls, MT | October 25, 2006 | 9 | 1 |
| Billings, MT | November 13-14, 2006 | 30 | 24 |
| Total | | 134 | 101 |

Shaded sessions were "Mini Plains Talk."

At each of these sessions a set of questions was put before the participants which resulted in extensive discussion and reflection. The six questions were:

1. What future do we want to create together for our children and grandchildren in this region?
2. What values do we need to hold to create the future we want for our region?
3. What relationships must be in place to make this vision a reality?
4. What are other possibilities that may exist for this region?
5. What actions, policies, or conversations are critical to achieving our collective vision?
6. What commitments am I willing to make to achieve this collective vision?

In addition to convening discussion sessions, data was collected to describe the region. Current and possible interventions were identified by NPI during this initial planning stage. All the data collected served as the basis for policy discussion and development of strategic community planning. This data baseline included information about population distribution, income and employment patterns, poverty rates, educational profiles, mortality and health statistics and resources. Using the ***Earn It, Keep It, Grow It Model***, NPI started to identify organizations and individuals that were interested and served as resources to help individuals, families, and communities achieve economic and social capacities.

Table 2
Plains Talk II Sessions

| Location | Date | Participants | Number of Organizations |
|-----------------|-------------------|--------------|-------------------------|
| Great Falls, MT | December 12, 2007 | 16 | 14 |
| Billings, MT | December 14, 2007 | 15 | 12 |
| Dickinson, ND | January 28, 2008 | 26 | 22 |
| Rapid City, SD | January 30, 2008 | 26 | 22 |
| Casper, WY | February 5, 2008 | 27 | 25 |
| Great Falls, MT | March 3, 2008 | 35 | 23 |
| Total | | 145 | 118 |

In the first year of the full implementation of NPI, a second round of Plains Talk, entitled Plains Talk II, was introduced. Plains Talk II provided NPI an opportunity to expand upon its initial success of Plains Talk I's public dialogue and specific policy action steps, wherever appropriate. Table 2 shows location, dates and number of participants for each session held. A total of 145 individuals representing 118 organizations participated in Plains Talk II. On March

3rd, Plains Talk centered around American Indian policies and issues.

In addition to the Plains Talk II, NPI was engaged in alliances, conferences, collaborations, programs, and other work focusing on meeting its vision and goals. The activities included:

Alliances & Coalitions

- *Montana Indian Business Alliance (MIBA)*
An alliance of tribal and non tribal organizations to promote networking, business development, and support for businesses in tribal communities.
- *South Dakota Indian Business Alliance (SDIBA)*
Similar to the MIBA, but with an emphasis on recruitment of the private business sector and cooperation with the state.
- *Native Financial Education Coalition*
A group of local, regional and national organizations and governmental agencies working together to achieve its common goal of promoting financial education in American Indian communities. The Coalition seeks to exchange information, forge partnerships, and develop and implement strategies to institutionalize outreach and school-based financial education for all American Indians.
- *National Community Tax Coalition*
A group of community organizations working collaboratively and in partnership to improve the economic well being of low and moderate income individuals, families and communities by accessing tax credits and asset-building opportunities.
- *Tax Help Montana*
A coalition of partners across the State of Montana that provides Volunteer Income Tax Assistance to low and moderate income people. The coalition includes organizations representing credit unions, U.S. Department of Revenue, legal services, community colleges, and extension services.

Councils, Conferences, & Meetings

- *Montana & Wyoming Tribal Leaders Council*
NPI has been attending council meetings in order to build relationships with the tribes and to keep informed of the projects and initiatives within the respective communities.
- *Family Economic Security Council*
Active participant in the Governor's Family Economic Security Council which focuses on defining strategies to increase economic security for Montana's families, especially those below or at poverty level.

