

# Can You Hear Me Now?

## Evaluating Your Technical Assistance

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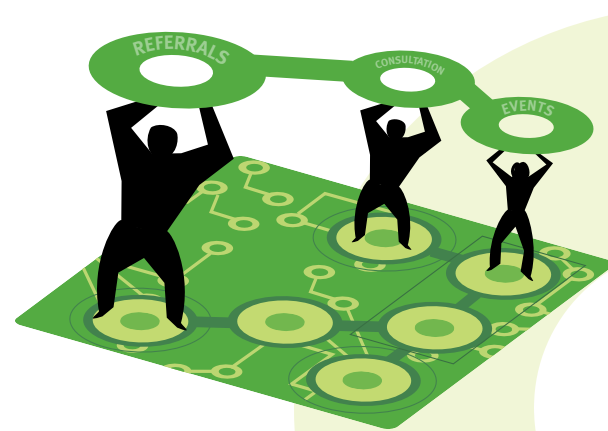
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# Introduction



One of the most exciting developments in the field of teen pregnancy prevention over the last two decades has been the emergence of strategies that actually “work.” Well-evaluated programs now exist that reduce sexual activity, the number of sexual partners, increase the use of contraception, and/or reduce the rates of teen pregnancy and childbearing. The existence of effective strategies, however, has surfaced another challenge: how to get program directors and staff to use science-based, effective strategies.

An obvious approach is education. Workers cannot use programs that they don’t know exist. To inform program staff about these effective strategies, organizations like Advocates for Youth, Child Trends, Healthy Teen Network, and The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy have all produced lists and descriptions of programs that work. State coalitions to prevent teen pregnancy have also produced such materials. In the past four years, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has funded multiple organizations to offer workshops, create materials, and educate states and local programs about

science-based approaches to preventing teen pregnancy.

Of course, greater knowledge about the existence of effective programs does not guarantee that local organizations will use these approaches. Staff often complain about lack of funds to purchase such programs, lack of training to use them, the political environments in their communities precluding the use of some of these programs, and other barriers (Philliber and Nolte, 2007). It has become clear that if science-based approaches to preventing teen pregnancy are going to be fully utilized, local sites and the state organizations who work with them often need assistance beyond a simple list of programs.

Many organizations have been providing technical assistance and training to encourage the adoption of science-based approaches to preventing teen pregnancy. While there is no “cookbook approach” to evaluating technical assistance (Nickols, 2000), evaluation strategies are needed to document the adequacy of this approach. The purpose of this paper is to outline the strategies of technical assistance, the barriers to effective evaluation of this work, and to offer guidelines for improving our evaluations of technical assistance efforts.

## Providing Technical Assistance

Technical assistance is most often used to increase the quality of work and the effectiveness of individuals, organizations, and others. It can center on any area of activity and can employ various strategies (Office of Justice Program, 2006; Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 1998). Some of these strategies include:

- **Conferences** or other large gatherings where there are presentations by speakers, roundtable discussions, or the like. Among those concerned about teen pregnancy, such conferences are often held by both state and national organizations.
- **Consultants** who visit sites for one-on-one or group presentations and conversations. These consultants are generally experts in teen pregnancy prevention or have some particular skill that will enhance the functioning of an organization, such as evaluation.
- **Dissemination of materials** that will improve knowledge or solve problems. Those providing technical assistance often uses materials informing organizations about effective strategies for teen pregnancy prevention.
- **Facilitation** of meetings or problem solving. As various individuals in a particular community try to reach consensus about teen pregnancy prevention strategies, an outside technical assistance provider can often play an important role in informing the community and facilitating the decisions they make about appropriate strategies for that particular community.
- **Formal training** about programs and their implementation. Many curriculum-based programs to prevent teen pregnancy require training to be used properly.

- **Group events** such as workshops. Technical assistance providers often use brief meetings to provide information or to help build individual skills.
- **Needs assessment.** Often communities need to thoroughly understand teen pregnancy locally and in their community context before they can adopt successful solutions. A technical assistance provider can help in collecting and analyzing data about teen pregnancy. They can also help a community realize what kind of data are needed, such as the geographic location and age distribution of teens having births, current attitudes toward contraceptive use, availability of services for young people, and the like.
- **Off-site support** including telephone calls, conference calls, e-mail, internet sites, and distance learning. To either begin or reinforce on-site technical assistance, these off-site strategies can bolster messages, trouble-shoot unexpected barriers, and reinforce the other strategies outlined above.
- **Referrals to needed resources.** A valuable strategy in technical assistance is to link programs with those who can help them, including grant makers, curriculum developers, sources of publications, or training resources.

