2020 | By: Tyler Hurley, Research Assistant



Sustainability of Grant Programs in Southern Minnesota: Revisiting the Southern Minnesota Initiative Foundation's One Big Thing Grants

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The Southeast Regional Sustainable Development Partnership brings together local talent and resources with University of Minnesota knowledge to drive sustainability in agriculture and food systems, tourism and resilient communities, natural resources and clean energy. The Partnerships are part of University of Minnesota Extension.

The Southern Minnesota Initiative Foundation is a regional development and philanthropic organization that fosters economic and community vitality in 20 counties of southern Minnesota through a culture of collaboration and partnership.

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Executive Summary

This research project offers an analysis of the Southern Minnesota Initiative Foundation's "One Big Thing" grantmaking program by evaluating the long-term and tangential impacts of two organizations funded through this initiative:

1. **Southeast Minnesota Together** (SE MN Together): a regional collaborative network of organizations and individuals working to address Southeast Minnesota's workforce shortage. *One Big Thing funding awarded in 2015.*
2. **Main Street Project**: a poultry-centered regenerative agriculture training center for immigrant communities interested in agribusiness entrepreneurship in Southern Minnesota. *One Big Thing funding awarded in 2011.*

While initial project outcomes were captured in the foundation's grant evaluation documents, these organizations continue to build partnerships and positively impact their communities to this day. In addition to project-based outcomes, this research seeks to better understand the factors that have contributed to the sustainability of these community-based organizations. To document stakeholder perspectives on these impacts and organizational sustainability, the following primary research question was used: How do community stakeholders describe their engagement with grantee organizations and define the impacts of their work and experiences?

Data was collected through interviews with key stakeholders, document analysis, site visits, and Ripple Effect Mapping. Together these methods allowed for solicitation of diverse perspectives and triangulation of findings that no individual method provided alone. Additional information on research methodology is provided in the full report to give context for analysis and key findings, research limitations, and for use as a framework to inform future long-term evaluations.

Key Findings

1. Ongoing positive community impacts of One Big Thing grantees extend far beyond the original scope of the projects.
2. Stakeholders described clear causal relationships between One Big Thing funding and current operations capacity.
3. Stakeholders reported that engagement with *One Big Thing* grantees has enhanced their motivation to personally address community challenges and strengthened their relationships within the region.

Project Overview

The Southern Minnesota Initiative Foundation (SMIF) is a donor-supported foundation that invests in economic development and community vitality in 20 counties in Southern Minnesota. In addition to core grantmaking programs that support early childhood education and entrepreneurship, SMIF awards "One Big Thing" grants to innovative programs that seek to address grand challenges in the region.

In 2011, SMIF awarded $100,000 to Main Street Project through the One Big Thing grantmaking program. $90,000 was awarded for the construction of two chicken coops that function as a poultry-centered regenerative agribusiness training center for immigrant communities in Southern Minnesota. An additional $10,000 was awarded as seed funding for the "Grow A Farmer" fund, which provided loans to cover startup costs for new "agripreneurs." SMIF's formal evaluation of this funding ends in 2012 with a final report that details the coop construction process and the development of additional funding partnerships.

In 2015, SMIF awarded $80,000 to form Southeast Minnesota Together. This funding covered the costs of recruiting and convening region-wide stakeholders for three community forums addressing workforce development in Southern Minnesota. Four additional grants of $5,000 were awarded to supportive pilot programs developed through these forums. SMIF's formal evaluation ends in 2016 with a final report that details the process of convening over 300 individuals in three communities, the formation of working groups and regional planning committees, and some of the initial outcomes.

These evaluations end with both organizations newly poised to advance their causes. Now, years later, both of these organizations continue to operate and shape their communities and the broader Southern Minnesota region. This research project revisits these two organizations with the intent to illuminate some of the long-term and tangential impacts of their work.

The purpose of this research is as follows:

1. To better understand the factors that contributed to the success of SMIF's One Big Thing funding initiative from the perspective of community stakeholders;
2. To create a final research product that effectively documents and communicates the long-term impacts of SMIF's One Big Thing funding initiative; and
3. To develop a framework for evaluating and demonstrating the long-term and tangential impacts of future SMIF funding initiatives.

Methodology

Interviews with Key Stakeholders

Eight semi-structured interviews were conducted with key stakeholders selected for their engagement with grantee organizations and for their knowledge of the time period surrounding One Big Thing funding. Three interviews were conducted with representatives of Main Street Project, and five were conducted with representatives of Southeast Minnesota Together. Most interviews were conducted by phone. Five interviews were recorded with the permission of the interviewees. Rough transcriptions were written in the moment for interviews that were not recorded. Transcripts were then analyzed and thematic codes were developed to identify trends and commonalities in the commentary.

Document Analysis

A wide range of documents were analyzed to provide background information for the researcher and to identify publicly visible long-term and tangential impacts of the organizations being researched. Documents included SMIF's One Big Thing evaluation reports, websites, news articles, blogs, academic journals, and videos of grantee organization convenings and panel events involving grantee stakeholders. Document analysis also informed the interviews and Ripple Effect Mapping processes.