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- *North Dakota Financial Education Conference*
Primary work using NPI resources to introduce Jumpstart Coalition in North Dakota.
 - *National Conference of State Legislators*
National Caucus of Native American State Legislators
A meeting of state legislators, community practitioners, philanthropic foundations, and corporations discussing regional work that contributes to building stronger and healthy communities.
 - *Access to Health Care*
Partnership of health care providers focusing on how to make mental health services and medical care services available to the uninsured or underinsured.

Services, Training & Other Activities

- *Predatory Lending Community Awareness Project*
Primary objective is to create community awareness on the issue of predatory lending and to identify a variety of outlets (e.g., print and electronic media) in delivering information.
- *Montana Credit Unions for Community Development (MCUCD)*
A partnership of credit unions in Montana offering alternative payday loans at acceptable interest rates to replace the predatory payday loans.
- *PolicyLink*
A national research and action institute for advancing economic and social equity by provide information and training on equity and social justice issues.
- *Bridge to Benefits*
In partnership with Children's Defense Fund of Minnesota and Urban Planet, the web tool helps community organizations screen individuals for eligibility and assist them with applications to receive a variety of services including income energy assistance, child care assistance, children's health insurance, food stamps, Medicaid, and reduced school lunches.
- *Northern Plains Action Lab*
A program similar to the Kellogg Action Lab that gives small businesses and nonprofit organizations technical assistance in the areas of grant writing, accounting, budgeting, marketing, web site design, and other relevant topics.

What Difference Did It Make?

Evaluation Question 1.0:

Have project participants gained a voice in decision making that affects the quality of their communities and lives?

The data collected by NPI has substantiated a need for action and response to individual and community situations of poverty, apathy, and challenges. There are many theories and models for reversing these conditions and they all focus on understanding, participation, empowerment, and action. Institution-based community organizations offer a comprehensive model of inclusive participation, which is open to any public form of political influence (community meetings, voting, lobby, advocacy, direct action, forums, etc.). The community organizers with partnerships among non-profits, faith-based, business, tribal, and governmental organizations with their organizing practices serve as bridging mechanisms within and among institutions, enabling collaboration and collective action. They accomplish this by forming new relationships and redirecting existing relationships toward political discussion and action, and by collectively learning and developing new goals in the process of action and reflection.

NPI through its Plains Talk has contributed to the development of a variety of new relationships focused on addressing specific issues and problems within the community. It has helped to create a public voice that can be instrumental in public policy consideration, development and implementation. The difference this process has made is essential for any change in society, especially in a community. Plains Talk is an open-ended process so citizens representing a variety of organizations and perspectives have a chance to identify the issues, to amend their opinions, and to redesign action based on what has been learned from experience and evaluative research. Evaluation is the constant taking stock of what citizens want to achieve, how well they believe they are achieving it, whether or not they still have the same goals and how to proceed with this new knowledge of their own experience. Although, the evaluation protocol was not formalized during Plains Talk, it was still inherent in the discussions and the results generated from the dialogues.

In each of the Plains Talk dialogues there were tensions generated from the various perspectives regarding specific issues or concerns. This is an expectation for any dialogue and is consistent with the ***Creative Tension Model***. Senge's seminal work centers on restructuring of thinking patterns within learning organizations - groups that prioritize and enhance the learning capacities of all their members. According to Senge, effective learning organizations are built through the practice of certain basic skills or disciplines: (1) personal mastery, (2) mental models, (3) shared vision, and (4) team learning. The principle of creative tension is the central principle

of personal mastery. When an individual holds a vision that differs from the current reality, a gap exists (creative tension). Mastery of this creative tension transforms the individual and the group from its shortfall or gap between vision and current reality to a clarity of vision and action.¹⁴

It was evident from the *group memory* reports that the groups were in the learning and creating modes. There was a collaborative effort to fill in the gaps between current reality and vision. In order to filter out the vision and current realities of the various groups a series of questions were asked of the participants in Plains Talk I.

