

How can complexity theory contribute to more effective development and aid evaluation?

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Dialogue at the Diana, Princess of Wales Memorial Fund, 3 July 2009, London, UK

Introduction

The sixth in a rolling series about how complexity theory is useful in the aid and development sector, this meeting focused on complexity theory and evaluation, and was hosted by Panos London and facilitated by Robin Vincent, Panos's Senior Advisor on HIV and AIDS and Ben Ramalingam from the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP). Development and aid are influenced by a range of interacting factors in constantly changing social contexts which can lead to unpredictable outcomes. Concepts and approaches from complexity theory may be useful for developing appropriate evaluation approaches that will enhance real-time learning and responsive working.

Following the more theoretical emphasis of previous meetings in the series, this day was anchored in six case studies of evaluation approaches which have drawn on concepts from complexity theory. Discussion considered the potential for, and challenges of, working with complexity theory for more effective development practice. A wide range of stakeholders were present, including development practitioners, academics, donors, consultants and NGO representatives.

Complexity theory: the opportunities and challenges

Introductory speakers

Ben Ramalingam of ALNAP noted the ambiguous role of evaluation in the aid sector – it is recognised as vital but universally derided, and often suffers from being used in a ritualistic rather than strategic way. Some of the issues for evaluation include the tension between learning and accountability, the limits of attribution, how evaluations are or are not used, equality and power, and ideological debates about methodologies, such as the dominance of randomised controlled trials (RCTs).

It may be that evaluation cannot do all that we ask of it and that we may need to revise our expectations. The nature of aid work may make it difficult to improve through an ex-post-rational research process – and there are limits to how much such a process can change a system that is ultimately underpinned by more political influences. Although there is a wealth of evaluation methods in theory, in practice they are largely required to conform to scientific management principles that make the following assumptions: people and social processes are rational; process is linear and can be broken down into and understood in parts; and social change is amenable to the hierarchy of objectives in a log-frame model.

Many find such a world view quite artificial. In contrast, complexity theory (theories) talks about systems that are interconnected, driven by feedback, where the properties of the system are not predictable but emerge from the relationships within that system. It talks about change processes that are non-linear, adaptive agency and individuals, and systems with an ability to self-organise despite any top-down mechanisms of control. Such a vision of the world is arguably more realistic. It also has implications for methodologies. It may be that we need to stop focusing on projects, and look more broadly at the societies that we work in and across sectors and institutions rather than within them. Evaluations may need to be more centred on real-time learning and helping managers adapt what they do. In our meeting today we are asking how to improve evaluation and how complexity theory can help.

Robin Vincent from Panos London highlighted the relevance of complexity to current challenges in HIV and AIDS, in particular the need to address the complex social factors that drive HIV infection, such as gender inequality, and stigma and discrimination. Robin introduced three key aspects of complexity relevant to current debates on evaluation:

Systems have 'emergent' properties. The whole cannot be understood by only looking at the individual parts. For example, looking at eggs, sugar and currants separately does not help us understand the experience of eating a currant cake. Early social science highlighted the emergent properties of the social world, arguing that you cannot draw conclusions about how society works by just looking at individuals.

Significant changes tend to be qualitative, rather than just quantitative. Changes in systems often display 'phase shifts' in their overall pattern. In the so-called demographic health transition in industrial countries for example, a whole range of changes to do with ways of life, economics, sanitation and public health added up to a shift from a situation where infectious diseases were the predominant cause of death to one where people tended to live into, and die in, their old age. Complexity helps us to understand how changes turn quantity into quality; at certain stages there is incremental change, but there are also large shifts in the overall pattern.

Causality may be non-linear. You cannot just look at a set of key variables that development will act on and that will lead to a predictable outcome. Many things interact and influence each other and sometimes the smallest details of context can make a difference.

Despite the growing awareness of these insights, we seem to cling stubbornly to ways of doing things that do not address the nature of reality, as the following quote from

Virginia Lacayo (2008)¹ illustrates: 'Most development professionals and organizations that I have exchanged ideas with about social change, agree that social change is a non-linear, long-term, and often unpredictable process requiring efforts at multiple levels. However, most organizations continue to frame their strategies in measurable, cause-effect terms as if their programs can be evaluated in isolation from other efforts, and can demonstrate effectiveness in the short term.'