Ripple Effect Mapping

In collaboration with the University of Minnesota Extension Center for Community Vitality, a Ripple Effect Mapping (REM) session was held on November 13, 2019 during a pre-scheduled meeting of the Southeast Minnesota Together core team. REM was utilized due to the broad network of stakeholders involved with Southeast Minnesota Together, which has convened hundreds of individuals at multiple events in multiple locations over the course of four years.

Core team members performed one-on-one interviews with each other about their work with Southeast Minnesota Together using a printed interview guide with space to take notes. Then the group collaboratively discussed, documented, and organized their results by themes in a "mind map" using XMind software operated by trained facilitators. An online survey was also distributed to a wider network of stakeholders via Qualtrics, and the results from 60 respondents were also incorporated into the mind map and presented back to Southeast Minnesota Together for feedback and verification.

Additional information on Ripple Effect Mapping is provided on page 6. The mind map is provided in Appendix A and the results are discussed throughout the report.

Researcher Positionality and Research Limitations

Measures were taken to distinguish this research as an independent project with no connection to the formal grant evaluations of the Southern Minnesota Initiative Foundation or other funding organizations. Interviewees were ensured confidentiality in their responses in order to encourage open and critical feedback without concern for influencing relationships with past or future funding organizations.

Interviews required the voluntary time commitment and active participation of individual stakeholders who were already balancing work and volunteer commitments with the organizations being researched. This research was conducted in addition to evaluations that were previously conducted in fulfilment of grant conditions or to further organizational objectives. The availability of stakeholders to voluntarily participate in an additional evaluation was a limiting factor on the number of interviews conducted.

Background: *SMIF + ABCD = One Big Thing*

In order to evaluate the intended and unexpected long-term outcomes of this funding program, it will be helpful to understand the community development methodology behind the One Big Thing grantmaking initiative. Asset-based community development (ABCD) is a development methodology often described in contrast to "needs-based" development methods. Needs-based development approaches focus on identifying deficiencies within a community and obtaining and allocating resources to ameliorate those deficiencies. Critics of this approach argue that this emphasis on needs generates a damaging narrative of powerlessness that turns communities into "clients" or "consumers" of externally derived aid and resources for problem solving (Kretzman & McKnight 1993).

Alternatively, ABCD shifts the focus from community "needs" to existing and unrealized assets within a community. "Assets" are broadly defined as physical resources like land and the built-environment, as well as less tangible resources like knowledge, human capital, and social connections (Kretzman & McKnight 1993). ABCD seeks to identify, connect, and leverage these existing resources in order to develop community-based responses to challenges and opportunities.

ABCD generates many tangential and unplanned outcomes due to the emphasis on new relationship building between people and assets within communities. These relationships often lead to new forms of collaboration outside of the initial project scope. Of these tangential outcomes, ABCD has been noted to have the potential to cultivate a sense of "active citizenship" among program participants that generates a sense of ownership and initiative to confront community-based problems (Mathie & Cunningham 2003). The concept of active citizenship as it pertains specifically to grantee organizations is discussed in the Key Findings and Analysis section of this report on page 7.

Definitions and Indicators of Program "Sustainability"

In literature surrounding community development grantmaking, "sustainability" can have several meanings. Definitions often concern the continuing availability and integrity of environmental resources (Kates, Parris & Leiserowitz 2005), which is of particular relevance to the agribusiness models developed by Main Street Project. However, this research used the term "sustainability" interchangeably with reference to the sustained operations of grantee organizations long after the initial One Big Thing funding ended.

Challenges in Grant Evaluation

ABCD inherently involves working with intangible attributes like relationships, knowledge, and attitudes toward challenges and opportunities in a community. Measuring changes in these

intangible attributes presents unique challenges in ABCD impact evaluation. In an assessment of several ABCD evaluation methodologies, researchers noted that the complex interplay between community members and assets make the "tangle of causality and influence... understandably difficult to unravel" (Peters, Gonsamo & Molla 2011, 4). However, several emerging evaluation methodologies attempt to address this issue.

Ripple Effect Mapping

An emerging method for establishing causal chains in impact evaluations is known as Ripple Effect Mapping (REM). This evaluation method relies on gathering diverse stakeholders together for a collaborative "mind mapping" session where participants interview one another about their experience with the community-based intervention being evaluated. These interviews document outcomes across three levels or "ripples" of change - transactional, transitional, and transformational, which are then displayed visually for the group to evaluate and visually organize. This process of collective reflection and analysis helps identify tangential outcomes while establishing causal relationships (Chazdon, Emery, Hansen, Higgins & Sero, 2017).