- What future do we want for our children and grandchildren in this region?
- Which organizations and what individuals do we need relationships with in order to make this vision a reality?
 - What qualities should these relationships have?
- What values do we need to hold to create the future we want for our region?
- What possibilities that we haven't thought of yet exist for this region?
- What actions, policies or conversations are most critical to achieving our collective vision?
- What commitments am I willing to make to achieve this collective vision?

The discussions from Plains Talk I fell into five categories: a preferred future, core values, important relationships, undreamt possibilities, critical actions, policies, and conversations, and commitments. Depending upon the location of the dialogue sessions the consensus for each category varied with a specific locus of identity. For a preferred future, the participants in Montana talked about a sustainable future when individuals could reside in a healthy community and economic stability. In Wyoming, the participants' thinking was systemic and heavy on economics, education, civic involvement, housing, and health care. In South Dakota, the participants wanted choices. Quality of life issues were deemed important and supported by economic security, educational opportunities, and safe communities. In North Dakota, the participants put an emphasis on the environment and being stewards of the land, water, and air. Safety in schools and communities was a key discussion item for them. It was evident from these group discussions that the loci of concerns were on economics, health, education, housing, safety, and quality of life.¹⁵

NPI has made an effort to support and foster a set of core values in all of its work. The vision for the regions is supported by five core values: community, accountability, respect, capacity, and hope. The participants of Plains Talk was asked to identify what they saw as their

¹⁴ Senge, P.M. (1990). *The fifth discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization*. New York: Doubleday Currency.

¹⁵ Rural Dynamics Incorporated (2007). *Plans talk: An exploration of the possibilities and promise of the northern plains region*. Great Falls, MT: Author.

core values. It was interesting to note that the core values for Plains Talk I were reflective of each region of what was valued and important to individual participants and their respective communities. In Montana, the core values included respect, hard work, strong ethics, and community. In Wyoming, the core values were dedication, passion, ethics, personal responsibility, integrity and honesty. Generosity, social justice, and awareness of other's needs were all cited as crucial values. In South Dakota, there was strong emphasis on respect. Embedded in this core value was understanding of others, diversity, cooperation, and community. In North Dakota, the core values included integrity, equity, balance, and remembering those who have less and have needs.

All the groups identified the importance of relationships among all the stakeholders. This included governmental agencies, business, faith-based organizations, schools, colleges, non-profits, tribes, and individual citizens. It was noted that learning and knowing by organizations, groups, and individuals does not happen in a vacuum. Group outcomes and accomplishments become a reality when there are interactions and shared understandings. This collective performance is best manifested when relationships are developed and sustained through discussion, cooperation, consensus, and action.¹⁶

The group discussions moved to undreamt possibilities. This was a creative phase of the dialogue and provided an opportunity for further discussion and deliberation. Some of the suggested possibilities were:

- rethink the presence of the military in the Northern Plains and what its implications may be for our future;
- bring the rural and reservation communities on par with the rest of the state;
- promote regional equity, which will improve access to jobs, services, and justice for our communities;
- capitalize on the untapped potential of alternative fuels;
- provide an exchange of cultural views that involves the smaller communities in the state, build a strong collection of nonprofit organizations and for-profit agencies, and begin a real regional dialogue including representation from regional tribes;
- initiate bus circuits that can build relationships between communities and even residents of different states through outdoor activities, hiking, camping, and ranching experiences;
- inspire collaborative grant making in local and national foundations, and engage corporations in philanthropy;
- pursue opportunities to establish a high technology corridor that incubates quality

¹⁶ Cook, S.D. & Yanow, D. (1996). Culture and organizational learning. In M.D. Cohen & L.S. Sproull (Eds.) *Organizational Learning*, 430-459. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

jobs and businesses and stimulates investment in alternative industries while connecting local residents to the resulting economic opportunity;

- provide an off-season academy for legislative officials that improves the efficiency of the short legislative season by better preparing elected leaders for their responsibilities; and
- use technology as a communication vehicle that keeps residents consistently connected to opportunities for involvement in community activities and in neighboring regions.