As regards HIV communications work, interventions have focused on trying to change individuals' behaviour and what are seen as their risky sexual practices. However, there is growing recognition that social factors like gender inequality or stigma and discrimination which drive HIV really need to be understood and addressed. But gender operates at several levels: at the interpersonal level, in certain institutions, and at the macro-structural legal level. So how do you address something so complex in planning and interventions?

Complexity theory provides opportunities, new concepts and tools to look at these things differently, to understand social change and complex aspects of HIV in a different way. Two quite different strands of complexity theory lead to:

- i) A focus on learning and bottom-up processes: applying tools and approaches from 'soft systems' and 'whole systems action research' implies understanding social life and social change as complex systems and emphasising action in the world to produce change.
- ii) A focus on the trajectories of societies over long time frames: recent approaches make use of social survey data to map the influence of key social factors that may have an influence on social outcomes (Byrne, 2002).² Such an approach can provide pointers for broad policy directions.

Richard Longhurst of the Institute of Development Studies asked whether the perennial challenge of too few resources for evaluation is exacerbated by recognising complexity and by the potential need for more resources to address it. Alternatively, perhaps it highlighted the need to invest in future methodological advances. Another challenge was how to deal with people who actively want to block the flow of knowledge, and who believe that complexity is extremely dangerous. Are there any methodologies we can use to get round that problem? Richard suggested that putting more emphasis on monitoring is important as a way of dealing with some aspects of complexity, while ensuring that this feeds into evaluation more than it tends to at present.

Robert Chambers of the Institute of Development Studies suggested that we may be on the verge of a methodological breakthrough. Poor people's lives and realities are emergent, very local, diverse, non-linear and unpredictable. They are adaptive agents. All these concepts from complexity theory are the realities of poor people around the

¹ Lacayo, V, Obregon, R and Singhal, A (2008) 'Approaching social change as a complex problem in a world that treats it as a complicated one: The case of *puntos de encuentro*', Nicaragua, *Investigación y desarrollo* vol 16, no 2, p 138

² Byrne, David (2002) *Interpreting Quantitative Data*, London: Sage Publications, p 6

world. We can ask 'Whose complexity counts and who counts complexity?' There may be participatory approaches where people do their own evaluation – using 'participatory numbers'³ – which are both more rigorous and more relevant. In spite of clashes of world view and methodology at the recent Cairo conference on impact evaluation there was some consensus that we need to be pluralist and recognise that RCTs do not work everywhere and that new participatory approaches may have a different sort of rigour.

Robert highlighted a number of examples of such participatory approaches, including a project with social movements in Bangladesh which generated 132 indicators of 'empowerment'. Professionals were horrified to think that poor people would have to spend time evaluating 132 indicators, but poor people were highly committed since these were their processes and their indicators. They facilitated, reported and learned directly from the process and changed the way they went about things as a result. It was their concept of social change.

To deepen, spread and put such participatory approaches into practice requires good facilitation and a lot of time and resources in the early stages of a project to develop a methodology in a participatory way. Once in place, it can be time-saving for staff, because people are doing the evaluation themselves. Complexity may add legitimacy to those already working with participatory processes.

Danny Burns of SOLAR /University of the West of England, Bristol said that they had used a mix of complexity theory, systems thinking, Foucauldian theories of power, and network theories in a wide range of work in international development, peace and reconciliation and UK-based regeneration. He suggested that you could not keep evaluation separate from broader questions of reflection, action and learning. In a mechanistic world view we separate action and evaluation, when in actuality we have continual and iterative cycles of sense-making which contribute to action. An action-research model recognises these linkages. Danny highlighted a few insights from their work to date:

Emergence. Evaluation design has to be as emergent as the phenomenon that we are exploring so we are constantly reassessing in line with the phenomenon.