Use of Appreciative Inquiry

Both ABCD and REM utilize a process of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) in engagement with community members (Chazdon, et al., 2017; Mathie & Cunningham, 2003; Peters, et. al., 2011). AI has been described as "a process that promotes positive change (in organizations or communities) by focusing on peak experiences and successes of the past" (Mathie & Cunningham, 2003).

In ABCD, AI is used as part of the process of identifying unrealized assets within the community and determining ways to connect and leverage them with other assets to effect change. Proponents of AI argue that the participatory process of focusing on assets and opportunities (as opposed to deficits and challenges) is integral to generating new opportunities for community-based interventions (Mathie & Cunningham, 2003).

In evaluation, adoption of AI is part of a larger movement toward participatory evaluation methodologies that often consider evaluation as a continuation of a community-based intervention, and not a clinical post-hoc examination of whether specific metrics have been achieved (Coghlan, et al., 2003). Use of AI in REM is designed to highlight successful components of an intervention in order to understand the factors that contribute to success. Those factors are then validated by group analysis. Negative experiences are documented, but the emphasis is not to fix what isn't working, but rather to expand on what is working (Chazdon, 2017).

Key Findings & Analysis

1. **Ongoing positive community impacts of One Big Thing grantees extend far beyond the original scope of the projects.**

Main Street Project

- Over the last eight years, SMIF's One Big Thing investment of $100,000 has been matched in income generated by immigrant farmers trained in regenerative agriculture and poultry farming at the training site constructed with One Big Thing funding.

- Main Street Project has expanded its operations from the two chicken coops constructed with One Big Thing funding to a 100-acre research and demonstration farm near Northfield, Minnesota. Stakeholders described the success of the initial project funded by One Big Thing as a contributing factor to their ability to develop additional partnerships and expand operations.

- Main Street Project has recently received national recognition for how their regenerative agriculture methods and training center offer promising solutions for reducing greenhouse gas emissions from industrial farming, a major contributor to climate change.
    - In 2019, Executive Director Julie Ristau was a featured speaker at the Climate Reality Conference in Minneapolis. She was one of three local leaders featured on a panel event moderated by former Vice President Al Gore.
    - Main Street Project was featured in *Healthy Soils to Cool The Planet - A Philanthropic Action Guide.* The guide highlights Main Street Project as one of three organizations nationwide doing important work to address climate change through agricultural supply chains.

A narrative report on Main Street Project's impact is available in Appendix C on page 16.

Southeast Minnesota Together

One Big Thing supported the organization of three forums that brought together over 300 community members representing diverse perspectives, communities, and work sectors. The original goals were to:

1. align and coordinate workforce solutions;
2. positively grow workforce capacity;
3. actively engage smaller communities; and
4. learn how to plan and collaborate regionally.

Today SE MN Together is a completely volunteer-run organization with active working groups addressing:

1. **Transit and Transportation**
2. **Welcoming and Inclusive Communities**
3. **Workforce Housing**
4. **Resident Recruitment and Retention**

Examples of working group accomplishments include:

- The Transit and Transportation working group presented results of their research to the Minnesota Department of Transportation and received a $75,000 grant to continue their work cataloguing regional transit providers and making the information accessible online.
- The Welcoming and Inclusive Communities working group collaborated with Project FINE to survey regional businesses and produce an online guide to diversity resources available in each county.

SE MN Together is recognized for being an important voice in regional development and community vitality.

- A 2018 Southeast Minnesota Regional Economic Study produced by the Southeast Minnesota League of Municipalities, Community Economic Development Associates, and HR&A Advisors describes SE MN Together's work as " critical for economic development of the region."
- The study includes multiple citations of SE MN Together's findings throughout the report and identified their working areas of Transit and Transportation and Welcoming and Inclusive Communities as key opportunities for supporting regional growth.

- Stakeholders report that engagement with SE MN Together has
    - Strengthened relationships across communities and sectors
    - Helped leverage strengths of existing partnerships
    - Increased access to resources that support regional work
    - Raised awareness of regional challenges and opportunities

A narrative report on Southeast Minnesota Together's community impact is available in Appendix B on page 13.

A Ripple Effects Map documenting the impacts of Southeast Minnesota together is available in Appendix A on page 12.

2. **Southeast Minnesota Together stakeholders described several challenges related to funding, time limitations, and recruiting participation from smaller communities.**

- "We understand that a foundation can not support you for the rest of your life, but it's kind of a tough place to be if you can't raise money. But I'm so impressed that we're still here and still working with no funding or no staff. It's all based on volunteers and the commitment of the people even though it's not at full capacity anymore. Whatever else I can do to support this group, I will do it." - Stakeholder 04
- "A year sounds like a long time for a project, but it's really not. To build relationships and organize people in all these little communities took longer than I expected. A year in felt like we were just getting started. Two years would be perfect." - Stakeholder 01

3. **Stakeholders from both organizations described clear causal relationships between One Big Thing funding and current operations capacity:**