Through the dialogue groups the sharing and learning resulted in considerations for critical action such as policy development and further conversations. The consequences of this collective learning was to identify those elements that were critical for change and making a difference. As noted in the field notes, each region had a different perspective of the critical. In Montana, it was important that policies be formulated and communicated that support family stability and break the cycle of dependency upon public systems. Increasing the living wage and other relevant policies to protect low-income families would be a first step to strengthening the economy and the community. In Wyoming, the group believed that the governmental agencies needed to spend more time understanding the role and mission of non profit organizations as it meets community needs and priorities. Involving policymakers in the conversation of individual, family and community needs was fundamental if change is to take place. Similarly in South Dakota there was a call for an end to reliance on government and to seek its cooperation in implementing solutions generated by the communities and region. Forming an informed citizenry and soliciting their assistance in a collective positive agenda was critical to the South Dakota group. The North Dakota group developed three guiding principles for changing the course of the state's development: (1) create a climate of innovation and energy; (2) hold more community conversations; and (3) change the nature of the conversations to future thinking and collaborative action.

In Plains Talk II, NPI attempted to follow up with the conversations started in Plains Talk I. The focus of these dialogues were on developing a vision for the state and sharing this vision with others. The Plains Talk II dialogues were more strategic in purpose as well as expanding the partnership involvement and commitment to community action. The North Dakota group articulated the importance of cooperation among nonprofit organizations, businesses, and governmental agencies in helping to cultivate and sustain communities. The depopulation of the plains requires a collaborative effort to bring sustainable services such as health care, education, transportation, housing, and economic support to the rural communities. There were similar concerns in South Dakota about education, healthcare, and depopulation of the rural areas. These groups indicated that education and financial literacy was an important factor in economic growth and vitality. There was discussion about how the various agencies and organizations

could work together to help all citizens with economic issues (credit, good paying jobs, housing, etc.) In Wyoming, healthcare, health insurance, housing, and self-sufficiency were integrated into the development of a state and regional vision statement. There was a discussion about the movement of messages, such as the vision, vertically and horizontally within the community. The dialogue surrounded the importance of the state government taking a leadership role in networking non profit organizations, businesses, agencies, and individuals.

The difference noted between Plains Talk I and Plains Talk II was the realization that cooperation and collaboration are important ingredients if a vision is to be acted upon. This was a common strand of action noted in all of the Plains Talk II sessions. Although not noted in the field notes, it was implied that a good history of collaboration or cooperation in some of the communities was lacking. Even though a community has little or no history of collaboration, a new collaborative approach appeared to be thought worthwhile by all of the stakeholders. There was discussion about the importance of being inclusive by including all non profit organizations, governmental agencies, and business interested in making their respective communities economically viable and places with a high quality of life. It was noted that the collaborating partners should spend time marketing the collaboration to key leaders in order to create a climate of possibilities for policy development and regional change.

A special roundtable was held on March 3, 2008 in Great Falls, Montana, focusing on American Indian issues regarding natural resources, education, human services, energy, and taxation. Thirty-five leaders from five reservations (Blackfeet, Fort Belknap, Crow Nation, Flathead, and Little Shell Reservations) and a variety of American Indian organizations discussed and developed a set of goals in four major categories.

- Agriculture, fish, wildlife, parks, and natural resources;
- Education, human services, law, and justice;
- Federal relations, energy, telecommunications, local government, and transportation;
- Taxation, business, and labor.

In each of the categories the working group identified a set of specific goals and actions pertaining to Indian Country. There were some common strands derived from the discussions that included:

- Communication: The importance of the involvement and building of relationships among the government agencies and organizations working with tribes through a two-way communication mechanism was noted by the working group.
- Pittman-Robinson Funds: The working group agreed that these funds which are derived from hunting and fishing licenses should be used for development and improvement of reservation lands and resources.
- Urban American Indians: There was consensus on developing public policies that focus on American Indians living in urban centers throughout the state. There were

specific concerns regarding good paying jobs, affordable housing, equitable opportunities, and educational choices for everyone.