Resonance – a different kind of rigour. Rather than focus on representative samples, they use the notion of 'resonance' to look at where the energy is in a system. This has involved working with stories and narratives and finding ways to build up those narratives and interconnect them in a complex process with multiple stakeholders. Multiple enquiry groups generate stories which are then tested with others to see if they resonate deeply or widely, in order to build a robust system picture of what is going on.

³ Robert Chambers (2007) 'Who Counts? The Quiet Revolution of Participation and Numbers' IDS Working Paper 296, www.ntd.co.uk/idsbookshop/details.asp?id=1006

Real change happens when the system is reconfigured. It doesn't always happen at the point of the problem or conflict at hand. The challenge is that it is much harder to measure across a system than measure one issue. It is necessary to look at how to engage with the whole system and shift that underlying set of patterns and norms as well as the direct intervention in a particular conflict zone or site, otherwise things can gradually retreat back to the original patterning – what in complexity theory terminology is often called an 'attractor'.

We need to look wider than causal attribution, beyond numbers and beyond traditional qualitative material. In order to understand the dynamics of a process, not to ask 'what's happening', but 'how' and why it is happening', we need a much more diverse range of evidence. SOLAR has successfully used pictures and drawing to unlock people's assumptions.⁴

Discussion of the questions raised by the introductory speakers

Discussion of these questions noted the importance of changing the mindsets of both the recipients and the donors of aid. While there was some recognition of the need for alternative methods, there was still a dominant emphasis on 'hard data' and prediction. Delegates felt that the history of the failure of development demanded experimentation with new methods but this implied mobilisation of resources and raised awareness of alternatives. There is still resistance to uncovering and addressing the real issues of power and control in development. For donors, accountability remains a critical function for evaluation, but this can skew the focus of evaluations and needs to be resisted to bring beneficiaries' needs more to the fore.

Complexity theory poses fundamental questions about the nature of development and how development interventions work, but the design of projects often does not allow for addressing complexity at the evaluation stage, and evaluators are often asked late in the day to evaluate the 'what' rather than the 'how' of projects.

The case can be made for more resources and the value of investing in evaluation, by emphasising that evaluation processes can also be part of developing strategy, learning, policy development, planning and even building capacity for leadership.

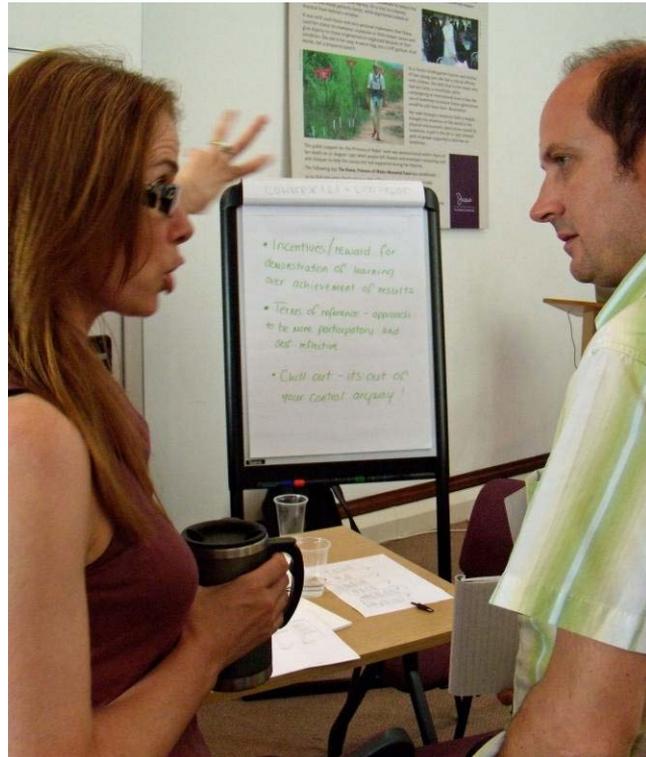
Small Group discussions: Do existing aid evaluation practices pay sufficient attention to questions raised by complexity theories?

Discussion of the issues raised in the introductory contributions continued in small groups, with the themes outlined below emerging.