This list suggests that there are many and varied strategies for offering technical assistance. This has implications for evaluation since the intervention being evaluated—although called by the singular term technical assistance—can actually be any combination of these strategies and can occur across various projects. To facilitate a good process evaluation of technical assistance, the defining characteristics of any particular technical assistance effort need to be specified.

## Challenges to Evaluating Technical Assistance

Several authors have lamented the challenges of evaluating technical assistance. Chief among these challenges is **failure to specify a clear set of strategies for providing such assistance and a clear set of expected sort and long-term outcomes:**

*...the goals of technical assistance projects are (frequently) not specified with a sufficient degree of precision to make (evaluations) possible... (Belshaw, 2005, p. 3).*

This problem is not limited to technical assistance in the field of teen pregnancy but has been noted by technical assistance providers in many other fields (e.g., Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development, 2005; Selowsky et al., 2005).

Another issue in evaluating technical assistance is **isolating the impact** of this assistance from other factors in the environment that may have caused change (Selowsky et al., 2005). Science generally uses control or comparison groups to provide assurance that perceived changes were due to the intervention being studied.

Similarly, evaluating technical assistance requires following organizations or individuals who are *not* provided this assistance. This is possible but may be expensive and often beyond the capacity of technical assistance providers or the organizations they serve.

Yet a third challenge in evaluating technical assistance is the **time it takes to realize changes after technical assistance occurs.** Simply deciding when to evaluate the results of technical assistance is itself a challenge.

Finally, some have argued that evaluation of technical assistance is difficult because many of the outcomes are intangible, difficult to quantify, or are side effects (Belshaw, 2005). For example, perhaps staff at an agency now go about solving program problems in a different way than before. Perhaps as a side effect of these new strategies, there is increased staff morale. Both of these outcomes would be difficult to capture and ascribe to the technical assistance itself. This problem again suggests the need for clarity about such outcomes at the beginning of a technical assistance project.

## The Outcomes of Technical Assistance

As in most other interventions, there are largely three broad areas of outcomes of technical assistance:

- changes in knowledge,
- changes in attitudes, or
- changes in skills or behavior.

Specifically, in promoting science-based approaches to preventing teen pregnancy recipients of technical assistance should:

- know more about the strategies that work to prevent teen pregnancy,
- believe that the use of such strategies is possible and important, and
- take actions to adopt these successful approaches.

There are perhaps some technical assistance providers who would argue that the burden for behavior change should not be theirs, since so many barriers exist to actually

adopting science-based approaches to teen pregnancy prevention—barriers which may not be under the control of the technical assistance provider (Ali-Dinar, 2006; Seitz, 1980). How can a provider of technical assistance, for example, take on finding sufficient funds for an organization so that it can afford new curricula and training? This is a reasonable question but it could also be argued that unless technical assistance produces some discernible behavioral change toward teen pregnancy prevention efforts, it is not very satisfying. Perhaps the best point to make here again is that a good evaluation of technical assistance requires clarity at the outset about just what outcomes are expected and the design of strategies for providing technical assistance that are strong enough, correctly targeted, and sufficiently effective to produce those outcomes—in spite of barriers.

In most evaluations of technical assistance there is another level of potential outcomes that are often studied. This is the **reaction to the technical assistance** itself.

Those receiving technical assistance might be asked to give this assistance an overall rating (e.g., excellent, good, fair, or poor) and might be asked more specifics such as whether they found this assistance to be:

- accessible
- clear

- community appropriate
- helpful
- interesting
- making good use of visuals
- meeting their expectations
- satisfying
- thorough
- timely
- useful
- well planned
- or any number of other dimensions

These dimensions may be important to achieving the larger goals of changing knowledge, attitudes, and behavior but they are not the same as such outcomes.

*'User satisfaction' is the most basic of training outcomes. It is important to demonstrate but doesn't get you very far in satisfying the ultimate goals of the training effort (Gabriel and Salmon, 1989, p. 3).*

Wang and Wilcox (2006) caution that positive results on these interim dimensions:

*...may not necessarily be able to guarantee positive summative evaluation results because the application of new knowledge seems almost always to be mixed up with other matters such as organization support and the application environment. (p. 531)*

## Using Logic Models in Evaluating Technical Assistance

One strategy for achieving the needed clarity in both the interventions of technical assistance and its desired outcomes is a logic model or theory of change (Coffman, 1999; W.K. Kellogg Foundation, 2004; Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 2008).