Through its activities, NPI has made a difference on the individual and community levels. As part of the Earn It, Keep It, and Grow It model, the various activities have reached out to address some of the specific concerns that surfaced in Plains Talk and other sources. Tax Help Montana has provided tax preparation assistance to low-income individuals at 26 sites throughout Montana. In the 2007 tax season, 5,105 federal income tax returns and 4,950 state income tax returns were prepared. The average federal adjusted gross income was \$16,976.33. The total federal refund dollars to the residence of Montana was \$2,675,767 of which \$1,647,061 was in the form of earned income tax credit.

This is an important activity for 2008 since individuals filing a 2007 Federal Income Tax return will be eligible for a 2008 Tax Rebate. Qualifying single filers (AGI less than \$75,000) will get rebates of up to \$600. Qualifying couples (AGI less than \$150,000) will get rebates of up to \$1,200, plus \$300 per dependent child, with no maximum on the number of eligible children. Persons who owe no income taxes, but earned at least \$3,000 in income from Social Security and veterans disability will get rebate checks of \$300 for individuals and \$600 for couples. This will be very helpful to the low income families and could provide some temporary economic relief in some communities.

In July of 2007, NPI entered into an agreement with the Montana Credit Unions for Community Development (MCUCD) to implement the Montana Credit Union Payday Loan Alternatives Project. Fourteen credit unions have signed a Memorandum of Understanding enrolling in *REAL Solutions*[™] (*REAL* stands for "Relevant, Effective, Asset-building, Loyalty-producing" Solutions), which focuses on offering affordable alternatives to payday loans. National Credit Union Foundation assigned a *REAL Solutions*[™] field coach to Montana to implement the project. The technical assistance included training of the providers and hosting conferences on credit reporting, compliance, marketing, financial counseling, and policy considerations. Currently, there are three credit unions providing payday loans. They have approved 98 loans. Twenty-three organizations participated in six webinars trainings and five conference calls. Four percent (4.3%) of the credit unions participated in all sessions, 56% of the credit unions participated in five to eight sessions, and 39% of the credit unions participated in one to four sessions.

Bridge to Benefits is partnering with the Otto Bremer Foundation and the Children's Defense Fund of Minnesota to help individuals determine their eligibility for financial resources such as school lunches, energy assistance, and tax incentives. The Otto Bremer Foundation recognizes that its success is dependent on working with others to achieve common goals. Partnerships and collaborations, both formal and informal, provide greater resources, experience,

and wisdom than the Foundation could garner on its own when working on complex issues. This strategy is most effective when the collaborations are configured in ways that maximize each participant's assets and expertise. The Children's Defense Fund offers an assessment tool which requires 10 minutes to complete, the screening tool calculates potential eligibility for:

- Medical Assistance (MA) and General Assistance Medical Care (GAMC)
- Basic Sliding Fee Child Care Assistance
- The School Meal Program
- Food Support Program
- Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and Working Family Credit (WFC)
- Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP)

Data to determine the number of families that have taken advantage of these services has not been collected to date. NPI is in the early stages of formalizing and establishing a link with the Otto Bremer Foundation and the Children's Defense Fund of Minnesota for its eight regions.

NPI has demonstrated a commitment to provide small business owners across the region with the tools, networks, and advocates necessary for them to succeed in a local, national, and global market. The small business alliances include the Montana Indian Business Alliance and the South Dakota Indian Business Alliance. The Montana Indian Business Alliance includes all seven reservations within Montana and the South Dakota Indian Business Alliance has membership from all the nine tribes and individuals from the urban centers in the state.

