

Embedding Evaluative Thinking & Social Learning

The complex questions and contexts of systems-change oriented work requires a learning-focused, developmental approach to evaluation. This approach will place social learning and specifically collective sensemaking and reflection as the heart of the effort.

The creation of such spaces and resources to enable and support these discussions are what will distinguish programs from “business as usual” funding and implementation while remaining focused on community transformation. The following are some takeaways we’ve harvested from engagement with foundations and donors over the last five years:



THE FOUNDATION-LEVEL THEORY OF CHANGE IS CRITICAL. The foundation-level TOC is the linchpin of your planning and evaluation process. It needs to be revisited and revised regularly, by foundation staff and trustees as well as by Project Directors, Steering Committee members and community members. Involving community leadership in this discussion will help develop ownership of the overall change strategy and deepen understanding. The discussion of values (and whose values!) as part of the ToC is critically important in providing criteria and guideposts strategy development. Importantly it will also bring critical perspectives to the discussion, to help the Foundation understand where opportunities might lie, which is essential for innovation. Lastly, it will help solidify for all participants the realities and challenges of work on the ground.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A LEARNING PARTNER? A foundation can play a critical role in catalyzing learning and innovation and the relationship building that is essential for systems-wide change. It means prioritizing “double-loop learning” or a learning model that periodically revisits and revises the overall conceptual framework of the initiative, that is the Theory of Change, including the values, goals, beliefs that govern the work. Creating an environment for learning requires discussing challenges, even failures. The openness is critical for innovation to take place and thrive. Double loop learning takes time and trust to build along with some risk-taking and deep commitment to place-based, community-driven work. Effectively creating these learning loops, spaces for reflective practice, is essential.

Nuts and bolts:

- **The creation of spaces and enabling discussions, exchanges and reflections** is the primary role that a funder can play in such an initiative. It is highly challenging to layer a learning approach on top of other activities (including, planning, implementation and evaluation), when staff, trustee time is so limited; but these other activities will not be successful without carving out spaces for reflections *as part of the work*. There needs to be serious attention focused on how to operationalize the work critical thinking and learning can happen.
- **Think about how certain activities, meetings, planning activities, etc. can be restructured.** How can you “shake-up” what you are already doing, without always adding activities or requiring more time? For example, how can a staff meeting being conducted to focus more on learning and reflection? And how can this be schedule to take place **more regularly as part of the work?**
- And perhaps most importantly, **consider what activities can be done away with all together.** There is often no better method to **unleash potential than through “creative destruction”**; think about those activities, procedures, or processes that are not core or priorities, and which could be eliminated to free up space (time, bandwidth) for more strategic thinking and acting.
- In addition, **consider how staffing, capacity and resources are aligned with doing the work differently.** Do staff/consultants have the capacity to support, accompany this approach? How can the Foundation support the governing structures to also align with a more learning-focused, developmental approach? How can resources can be targeted, capacity provided and timelines shifted so that collective critical thinking and learning can happen?
- **The evaluator/evaluation team is the Foundation’s thought partner and critical friend.** Strong facilitation skills are essential both for designing and enabling opportunities for reflection and learning about the initiative as a whole and for the Foundation’s own learning about the process of implementing the program. The evaluator is also responsible for documenting learning, and alignment with the evolving Theory of Change and planning process. If the evaluation is not exclusively for accountability purposes, and prioritizes learning then there needs to be community level planning and evaluation support. This role entails assisting communities with participatory planning and data collection activities, and helping create spaces for learning and reflection. This role requires facilitation and training skills and includes documentation of activities that are carried out.

EXPANDING THE CIRCLE

The most powerful way of strengthening the potential of learning to actually be transformational and contribute to complex social change processes is by ensuring that reflective spaces are not echo chambers.

- **Bring together stakeholders beyond the steering committee to talk about progress.** Revisit your TOC and look at your monitoring results. Talk about what you had hoped to achieve, what you are doing well (and for whom) and what the struggles are. Be sure to invite some critical, creative thinkers. Invite a few people from the target population, community leaders, and others perhaps with issue expertise. ***Make sure there is careful attention to power dynamics and ensuring that priorities and concerns of those voices most marginalized are given weight.*** This is the opportunity for deeper analysis and innovation. Without these spaces the initiative will be driven by a strategic plan created by a few individuals and which functions as a check-list. ***Think about the planning work as strategic thinking and action, rather than planning.*** How could you do things differently?
- **Build capacity and knowledge exchange** not only within the Program also with organizations and actors with experience and connections to transformational work. The Foundation adds value in a convener role, facilitating dialogue and contributing to knowledge in the field. **Invite facilitators at retreats and other gatherings to share their expertise to support staff to deepen their analysis of the issues and contexts.** Potentially, this work could be followed up *in situ*, so that staff at all levels of the organization benefit from capacity-building opportunities.
- **Ensure that at the community-level there are spaces for learning and reflection** as well. Suggestions include:
 - Program Project Directors and implementing staff have regular focus group discussions with representatives of the target community.
 - Regular sensemaking/reflection meetings that draw on evaluation findings (both focus groups and any external findings available) to discuss progress, what's working, what isn't, and opportunities for innovation and adaptation.
 - Ensure there are opportunities for cross-community learning.