- "But the One Big Thing grant is what made this possible… It became the backbone of our local efforts and our learning." - *Stakeholder 02*
- "SMIF had a stake in this at the outset … There were tremendous amounts of rippling in the initial outcomes." - *Stakeholder 06*
- "The key that I can't stress strongly enough - without that initial funding - it wouldn't have been possible. We wouldn't have gotten off the ground." - *Stakeholder 05*

4. **Stakeholders reported that engagement with One Big Thing grantees has enhanced their motivation to personally address community challenges and strengthened their relationships within the region.**

Both the literature surrounding asset based community development and the stated objectives of Southeast Minnesota Together reference "activating" human capital in the community. While analyzing interview transcripts and Ripple Effect Mapping data, I interpreted many statements as supportive evidence of "active citizenship" as a significant long-term outcome of these One Big Thing projects. Several stakeholders mentioned that the challenge of finding time to participate in volunteer work with Southeast Minnesota Together, or the challenge of developing and maintaining funding partnerships for Main Street Project, were outweighed by the value of the personal and community-based outcomes of their work.

Selected Quotes From Stakeholders Interpreted as "Active Citizenship"

- "Those convenings really cemented in my mind that what we do is really important... It's become a personal issue for me that what we do to engage these communities is valuable. The convenings helped me develop an understanding that I need to help this process. I need to be involved. I need to figure out how to apply my professional expertise." - *Stakeholder 05*
- "I wouldn't trade this time for anything. Met great people. Got to know the region in depth. Meeting mayors, admins, businesspeople. It was a really great experience for me." - *Stakeholder 01*
- "It gives me a great sense of pride and joy that so many people have an interest - and it's not a self-interest." - *Stakeholder 08*
- "Good for me or the organization was never the objective. The mission or the people - that's what was always the center of it." - *Stakeholder 07*
- "All of these challenges were an inspiration for us." - *Stakeholder 04*
- "Minnesota is really very unique. I travel a lot for work. Wherever I go I'm excited to see and learn from other places - we don't have anything extraordinary here - but we work together. People ask me how do you make that work, and I tell them - we build relationships - and work together. Other communities have a harder time bringing people together." - *Stakeholder 04*
- "[Southeastern] Minnesota, and especially Northfield, have a quality of understanding things, a quality of analysis, that is really freaking unique… From the very beginning, I said, I'm not moving again. I have wanted to many times - when winter hits I want to go away, and I don't. And the reason is because I love this region. I love Northfield because of what it is, and because of what it has allowed me to do." - *Stakeholder 08*

Conclusion

Through Main Street Project and Southeast Minnesota Together, the One Big Thing grantmaking program continues to have a transformative impact on the Southern Minnesota region. Much of the ongoing work and impacts would have been impossible to predict at the outset of these projects. Success within the initial, more limited scope of the projects encouraged the development of new community-based partnerships and funding opportunities, which allowed the programs to continue and expand operations without continued One Big Thing funding. For both organizations, active support from a broad and diverse network of community stakeholders was instrumental in organizational development and sustainability.

Throughout the process of interviewing stakeholders about their experiences with these new organizations, I often recalled Alexis De Tocqueville's 1835 commentary in *Democracy in America*:

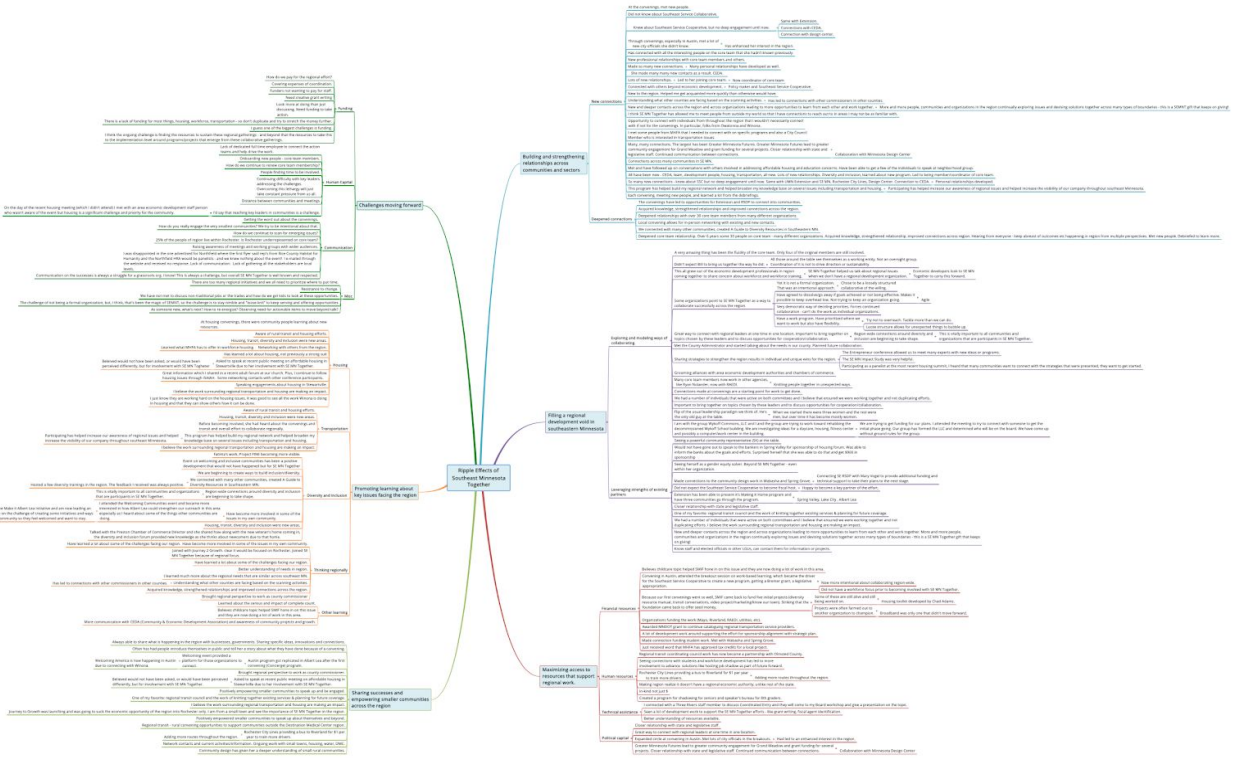
> Americans are forever forming associations. No sooner do they see a need than they rush to meet it... They have not only commercial and manufacturing associations, in which all partake, but associations of a thousand other kinds - religious, moral, serious, futile, general or restricted, enormous or diminutive. Wherever at the head of some new undertaking you see the government of France, or a man of rank in England, in the United States you will be sure to find an association.