Table 3
Number of Northern Plains News Readers

| Month | Sent | Returned | Opt Out | Received | Opened | Percent Readers |
|----------------|--------------|-------------|------------|--------------|--------------|-----------------|
| August, 2007 | 466 | 56 | 1 | 409 | 113 | 27.6% |
| September | 534 | 82 | 1 | 451 | 118 | 26.2% |
| October | 1,070 | 191 | 3 | 876 | 278 | 31.7% |
| November | 1,029 | 164 | 0 | 865 | 290 | 33.5% |
| December | 915 | 36 | 2 | 877 | 243 | 27.7% |
| January, 2008 | 978 | 40 | 0 | 938 | 251 | 26.8% |
| February | 1,148 | 72 | 1 | 1,075 | 301 | 28.0% |
| March | 1,151 | 91 | 2 | 1,058 | 281 | 26.6% |
| April | 1,149 | 93 | 0 | 1,056 | 290 | 27.5% |
| Average | 937.8 | 91.7 | 1.1 | 845.0 | 240.6 | 28.5% |

As noted by the Plains Talk conversations, communication was identified as a critical component for any successful collaborative endeavor. The Northern Plains News (NPN), a web-based newsletter, attempts to keep subscribers and interested individuals informed of NPI work and news. NPN has partnered with the Montana Horizons and South Dakota Horizons communities to provide stories of their successes and events. RDI started the newsletter on August 2007. Table 3 shows the number of newsletters sent, the number returned, and the number of people who opted not to receive the letter. The percentage shows the number of people who opened the newsletter for the particular month. On the average there was a one in four readership for the NPN.

What has been learned?

Evaluation Question 2.0:

At the system level, has the knowledge and experience generated by NPI partners been institutionalized through incorporation into public and private policies and programs?

Public policymaking takes place when people with authority make decisions or commitments on important public questions. The effect of these decisions may or may not disrupt the status quo, but it becomes democratic when the people have input into a particular policy.¹⁷ The Plains Talk sessions are one of the first major steps to getting public input. Through the process of identifying citizens, leaders, and organizations to form a collaborative group, the discussion or decisions that move toward policies become a portal to possible system-wide changes if the policymakers adopt a specific policy recommendation from the group. One of the major lessons learned through this process is the realization that the early stages of a collaborative effort should include diverse involvement by all the nonprofit organizations, faith-based organizations, businesses, governmental agencies, and elected officials interested in the topic under discussion and review if any legitimacy and action is to take place.

A second lesson learned from this protocol and process is that the collaborative groups have to be sensitive to the data and resources available to them. Policymakers, opinion-makers, and the general public have different levels of control. Collaborative partners need to spend time

¹⁷ Gerston, L. (2002). *Public policymaking in a democratic society: A guide to civic engagement*. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe .

collecting this data, but must also market to key leaders to create an atmosphere of need and response. Sometimes the collaborators serve as a positive external motivator to policy and opinion makers. But overall a climate has to be established in which the collaborative group is attempting to work together to actualize a vision that is shared by residents and citizens.¹⁸

One of the challenges in any collaborative dialogue is the suspension of judgment. Without it, dialogue is not possible. Suspension of judgment is not about stopping judgments from occurring, but it is about parking a judgment so that all voices can be heard and evidence can be collected to support a particular point of discussion. The judging process divides reality into parts and then compares these parts as a way of knowing something about the whole system or a particular problem.¹⁹ Dividing something in parts can divert a participant's focus from the real problem and contribute to the formation of barriers rather than the possibilities of a solution. This was noted when the groups were concerned about the quality of education on the various levels (parts), when the true issue may have been how to motivate people to get a quality education for good job placement and economic security (system).

Through the dialogue and conversations, opinions were expressed by the participants. "An opinion is a judgment, a conviction, a view, or belief held by a person on some issue. . . . It is useful to distinguish [opinions from] broader attitudes and value systems on which they are based."²⁰ Opinions are not necessarily less stable than attitudes and values, but care must be taken to evaluate them in the context of reliable evidence and the person's value system. The outcome from the dialogues is that an opinion is tentative and can be reversed. This was noted throughout the Plains Talk conversations. Therefore, another lesson learned was the ability to listen to what was being said respectfully, but not to arrive at a conclusion until the topic or issue was teased out by the group.

