Existing Measures: Anticipating a Cross-Sector Alignment Measurement System

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This is one of two briefs prepared in support of the development of a cross-sector alignment measurement system. This brief contains preliminary reflections on measuring cross-sector alignment gathered during a recent review of existing collaboration and cross-sector alignment metrics. The second brief will review existing measurement systems to assess collaboration or cross-sector alignment.

Existing Metrics and the State of Data and Methods

Data Sources

Most of the metrics identified in a recent review of collaboration and cross-sector alignment measures were derived from the following types of data sources:

- Key informant interviews, surveys, and network analysis (O'Neil et al., 2020; Redding, 2020)
- Publicly available data or budget analysis (e.g., McCullough, Leider, & Phillips, 2020)
- Existing tools, measures, and indices, e.g., the Partnership Capacity Survey (Baker, Wilkerson, & Brennan, 2012), the Distressed Community Index (Mangrum et al., 2020), and the Health Equity Index (Davis, Rivera, & Parks, 2015)
- Engagement in alignment-related activities (O'Neil et al., 2020)

A wide range of outcome measures were identified in the review including collaboration measures (e.g., Mt. Auburn Associates, 2019), intermediate social factor outcomes (e.g., Fisher, Foti, & Povick, 2020), and population health (Mays, Mamaril, & Timsina, 2016). A key challenge for a measurement system will be to encourage linking measures from the data sources bulleted above to these types of outcome measures.

Notably, few papers discussed the use of operational or shared data for the evaluation of factors that are core elements of the Cross-Sector Alignment Framework (health outcomes are an exception). However, Mathematica has started working with measures of data sharing itself (O'Neil et al., 2020), and as more stakeholders who are engaged in cross-sector alignment begin to have higher scores on such measures, using operational data for evaluation should become more feasible.

Methods

In most papers reviewed, data was collected, analyzed, and presented descriptively or anecdotally. This information is both useful and critical. However, the broader cross-sector alignment enterprise will benefit from studies of a balance of analytical methods. In rare cases, correlations between causal factors and their outcomes were analyzed (O'Neil et al., 2020), and there are opportunities to engage in this approach and other comparative methods. While comparison is not always desirable, it will in many cases promote clarity in practice and in learning and research that spans contexts.

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Considerations for Building a Measurement System for Cross-Sector Alignment

Standardized and Situational Metrics

Two types of metric usage and origin may be particularly important to consider in developing a measurement system. The first is comparison. Metrics can be compared across contexts to determine best practices and measure absolute progress on the given metric. Such measures will need to be standardized and might originate from the field or from an influential actor in the field. The second is in operations. Standardized measures can be used for operations, but operations may also call for situationally unique measures. Consider for example the process of developing shared purpose. This process may necessitate the inclusion of measures that reflect the challenge of bringing together specific actors in a specific context. Consequently, a collaborative's measures may not reflect standardized measures adopted in the field more broadly. A measurement system for cross-sector alignment might address both standardized and situational measures.

Development Over Time

If the cross-sector alignment measurement system is to be used by practitioners and researchers, they are likely going to want to improve the measures and measurement systems as alignment learning continues. This indicates a need to build in a capacity for the measurement system to develop over time.

Measurement Levels

Measuring a concept at one level may be quite different from measuring the same concept at a different level. For example, community engagement may look different at the state level than at the local or municipal level. This may indicate a system that explicitly offers direction for measurement at different levels.

Qualifiers that Span Concepts

During this latest review, several qualifiers that might need to be measured when they are used to qualify other concepts or measures were identified. Examples include terms like sustainable, adequate, successful, authentic, and meaningful. Consider the concept of sustainable financing. In such a case, it may be helpful to find or develop a way of measuring both financing and the sustainability of financing.

The Process of Measurement

There are several factors related to measurement that might be considered while developing a measurement system. Four stand out:

1. A common theme in discussions around measurement is that community voice, equity, racism, and power dynamics should be key considerations during measurement processes and, before that, the development of the measurement system. This is important as well in terms of trust across partners and partnership sustainability.
2. Measurement can be resource-intensive, and time, money, and expertise are needed to design, implement, and draw information from measurement systems. It will probably be important to consider these constraints when developing a measurement strategy.
3. A key challenge both in shared data (a key element of the Cross-Sector Alignment Framework) and in measurement more broadly is the satisfactory negotiation of sensitivity and privacy requirements associated with health information (DeManche, 2020).
4. Sectors have their own paradigms for managing information (Braveman et al., 2019; Mangrum et al., 2020). It may be necessary to be culture-conscious as a measurement system is developed. Guidance on interoperability may need to be provided (Mangrum et al., 2020). By providing guidance to such challenges as these, a measurement system could provide additional value to the field.

Questions

As a measurement system for cross-sector alignment is emerging, three areas of opportunity for input from the field are clear:

1. How can standard metrics that allow for cross-comparisons (inside and across aligning systems) be encouraged given the practical need for actors to act to act situationally using nonstandard metrics?
2. What is likely to promote uptake of the measurement system? Is there a format that would make the measurement system more user-friendly? This might also vary by the types of stakeholders involved
3. How can communities and end-users be involved in the development of the measurement system?

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