

Ripple Effects Mapping: A fun, story-based evaluation tool

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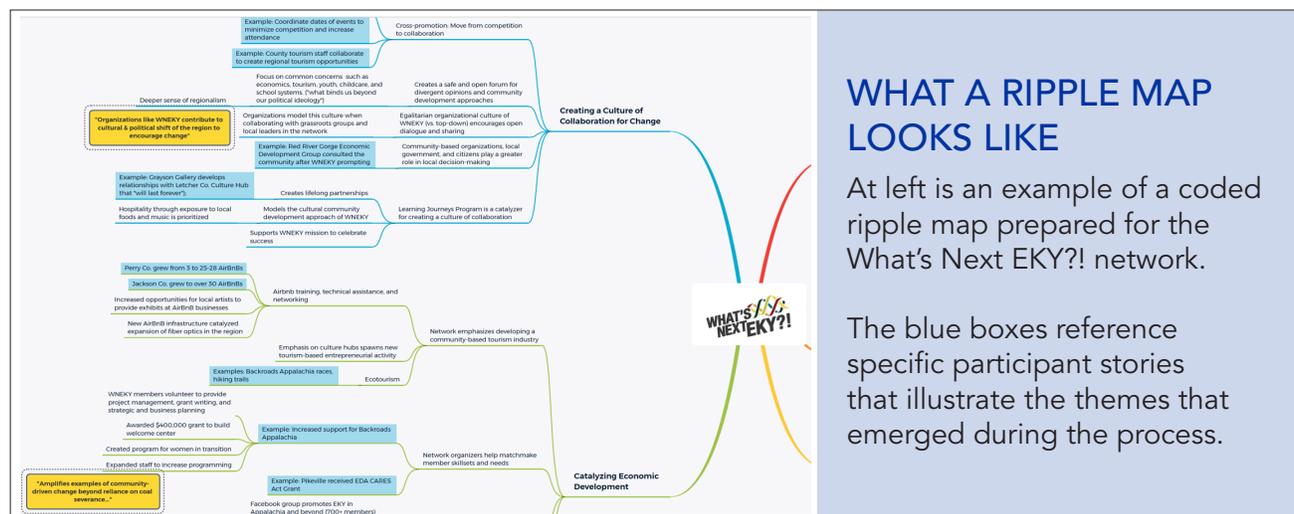
BENEFITS AND USES OF RIPPLE EFFECTS MAPPING

Much of what we do in Extension is educational in nature. Our evaluation methods have thus historically focused on *individual-level* impacts, such as what our participants have learned or are doing differently because of our programming (Chazdon, 2022). But what about the broad *community-level* impacts of our work? Extension invests deeply in leadership development and creating connections among people. How do we track what happens in our communities because of this connecting work? How do we tell the story of Extension and how it leads to community change?

Ripple Effects Mapping (REM) is a story-based evaluation tool that captures the intended and unintended impacts of a complex program or network. It is a qualitative evaluation tool developed by Extension professionals and community developers. REM results in a visually appealing map that displays clusters of far-reaching effects. This tool is adaptable and can be used in many situations. For example, it would be appropriate for exploring the outcomes of a rural entrepreneurship program. Or the tool could be used to help a food coalition map the impacts of investing in collaboration and coordination. REM can be used mid-program or at the end of the program.

REM can also be used for purposes beyond program evaluation. It can be used as a stimulating way to jump start a participatory planning process as stakeholders gather to reflect on what is working and how they want to move forward. In other contexts, it might be appropriate as a team-building exercise. For example, a group of pandemic-weary 4-H volunteers might be looking for a tool to get them re-energized and better understand how their work intersects and makes a difference.

All these scenarios would be an excellent fit for this highly participatory process. Indeed, evaluation can be fun and exciting in addition to providing an opportunity for reflection and growth.



KEY COMPONENTS AND STEPS OF RIPPLE EFFECTS MAPPING

STEP 1: The REM process begins by bringing together a diverse array of people who have been involved with the program in some capacity. Participants are first broken into pairs to interview each other using appreciative inquiry questions. These are positively framed questions that are meant to elicit stories about participants' successes (Hansen, Sero, & Higgs, 2018). For example, "Tell me a story about a high point with this program" or "What changes are you most proud of that have resulted from this program?" This sets the tone for a highly *participatory* process since every person is asked to share something and draw out their partners' experiences.

STEP 2: The group then reconvenes and each pair shares out one powerful story. The facilitator writes down these accomplishments on a large piece of paper on the wall. Each impact radiates out from the center of the page where the program name is printed. Thus begins the period of *interactive group interviewing and reflection* as participants are encouraged to add to each other's stories and note connections.

STEP 3: The facilitator asks a series of probing questions such as, "Then what happened?" or "How are things different in this community as a result?" This collaborative brainstorm is captured by drawing additional lines to connect activities, experiences, and impacts, resulting in a visual *mind-map* that appears on the butcher paper. The ripple map reveals clusters of positive feedback and impacts. Barriers and obstacles are recorded on a separate sheet of paper from the ripple map.

STEP 4: Digitizing and coding of the ripple map happens after the group session concludes. Depending on the purpose of the REM process, the facilitator may take the hand-written map and create a clean, digitized map using software such as x-mind and return it to the group for sharing with stakeholders. The qualitative data may also be coded by the facilitator using a framework that works for the group. The *community capitals framework* is one of the most popular coding schemes and involves grouping the impacts according to different assets of a community (social, human, political, cultural, natural, financial, and built). This can be a particularly useful framework in the context of Extension because it allows us to map how investments in individual skills development and relationship-building work can lead to broader community development impacts, initiating a "spiraling up" process that may result in notable improvements in community financial capital, the built environment, and so forth (Emery & Flora, 2006).

STEP 5: The final step of the process involves reconvening the group to review and achieve group validation of the results, while also exploring next steps. A PDF of the digitized map and accompanying report may serve as a starting point. After reviewing the map, the facilitator will ask questions such as, "What have you learned about the program through this process?" or "What do you think are the most significant impacts that need to be highlighted?" or "How can we use this map and the detailed stories we gathered to move forward? Where do we go from here?" The group may want to channel all the positive and hopeful energy generated through this process to move directly into a strategic planning process. The facilitator can also help train the group on how to use the evaluation results to articulate the public value of the program (see Chazdon et al., 2017). Maps can be included when applying for grants and specific stories shared with elected officials – or the group might want to use the data to recruit new volunteers or program participants.