As with the suspension of judgment, good and effective conversations are about the participants' ability to listen. It was evident from the results of Plains Talk that there was active listening. Without this listening collaborative partnerships can not be sustained. So another lesson to be learned from Plains Talk I & II is making sure that what has been said is recorded. Not only does the recording create a group memory for future reference, but it validates that there was listening taking place during the dialogue. There are three levels of listening that everyone should be aware of: listening to another person, listening to one's self, and listening for a

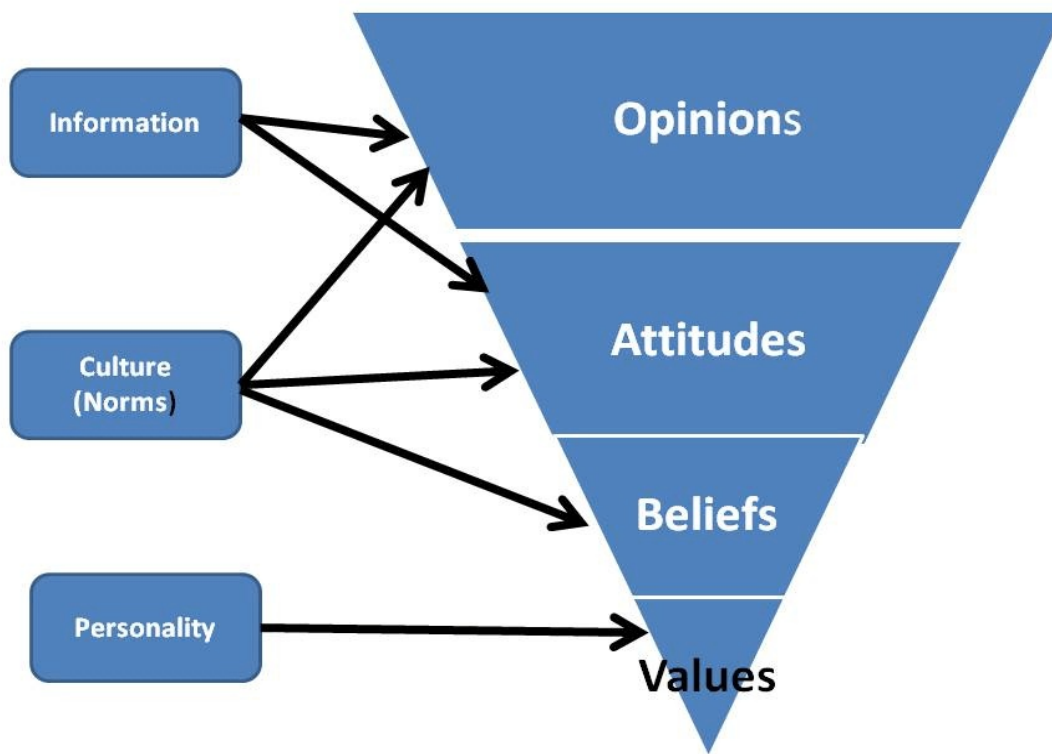
¹⁸ Mattesich, P., Murray-Close, M., & Monsey, B. (2001). *Collaboration: What makes it work*. Saint Paul, MN: Fieldstone Alliance.

¹⁹ Ellinor, L. & Gerard, G. (1998). *Dialogue: Rediscover the transforming power of conversation*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

²⁰ Gould, J. & Kolb, W. (Eds) (1964). *A dictionary of the social sciences*. Glencoe, IL: Free Press of Glencoe, p. 477.

collective shared meaning. These skills were reinforced throughout each of the dialogue sessions.