ENSURE UNDERSTANDING AND BUY-IN TO A DEVELOPMENTAL, LEARNING-FOCUSED EVALUATION PROCESS. There must be buy-in from Foundations decision-makers (including trustees), partners and communities. This process simply looks different from anything most have experienced previously; it is often challenging for decision-makers to why it's important to prioritize, and put time and resource into "process".

Two strategies to consider in advocating internally for this approach:

- Peer sharing - where other funders/donors share their experiences, either in person or through brief video conferences, and where staff/trustees can ask questions.
- Experiential learning – participation in internal social learning activities and observation/participation in partner activities can go a long way in helping decision-makers to understand the value of prioritizing this new way of working.

ALIGNING CASE-MAKING & LEARNING NEEDS

There is an ongoing tension between the need for learning and critical thinking and "proving" or making a case to external actors on the impact on the ground. Here are a few recommendations:

- Analyze the Foundation's evaluation's needs and the process of simultaneously meeting learning and case-making needs. Streamline and coordinate learning to improve the quality of the evaluation and to minimize burden on Partners.
- Systematically collect activity and participation data, to track progress over time. Clarify data collection expectations, including what activity data need to be collected and when.
- Ensure that there are in place strategies for collecting important data points to explain progress towards specific expected outcomes, such as systematic information on income and savings, business development, health indicators, educational performance, civic participation, and leadership. These data are the "low-hanging fruit" that, with some advance planning, can be integrated in regular program activities.
- Coordinate and align participatory tools and activity tracking with the Foundation's overall reporting procedures and requirements.
- Ensure data collection opportunities coincide with evaluator visits to strengthen capacity-building opportunities for staff and to ensure the best quality data. Opportunities should align, whenever possible, with grant timeframes so that evaluation efforts are consistent. Fund the evaluation efforts of Partners (through existing grant amounts, during the site visits), to limit burden and ensure that these efforts are recognized as part of the work and not an additional layer of work.

- Align sense-making, or collective analysis of data, with strategies for organizational learning, discussion, and reflection in support of decision-making and planning. This process benefits from external facilitation and is something that could be achieved in concert with evaluator visits.
- Build on-the-ground M&E capacity. While a yearly site visit from an external evaluator is recommended, we recommend a local learning and evaluation partner in each country to facilitate and ensure quality control of ongoing evaluation efforts.
- Coordinate learning, evaluation, and communication strategies. Structure conversations with Foundation leadership and staff to share from the Action Learning Process for internal and external learning. Clarify and coordinate on the ground lessons about how program strategies can benefit from learning.
- Make sure that output data is systematically being collected and managed. This is the primary data you will be drawing from, unless you are going to increase significantly the scope (and budget) around the evaluative effort.

FOUNDATION REFLECTIONS ON ITS ROLES IN PROGRAM STRATEGIES.

If the initiative's evaluation is to be developmental¹ then the foundation's evaluation must look at their role in the process, as conveners, brokers, and capacity builders. This is what the foundation can claim as its contributions to the effort; its role is not limited to getting money out into the field. As such, consider data collection around some of these changes in the people and organizations you are engaging with, such as:

- Changes in knowledge and perceptions of community-driven work; both of Foundation staff as well as those engaged in the initiative including leadership, partners or allies, and residents and community members.
- Independent interviews of key informants on the Foundation's role in the process, looking at issues such as process support, capacity building, expectations and communication and coordination, etc.
- Think about how to creatively use quantitative data (mostly activity data at this point) and qualitative data to make a case. Quantitative data can be used to create compelling charts or visualized using a combination of icons and graphs, and qualitative data can be used for case-studies to showcase the process, what is being learned, and what results from it.
- Think about who your audience is, and how they learn, understand. What reaches them? **This is really about communications strategy.** For example, think about doing video testimonies of what has changed. This can be really

¹ **Developmental Evaluation** (DE) is an evaluation approach that can assist social innovators develop social change initiatives in complex or uncertain environments. DE originators liken their approach to the role of research & development in the private sector product development process because it facilitates real-time, or close to real-time, feedback to program staff thus facilitating a continuous development loop.
http://betterevaluation.org/plan/approach/developmental_evaluation

powerful. This means that you will need to clarify your strategy about how best to communicate (and what to communicate) to different audiences.