These devices are also used by programs to clarify their strategies and goals. The model below is generic but can be used as a template to plan a technical assistance evaluation and to also improve the technical assistance program itself.

Planned Strategies	Expected Shorter-term Outcomes	Expected Longer-term Outcomes
<p>The technical assistance provider will use:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ conferences</li> <li>○ consultants</li> <li>○ dissemination of materials</li> <li>○ facilitation</li> <li>○ formal training</li> <li>○ group events</li> <li>○ needs assessment</li> <li>○ off-site support</li> <li>○ referrals to needed resources</li> </ul>	<p>Those who receive technical assistance will report that it was:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ accessible</li> <li>○ clear</li> <li>○ community appropriate</li> <li>○ helpful</li> <li>○ interesting</li> <li>○ making good use of visuals</li> <li>○ meeting expectations</li> <li>○ satisfying</li> <li>○ thorough</li> <li>○ timely</li> <li>○ useful</li> <li>○ well planned</li> <li>○ had other positive attributes</li> </ul>	<p>Those who receive the technical assistance will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ increase their knowledge</li> <li>○ adopt more favorable attitudes</li> <li>○ acquire new skills or take positive actions</li> </ul>

The strategies column in this model should be more detailed and specific to indicate which of these or other techniques will be included, the number of people to be targeted by each, their intensity or duration, and their schedule. So, for example, a technical assistance program might use three formal training events of three hours each over a period of three months, reaching 10 staff from two agencies.

A provider of technical assistance need not measure all of the interim outcomes or responses to technical assistance listed in the middle column of the model. Still, choosing some of these measures or others as particular goals of the technical assistance should occur when the program is designed.

More specificity should be added to the longer-term outcome column as well.

For example, a technical assistance provider might seek to:

- significantly increase knowledge about the characteristics of programs that successfully reduce teen pregnancy;
- significantly increase the perceived importance of using science-based approaches to prevent teen pregnancy among agency staff; or
- significantly increase the number of organizations in the community that are using science-based approaches to teen pregnancy prevention.

Having fleshed out the model above, technical assistance providers or their evaluators should be ready to choose measurement strategies and data collection procedures for each strategy and outcome.

## Measurement and Data Collection

There are simple strategies for measuring whether a planned program of technical assistance actually occurred as planned (Crowe, 2000). These can be as simple as a sign-in sheet, recording those who attended conferences, trainings, or other group events. A technical assistance provider might also keep a log of consulting contacts provided, phone calls, materials distributed, or referrals made. In each case, the evaluation should be able to report which technical assistance strategies were used, how often, for how long, and who was reached by each. Taken together this information provides a process or formative evaluation for technical assistance activities.

Exit interviews with participants or post-session questionnaires can be used to collect data on the responses to training (the shorter-term outcomes in the model above). Questions might also be added about the location of any meetings or conferences, the food provided, the assistance with transportation, or other logistical issues. These dimensions of response to the technical assistance provided are attitude measures. Consequently, Likert or other scales can be used as a way to measure each outcome. For example, a question on clarity of the technical assistance might read as follows:

How clear was the workshop presentation?

- very clear
- somewhat clear
- not very clear
- not clear at all

Or a question on satisfaction with technical assistance might ask:

How satisfied were you with the technical assistance provided?

- very satisfied
- satisfied
- dissatisfied
- very dissatisfied

Finally, to collect data on changes in knowledge, attitudes, behavior, and skills, before and after (or pretest/posttest) measures will be needed. To measure changes in knowledge, the technical assistance provider should decide on the key facts that the technical assistance will convey. These should be stated as clearly as possible to facilitate converting them into clear questions. For example, instead of setting a goal “to increase knowledge about successful programs,” the provider might decide to work on increasing knowledge about “Reducing the Risk, Teen Outreach, and the Children’s Aid Society/ Carrera model programs.” Technical assistance recipients can then show their knowledge about these programs before the technical assistance begins and again once it is complete. To measure how long this knowledge is retained, the evaluation might conduct a second follow-up survey with recipients some weeks or months after the technical assistance is provided.

It is important to remember that self-assessed knowledge (e.g., How much would you say you know about....) is not the same as actually measuring knowledge. Often after training or other kinds of technical assistance, recipients realize they did not know as much about a topic as they had assumed before the training. Consequently, they often will give themselves lower scores on knowledge after the technical assistance than before. This makes before and after self-assessments of knowledge less helpful than other more direct tests or measures of

knowledge. Reports of how much knowledge was gained at the training are also not the same as measuring knowledge directly. Each knowledge question should include a “don’t know” response and technical assistance recipients should be instructed not to guess so that the evaluation can clearly measure what they are certain they know.