The Plains Talk process validated Yankelovich's **Hierarchy of Opinions, Attitudes, Beliefs, and Values**. He uses the inverted pyramid to show that the core values are the most solid enduring qualities, while opinions are unstable. Attitudes and beliefs are in between the two. Opinions are derived from attitudes and attitudes are derived from values. The preliminary work of NPI confirms these aspects of the theory. The conversations did document that citizens do find themselves in the middle of a struggle between values and "public opinion." Sorting out what the macroculture expects, the many subcultures, especially at the rural level, can pull citizens in different directions.²¹ Bringing these diverse influences into the unified strategic focus will be one of great challenges for NPI.



²¹ Yankelovich, D. (1991). *Coming to public judgment: Making democracy work in a complex world*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.

How will it inform the future of the initiative?

Evaluation Question 3.0:

Is NPI able to sustain change efforts through funding streams other than through the W.K. Kellogg Foundation's investments?

Since this is the first year of NPI, there were no strategic action steps recorded or taken as a result of the Plains Talks. Therefore, as the process moves on specific action plans and policy statements will be developed. The NPI Logic Model had made it one of their short term activities and outcomes, but there was no evidence to support the completion of this task at this time. There were a large number of activities that were began or expanded, but there was no link between Plains Talk and the specific activities identified. The intermediate implementation phase (2008-09) does state that there will be the implementation of a wide variety of strategies, but what these specific strategies are have not been clearly articulated in any document reviewed by the evaluators except in the NPI Logic Model.

Many of the collaborative partnerships are in a competitive mode to find funding for their respective programs and projects. Collaborative partnerships are countercultural and can be seen as a threat to each other. Therefore, having the partnership focus on policy initiatives that will be adopted and sustained from governmental agencies and the business community are appealing. For NPI, the same is true for their activities that are contributing to the building of healthy communities and families. This endeavor should be a process in which NPI learns what works and what does not work, but also how to sustain the shared vision and strategic actions identified by the various regional groups. There are levels of discomfort and barriers that through the spirit of dialogue will keep the partnership opened to possibilities and opportunities. Building good relationships among the partners and sharing resources are important for fostering and supporting conversations that help create and sustain collaborative partnerships.²² Creating participative relationships should involve organizations and individuals that understand what change means and are willing to change; are committed to a blend of independence and interdependence; and are willing to be risk takers and leaders.

Each of the activities identified by NPI has a specific focus and expectation that is contingent on marketing, awareness, and support from different organizations and agencies. The lessons or questions raised included how does NPI expand the successful activity or activities to

²² McLagan, P. & Nel, C. (1995). *The age of participation: New governance for the workplace and the world*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

the other regions? Is this part of the regional collaborative work? Linked to this was the assurance that reliable data collection protocol and information sharing process is in place. This information can be used to inform the partners and the various activities of successes, failures, etc. for improvement and movement of the initiative.

Recommendations

Based on the findings from this first year of evaluation of NPI the following recommendations are being proposed:

- A review of the logic model and initial evaluation questions should be completed as soon as possible. These two documents will guide the evaluation into the self-organizing evaluation design.
- A review of the protocol for collecting qualitative data from the Plains Talk sessions should take place. Currently, the information and reporting is summative, but does not address the formative areas of satisfaction, intention, and action.
- Each activity is collecting data about clients being served. A system to measure client satisfaction and effective use and application of services need to be developed.
- More information and data about the partners and staff involvement in NPI is needed to determine level of commitment and satisfaction with the initiative.
- To carry out the Predictive Design the evaluation teams needs to create a common set of instruments and procedures to measure the practices and impact of the activities and dialogues. There are many components to the NPI initiative and a common instrument will provide for comparative analyses and reporting.
- Preparation should be made to implement the self-organizing evaluation design that will investigate the emerging structures, patterns, and properties of collaborative endeavors and partnerships. When looking for patterns or changes in patterns, it is useful to attend to three features of any system: boundaries, relationships, and diversity.