In my personal opinion, one of the reasons these One Big Thing projects may have been so successful is that they draw on some of our most enduring and empowering cultural traditions by calling people to service in their communities, and making space and opportunities for people to come together and make meaningful, visible contributions to a common purpose.

Appendix A: Ripple Effect Map of Southeast Minnesota Together

A high-resolution image of the Ripple Effect Map is available online here:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1G1_kh4bk47Up4tNFWeDqjC-AzfeFyYS2/view?usp=sharing



Revisiting One Big Thing: Southeast Minnesota Together

How a group of volunteers became a regional voice for the future of Southern Minnesota

Over the next 20 years, Southeast Minnesota is projected to face a shortfall of 45,000 workers, leading to challenges for economic growth in the region. Southeast Minnesota Together (SE MN Together) began as an informal network of volunteers interested in addressing the region's workforce shortage by starting conversations about how to better:

1. align and coordinate workforce solutions;
2. positively grow workforce capacity;
3. actively engage smaller communities; and
4. learn how to plan and collaborate regionally.

In 2011, One Big Thing funding from the Southern Minnesota Initiative Foundation supported SE MN Together's organization of three regional convenings that brought together over 300 community members representing diverse perspectives, communities, and work sectors to discuss how to create community-based solutions for workforce development through regional collaboration.

One participant said of the convenings, "That was the *aha!* moment for me - I knew we were struggling with these issues, but to hear from all of the communities individually really made it clear that what we share is important… What we learned in the first few convenings is that nobody really knew what was available in the region."

The initial conversations around "workforce development" helped illuminate the complex and interconnected issues that contribute to the region's workforce shortage. With the support of a wide network of community-based partners, SE MN Together has managed to keep these conversations going long after the One Big Thing funding period ended. Today SE MN Together, an entirely volunteer-run organization, has active working groups addressing:

1. Transit and Transportation
2. Welcoming and Inclusive Communities
3. Workforce Housing
4. Resident Recruitment and Retention

The Transit and Transportation working group found that Southeast Minnesota is served by many different regional transportation providers, but there was no centralized way for individuals to search available routes or timetables. The group presented their findings to the Minnesota Department of Transportation and received a $75,000 grant to continue their work cataloguing regional transit providers and making the information accessible online.

A member of the Welcoming and Inclusive Communities group described their work by saying "For refugees and immigrants everything starts with a job - how do we attract new people to the region and what are the barriers and challenges for new residents?" This group surveyed businesses in Southern Minnesota to better understand common experiences hiring and retaining diverse employees. They then compiled their findings with a list of resources in each county to better prepare businesses to welcome and work with the growing immigrant and refugee communities in Southern Minnesota.

Due to the outcomes of these working groups, SE MN Together is recognized as an important voice in regional development and community vitality. In 2018, the Southeastern Minnesota League of Municipalities released the Southeast Minnesota Regional Economic Study, which describes SE MN Together's work as "critical for economic development of the Region." This study was conducted in collaboration with Community Economic Development Associates (CEDA) and HR&A Advisors, a consulting firm based in New York.

The study includes multiple citations of SE MN Together's findings throughout the report, including results from the Welcoming and Inclusive Communities working group on the growing number of refugees and immigrants in the region and their importance to regional vitality.