Measuring changes in attitude also requires a before and after technical assistance strategy, perhaps with later follow-up to assess the staying power of changes in attitudes. Attitude questions should avoid a middle ground or neutral response and should not include a “don’t know” option. Everyone has attitudes. The question below illustrates a common style for attitude questions:

How important would you say it is for your agency to use a science-based approach to teen pregnancy prevention?

- very important
- somewhat important
- not very important
- not important at all

Behavior change cannot be measured immediately following the delivery of technical assistance but instead, must be measured, for example, after recipients have had a chance to buy new curricula or adopt

## Enhancing Traditional Evaluations of Technical Assistance

These traditional methods of research design, measurement, and data collection remain the most respected ways to evaluate the cause and effect of technical assistance or any other intervention. Still, the many challenges to using these traditional approaches, as discussed previously, make them somewhat more difficult when trying to isolate the impact of technical assistance. Outcomes that are difficult to measure, elusive control strategies, and even the difficulty of defining what constitutes technical assistance, all present evaluation challenges.

new teen pregnancy prevention strategies. Sometimes technical assistance providers encourage recipients to create action plans for themselves as part of the technical assistance program. This may increase the likelihood of following through on behavior change. Then, technical assistance recipients are contacted by telephone, e-mail, or in some other way to assess whether these planned changes have, in fact, occurred.

As noted above, it is often difficult to evaluate technical assistance using a true experimental design, where individuals or agencies are randomly assigned to receive or not receive the technical assistance. However, opportunities may exist to use a sample of similar agencies or staff as comparison or to use “waiting controls”—those who later receive the technical assistance. If any of these strategies are possible, it strengthens the evaluation since the results can be framed against what changes would have occurred without the technical assistance. If controls or comparisons are available, then the appropriate analysis examines whether the changes in knowledge, attitudes, or behavior among the recipients of technical assistance are significantly greater than changes made by the control or comparison group.

Sometimes evaluations that defy our best quantitative techniques can be shored up with qualitative measures. It is persuasive when a community tells the story of how it came together, defined its teen pregnancy problem, learned what might work, received training on effective programs, and then put these programs in place—all under the tutelage of a good technical assistance provider. To what other intervention should we ascribe this progress? Doesn’t this kind

of testimony make a prima facie case that the technical assistance was the likely cause of this progress? In other words, if it can be argued that the technical assistance being evaluated was—so to speak—“the only game in town,” it shores up our argument for cause.

If those who attend our workshops declare that this is where they learned about effective programs, if they later tell us that because of these workshops they changed something about their programs, can we not say that we have at least “promising,” if not conclusive, evidence that our technical assistance is effective? If an agency supervisor argues that his staff now “feels” differently about their work after intensive technical assistance, can we not at least hypothesize that technical assistance was the cause of this change? The collection of these “promising” or “suggestive” data in turn, helps make the case that it is worth the resources needed to find and track a control community or group

## Conclusion

Many evaluations of technical assistance suffer from a failure to clarify either the strategies to be used for technical assistance, the immediate responses expected from this technical assistance, or the expected changes in knowledge, attitude, or behavior. Organizations often fail to benefit from technical assistance because they lack capacity to implement recommendations, because technical assistance strategies may be poorly planned or designed, or because internal conflict over governance provides little incentive to adopt change.

The use of logic models in the early stages of the evaluation process is a way to address some of these challenges. Logic models quickly outline and summarize relationships between processes and outcomes related to the agreed upon scope of work.

A technical assistance evaluation includes methods for gathering data commonly used in traditional social research, including

and undertake a more rigorous evaluation.

We have been discussing how to evaluate technical assistance intended to promote the adoption of science-based teen pregnancy prevention programs. The field, however, needs to move beyond this question to discover which technical assistance strategies work best for which audiences in various contexts. When do workshops work better than individual coaching? Are there some communities or programs that can make significant progress by attending on-line training? Are there some topics on which we can offer technical assistance in brief telephone calls while others will demand hours of our on-site time? Answering these questions will challenge our research designs even further, but the same principles will apply. We will need clear statements of our problem, the best designs we can muster, and careful measurement of our outcomes. And we will need testimony.

questionnaires, surveys, interviews, or observations. Moreover, evaluations of technical assistance may use the same evaluation designs used for any other evaluation problem. The challenges of evaluating technical assistance are particularly great, owing to the difficulty of assembling control groups, using random assignment, doing necessary follow-up, and measuring outcomes well. Sometimes our more traditional techniques for doing this can be enhanced by adding qualitative strategies—the stories and testimony of those receiving assistance.

