

Counting What Counts:

Bridging the Gaps among Stakeholder Perspectives

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Overview

- Stakeholders face different **goals, needs, and challenges** with respect to environmental program evaluation, which lead to different **implications** for practice.
 - Government
 - Private Sector
 - Community and Environmental Groups
 - Academics
- Example of perspectives on EPA's flagship voluntary program, the National Environmental Performance Track.
- While differences in perspectives are significant, there are some shared perspectives too.
- Suggestions for bridging the gaps.

Government Perspectives

Goal: Improve program effectiveness and nurture fledgling programs while satisfying OMB obligations.

Need: Standardized measures of program effectiveness that EPA can aggregate to describe program benefits overall.

Challenge: OMB requires EPA to report measurable environmental outcomes, but innovative programs may have most potential in areas where measurement is difficult: relationships, trust, and empowerment of internal change agents.

Implications: EPA assesses program impact based on information provided by members. Tendency to gauge program's value through surveys of membership.

Company Perspectives

Goal: Communicate key messages internally and externally in a manner that maximizes value.

Need: Individualized approaches to measurement that fit company's management structures and operating practices. Different measures for different audiences.

Challenge: EPA reporting requirements add to companies' costs.

Implications: Reluctance to participate in voluntary programs that do not fit company's internal culture, incentives, and identity.

Community and Environmental Advocacy Group Perspectives

Goal: Watchdog for projects that may jeopardize human health and environment

Need: Publicly available data that allow for straightforward comparisons among participants and non-participants.

Challenge: Lack of access to data beyond EPA's Toxics Release Inventory (TRI) and Enforcement and Compliance History Online (ECHO). Minimal resources for evaluation.

Implications: Reliance upon publicly available data sources that may lack relevance for innovative programs. Inconsistent support for or interest in innovative programs.

Academic Perspectives

Goal: To test hypotheses in order to draw causal inferences and assess theories of individual and organizational behavior.

Need: Specific measures of program impact that can be observed for participants and non-participants.

Challenge: For many innovative policies, data to measure program effectiveness are scarce or completely lacking.

- Innovative programs tend to recognize and bolster private sector changes which makes identifying impacts properly attributable to the program more difficult.

Implications: Of the 11 large-scale empirical studies of voluntary programs, 7 use TRI data; 1 uses data collected by the authors through a survey; 1 uses data collected by a citizens' group; 1 uses data from the SEC, and one uses confidential data from the U.S. Census Bureau.

Shared Perspectives

- Desire to know what works and what doesn't work to improve environmental performance. Desire to innovate.
- Unhappiness with existing environmental regulatory system.
- EPA and private sector practitioners share awareness of the messiness of program implementation and the importance of “soft” impacts.
- Community/environmental groups and academics share a need for data precision and context.

Bridging the Gaps

- Recognize, use, and strengthen information sources available now.
- Collect information through baseline studies, surveys, and before-after comparisons of program participants and non-participants.
 - Even “soft” impacts can be precisely defined and measured.
- Move beyond satisfaction surveys.
- Begin design of a national, mandatory information database much like TRI with information on stewardship performance.