The report recommends creating a more welcoming environment for immigrants in Southern Minnesota because "if the Region were to capture a share of international migrants proportional to its current population," it would result in $380 million in additional output for the region by 2040, as well as 2,000 new jobs, and 5,100 new residents. Laying the groundwork for this growth continues to be a priority of Southeast Minnesota Together.

On transportation, the report also recommends continuing the same work that the SE MN Together Transit and Transportation working group is conducting. The report states that increased transit capacity in Southern Minnesota would result in $460 million in additional output in 2040, 1,100 new residents, and 380 new jobs.

SE MN Together has also resulted in additional projects being launched in the region. In 2019, the Minnesota Design Center selected Southeast Minnesota for its Greater Minnesota Futures (GMNF) pilot project. The project was designed to empower communities with under 5,000

residents to identify existing regional assets and develop strategies for growth. The project report states “Southeast Minnesota was selected as the region in which to pilot GMNF because of Southeast Minnesota Together’s many talented members, members’ strong connections with Southeast Minnesota communities, knowledge of issues facing Southern Minnesota communities, the organization’s interest in innovative approaches to economic development, and its willingness to participate as a partner in the Pilot.”

These are a few examples of the many tangential outcomes of convening diverse community stakeholders through Southeast Minnesota Together. While document analysis and stakeholder interviews helped provide examples of specific outcomes, Ripple Effect Mapping provided a more comprehensive view of the impact this organization has had on the region.

Through Ripple Effect Mapping, stakeholders reported that they are:

- Building and strengthening relationships across communities and sectors;
- Filling a regional development void in Southeastern Minnesota;
- Maximizing access to resources that support regional work;
- Sharing successes and empowering smaller communities across the region;
- Promoting learning about key issues facing the region;
- And addressing challenges in funding, human capital, and communications to continue working as Southeast Minnesota Together.

The success of SE MN Together demonstrates how a targeted investment in empowering diverse stakeholders to take action in their communities can have a transformative and long-lasting impact on the Southern Minnesota region.

Revisiting One Big Thing: Main Street Project

How an agribusiness incubator is turning Southern Minnesota into a national leader in the fight against climate change

Southern Minnesota is home to many immigrant communities, yet many new immigrants are often caught in low-wage industrial agriculture or food industry jobs. Main Street Project offers training in regenerative agriculture poultry farming to help immigrant agripreneurs earn additional income by raising and selling their own flocks of chickens, and then leveraging the skills they learn into increased job opportunities and wages.

In 2011, SMIF awarded $100,000 to Main Street Project through the One Big Thing grantmaking program. $90,000 was granted for the construction of two chicken coops that function as a poultry-centered regenerative agribusiness training center for immigrant communities in Southern Minnesota. An additional $10,000 was awarded as seed funding for the "Grow A Farmer" fund, which provided loans to cover startup poultry farming costs for new "agripreneurs."

Since 2012, 20 agripreneurs have completed training in the poultry coops constructed with One Big Thing funding. SMIF's initial investment of $100,000 has been matched in income generated by and for the trainee farmers through their work raising and selling 35 flocks or about 50,000 birds. Several immigrant agripreneurs have noted an interest in utilizing their poultry farming skills to start businesses in their home countries. In Minnesota, financing, land, and access to markets remain challenges for individual agripreneurs to launch their own businesses. The Grow A Farmer fund helped overcome some of these challenges by financing startup costs for new farmers. Today Main Street Project is working to address these barriers by subsidizing startup costs for new farmers from the profits of their poultry Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program. Through the Main Street Project website, consumers can pre-order boxes of locally raised free-range chickens and pick them up at harvest time.

The success of the initial coops constructed with One Big Thing funding has helped enable Main Street Project to develop the partnerships and resources to expand their operations to a new 100-acre demonstration farm near Northfield, Minnesota. The Main Street Project website states, "With proof of concept firmly established through our initial small prototype facilities, we have consolidated and scaled up our production, training and research operations."

The One Big Thing grant is what made this possible… It became the backbone of our local efforts and our learning. - Stakeholder 02

While Main Street Project's One Big Thing grant was focused on creating "pathways out of poverty" for immigrant populations in Southern Minnesota, in recent years Main Street Project has set its sights on addressing systemic imbalances and injustices in our food system.

Public education is required to create systemic changes and Main Street Project has found innovative ways to teach new communities about their work. In 2019, Main Street Project had a booth at the Minnesota State Fair where visitors met with an agripreneur and learned firsthand about the benefits of producing "healthy, culturally-relevant food" through regenerative agriculture. Main Street Project plans to scale their regenerative agriculture standards and practices around the world by developing international applied research partnerships. Partnerships have already been formed in Guatemala, Mexico, and Pine Ridge, South Dakota.

In addition to making systemic changes in our world's food system, the regenerative agriculture farming methods taught by Main Street Project offer promising solutions for reducing greenhouse gas emissions from industrial farming, a major contributor to climate change. In 2019, Executive Director Julie Ristau was a featured speaker at the Climate Reality Conference in Minneapolis. She was one of three local leaders featured in a panel discussion moderated by former Vice President Al Gore.