As evaluation of technical assistance to promote science-based teen pregnancy programs moves forward, it will need to define what kinds of technical assistance work best for which audiences in various contexts. The strategies of clarity, good design, and good measurement will be needed even more often if we are to sort out such questions.

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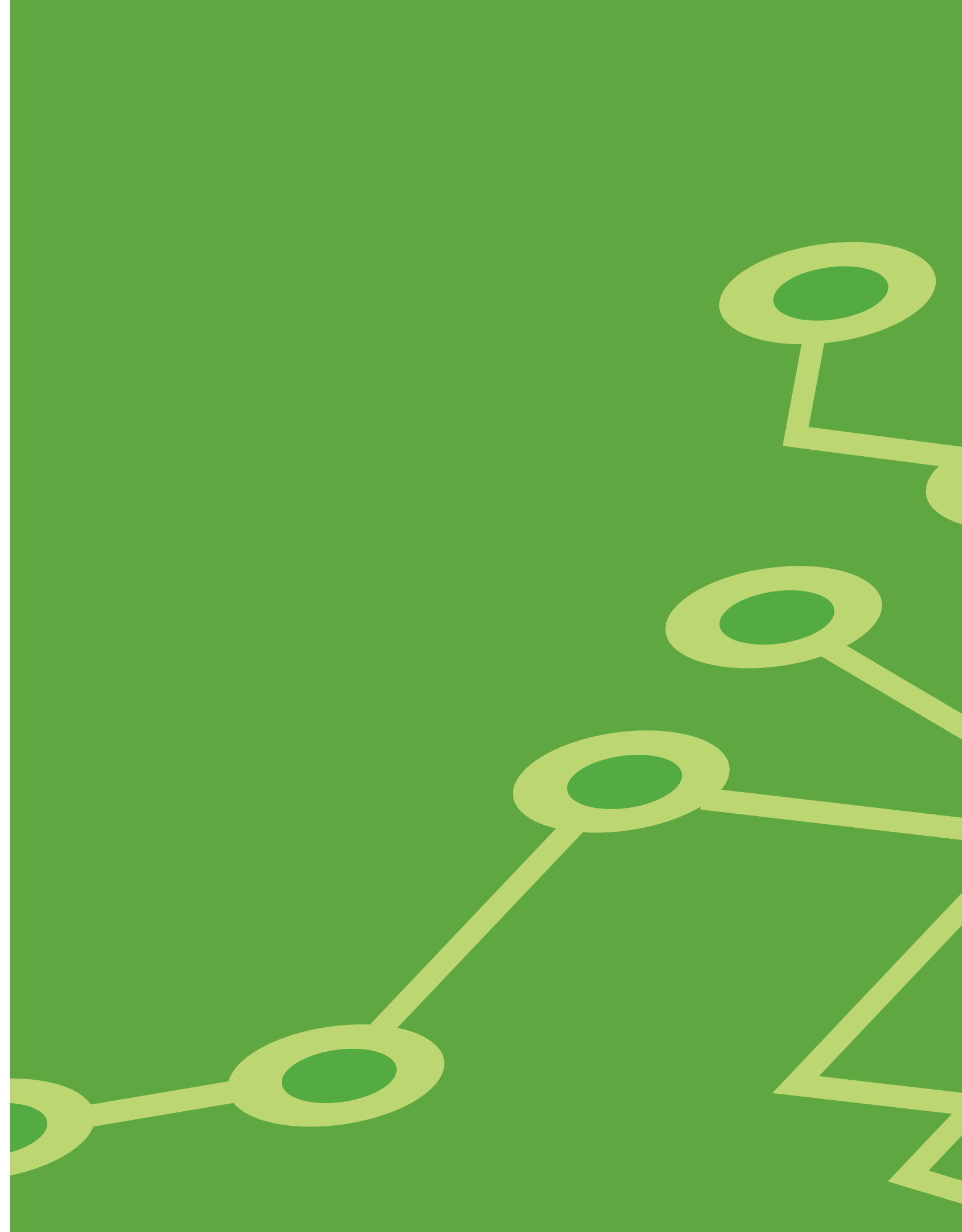
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