Main Street Project was also featured in *Healthy Soils to Cool The Planet - A Philanthropic Action Guide.* The guide highlights Main Street Project as one of three organizations nationwide doing important work to address climate change through agricultural supply chains.

Main Street Project hopes to make Southern Minnesota the base of operations for these global ambitions, bringing national and global leaders to the region to learn and share resources. "The climate work is very emergent right now. Our farm is positioned to be one of those shining, pilot places for this work." - Stakeholder 06

Appendix D: Recommendations for Future SMIF Long-Term Grant Evaluations

If there is one issue that bedevils grantees and grant-makers alike, it is evaluation.
- Tim Brodhead, The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation

There is a great deal of literature surrounding grant and program evaluation. The following recommendations are not intended to be a comprehensive overview or comparison of evaluation methodologies. Rather, these are a few recommendations, steps, and questions to utilize as a framework to inform future SMIF long-term evaluations.

Consider incorporating a long-term evaluation strategy into the overall funding strategy for One Big Thing grantees.
Understanding that one of the purposes of long-term evaluation is to collect illustrative examples of the impact of SMIF funding on Southern Minnesota communities, there are several low-cost, low-effort ways to solicit this type of information from grantees.

As part of the Ripple Effect Mapping session conducted with Southeast Minnesota Together, a brief online survey was distributed to a broad network of stakeholders. Based on the principles of Appreciative Inquiry, the survey asked the following questions:

1. What new or deepened connections have you made as a result of Southeast Minnesota Together? What have these connections led to?
2. Describe an achievement or success you, or your organization, had based on your involvement with Southeast Minnesota Together? Please be as specific as possible. Use examples!
3. Beyond your involvement, have you heard about any accomplishments that have been made by Southeast Minnesota Together? Please describe.
4. What unexpected things have happened as a result of your involvement with Southeast Minnesota Together?
5. What challenges has Southeast Minnesota Together encountered and how could these challenges be overcome in the future?

This survey could be easily adapted to other organizations and distributed to stakeholders via Qualtrics or Google Forms at designated intervals of time following the initial funding period and evaluations. If grantees are made aware of the survey and long-term evaluation goals at the outset of their work, they may be more likely to recognize, document, and share relevant

impactful stories with SMIF. The survey could be further adapted to document consent to share stories on SMIF's website, blog, annual report, or other development communications purposes.

Data collected through the survey could also help identify organizations or stakeholders to contact for more in-depth data collection methods like interviews, video profiles, or Ripple Effect Mapping.

Collect and analyze publicly available documents for background information, context, and leads.

Many community-based organizations document the outcomes of their work on publicly available websites, blogs, or social media platforms. Additionally, work of grantee organizations or stakeholders may be found on partner organization and news media websites. Conducting thorough document analysis routinely and at the outset of a long-term evaluation serves several purposes:

- It raises awareness of ongoing grantee operations and past successes, which can identify organizations or stakeholders to contact for more in-depth data collection.
- Information from publicly available websites can inform the structure and scope of follow-up interviews or profiles.
- Publicly available information can be easily shareable via social media to the mutual benefit of SMIF and grantee organizations. For example, Main Street Project used their Facebook page to advertise their public education booth at the 2019 Minnesota State Fair. Awareness of these types of ongoing events could provide opportunities to collect evaluative data at the event through in-person participation, or to share impacts of SMIF funding in real time by sharing social media content, or to inform future evaluations by noting relevant documents (through files, links, and screenshots) in SMIF databases.

Define the purpose, audience, and final product for each evaluation.

Evaluations can serve many purposes and have many potential audiences. Clarifying and defining your intended outcomes and audience at the outset of your evaluation will help determine which evaluation strategies and methodologies best suit your goals.

Here are a few questions you may want to consider:

- Is the purpose of this evaluation to inform or shape the program structure or organization being evaluated?
- Is the purpose to inform future SMIF funding decisions? Is the organization being evaluated subject to those future funding decisions?
- Is the final research product intended to be shared with grantee organizations?

- Who is the intended audience for this evaluation? What is their base of knowledge of these programs? How do we hope they will utilize the final research product?

These questions may help determine the form and content of your final research product, whether it is a formal evaluation report, visual media, infographics, blog posts, development communications, or some other content.

Consider how your assumptions, biases, and positionality may influence your work.

> "Funders, program implementers and policymakers often evaluate the strategies, initiatives or programs they support to determine whether they are worth continuing support. Although this is not the only use of evaluation, many people tend to look at evaluation as something that results in a judgment about the merit of their performance and work. Often they dislike evaluation because the judgment could seem unfair for various reasons. For example, they might believe that inappropriate metrics were used in forming the judgment, or the evaluator failed to understand what they are trying to do, or they could resent findings that show their work did not have the anticipated impact.
>
> You have probably encountered these situations before. You might have been hesitant to tell your funders anything that didn't work; you could lack confidence that your evaluator will help you frame the findings within the proper context; worst of all, you might not see evaluation as worthwhile for any purpose other than to fulfill your funding requirement. Consequently, the power of evaluation to facilitate learning and improve your strategy, initiative or program is diminished." - W. K. Kellogg Foundation, The Step-by-Step Guide to Evaluation, p. 14.

Understanding the assumptions and expectations on both sides of an evaluation is an important step to creating useful knowledge. This is also why it is important to have a clear understanding of the intent and purpose of your long-term evaluation, and to be able to communicate them effectively to stakeholders.

It may be helpful to ask yourself:

- What is the relationship history between the grantee organization and SMIF?
- Are there any perceived incentives to deliver positive information? Are there perceived disincentives to share negative information?
- How does the grantee organization define success, challenges, innovation, and deviations from the initial scope of the project? How does the grantee organization believe we define these terms? How do we define these terms?
- What is my own understanding of the grantee program? Does this understanding influence or limit my ability to conduct a thorough evaluation?

Sharing definitions and intent with stakeholders may be a way to mitigate or navigate assumptions and biases. Working from a shared understanding of a strengths-based evaluation methodology like Appreciative Inquiry, may also encourage dialogue around challenges in a positive or non-threatening way.

Consider the benefits and trade-offs of your potential research methodologies.
Multiple data collection approaches each offer trade-offs in terms of the type of data that you collect and how that data is influenced by evaluator positionality. For example, ensuring confidentiality by allowing anonymous feedback from diverse stakeholders through online surveys, or by using third-party evaluators, may help protect data from bias or concerns for future funding. However, data from anonymous stakeholders may not have the same utility in development communications as more illustrative and personal examples.

Different data collection approaches also require different investments of resources from grantee organizations and foundation staff. To work efficiently, it may be helpful to begin with document analysis, online surveys, email communication, and build to more resource intensive methods like in-depth interviews or Ripple Effect Mapping once they have been deemed appropriate for the evaluation and final product.

For complex interventions involving large numbers of stakeholders or participants, consider using Ripple Effect Mapping to identify long-term and tangential program outcomes.
"Long-term outcomes or program impacts are expected to follow from the benefits accrued through the intermediate outcomes." - Handbook for Practical Program Evaluation, p. 58.

In conducting long-term evaluations, documenting the chain of outcomes can be difficult for programs that involve large numbers of stakeholders over long periods of time. For example, Southeast Minnesota Together convened hundreds of community stakeholders at multiple events in different locations over the course of several years. However, Ripple Effect Mapping provided a unique way to engage key stakeholders together to document outcomes of this work and verify causal relationships to the short-term and intermediate outcomes of their activities. The final product, a mind-map documenting outcomes by themes, could be used as a roadmap for further in-depth more narrative evaluations on specific outcomes.

Appendix E: Semi-structured Interview Guide

Research Question: How do community stakeholders [of grantee organizations] describe their engagement with grantee organizations and define the impacts of their work and experiences?

Introduction

Thank you for making time to speak with me. As I mentioned, this is a qualitative research project for the Center for Urban and Regional Affairs at the University of Minnesota and for my MPA degree program at the Humphrey School of Public Affairs. What we discuss today is confidential; your name and identifying information will not be associated with the data analysis for this project. Your participation in this research will have no bearing on your relationship with me personally, the Southern Minnesota Initiative Foundation, the Center for Urban and Regional Affairs, or the University of Minnesota. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Interview Guide

- How would you describe your initial engagement and with [insert grantee organization]? How did you come to be involved? What is your current involvement with the organization?
  (optional follow up prompts: how did you learn about the organization, what motivated decision to join)

- What was the most significant change you witnessed or experienced through your involvement with [insert grantee organization]?
  (optional follow up prompts: community/personal change, outcomes of initiatives)

- How would you describe the relationships you made through your involvement with [insert grantee organization]?
  (optional follow up prompts: collaborative/educational, project-based, regional or within community)

- How has your involvement influenced the way you see or understand your community within the region of Southeast Minnesota?
  (optional follow up prompts: opportunities/challenges, assets/deficiencies, attitude toward change/future)

- What do you feel are the factors or assets that have led this initiative to sustain operations after the initial funding period ended?

Appendix F: Thematic Codes Developed Through Interview Analysis

Code	Description
Motivation	Reasons given for participating with grantee organizations
Urban/Rural Divide	Comparisons of communities in Southern Minnesota to resources in the Twin Cities or other urban areas
Perception of Community	Any emic descriptions of community
Change in Understanding	Description of knowledge gained through participation with grantee organizations
Active Citizenship	Sense of agency, responsibility, or ownership in community-based problem solving
Challenges	Framing community or organizational issues as “challenges”
Opportunities	Framing community or organizational issues as “opportunities”
New Relationships	Description of relationships formed through participation with grantee organizations

Appendix G: Academic References

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