⁴ For more on these approaches see Burns, Danny (2007) *Systemic action research: A strategy for whole system change*, Bristol: The Policy Press, ch 6

Starting with a theory of change

The nature of development and the theory of change behind development interventions was an important starting point for deciding on appropriate evaluation approaches at the outset of a project. Any organisation needs to be clear about what it is aiming to achieve in society – encompassing thinking about the past and the future, even if it is not possible to understand all the complexities of societies beforehand or from a distance. It was important to involve communities in envisioning the process of change themselves. There was interest in finding ways



to develop an approach to evaluation and analysis that collects multiple narratives with a multiplicity of feedback and uses that complexity theory to frame interventions. Given the emphasis of funders on clear results, it was important to highlight examples of people already demonstrating adaptive, flexible approaches that succeed – as is already happening with the track record of Outcome Mapping for example.

Challenging funding orthodoxies

Public funding pressures, that is, to be seen to spend money with demonstrable results in short timescales, have an important influence on what methods are accepted: 'From the bilateral community through to the field, everyone is looking over their shoulder right up to "how will it go down in Parliament?" 'Money has to be spent quickly with respected actors. Some UK NGOs have more independence owing to the way they raise funds, meaning that they are not so reliant on government money. In spite of this greater independence they are not challenging the traditional structures of the civil service; maybe they should be doing more? If we are arguing that complexity theory perspectives can help to make aid and development more effective, we need to find ways of demonstrating this in practice and avoiding the impression that it is too intellectual, too involved, or leads to lack of focus.

Incentives for learning

If you accept the implications of complexity, and that development outcomes are influenced by unexpected interactions in constantly changing social contexts, there need to be some shifts in the ways that aid institutions work – towards a continual learning process from which you occasionally extrapolate results. Rather than emphasising right and wrong, it was felt that there needed to be more incentives to

promote learning. We need to avoid 'good guy' and 'bad guy' perspectives on this and try and see what 'incentives' people have to set their programme work up in this way.

Complexity as a way of understanding the world

Some felt there might be a tension between a better understanding of the world provided by complexity concepts and the way these insights can help us to do our jobs better. At the psychological level, complexity raises insecurity. The challenge is to make people feel comfortable going into and working with an open-ended process. There was some consensus around the fact that there was a facilitation-skills deficit across development – in particular people needed the skills to be flexible, inventive and creative so that they could guide an emerging process appropriately.

Promising approaches: Case studies of complexity-informed evaluation

Six case studies were presented in response to this question: What promising approaches and experiences are there of addressing real-world complexity in aid evaluation? These were then discussed in small groups. Key points from these discussions were shared in a plenary at the end of the session.

Using complexity to evaluate capacity-building, Nigel Timmins, Tearfund

Nigel presented a monitoring and learning process developed by Margie Buchanan Smith intended to 'enable real-time reflection and learning, fostering maximum appropriate emergent adaptive behaviour through capacity-building', which was just beginning to be used to assess capacity in the context of work in disaster-management and humanitarian systems. The process made use of stories of change, shared and discussed at various levels in the network of stakeholders. Tearfund wanted a process that could change in real time and not have predetermined outcomes, but that captured real/valuable information, so that it could also be accountable to donors.

Discussion highlighted the need to ensure that local participation was resistant to distortion by more powerful agendas. There was also a suggestion that rather than use indicators it might be more useful to develop 'areas of change', or milestones. Indicators could themselves be emergent and regularly reviewed to ensure they were still relevant. Could emergent indicators lead to frustration if the 'goalposts' keep moving? A central purpose was to allow participants to learn for themselves how capacity development takes place, and to identify related needs.

Evaluating the complex social dimensions of HIV and AIDS, Robin Vincent, Panos

This case study focused on the challenge of evaluating the social and structural factors that drive HIV infection, in order to develop more effective HIV prevention, and

drew on ongoing work in partnership with UNAIDS and the Communication for Social Change Consortium. Robin outlined some useful tools and approaches from complexity theory that showed promise in this area, highlighting two emerging strands from quite different angles. Firstly there was some work which looked at tracking how a range of social factors in any social setting combine and interact over time to produce social outcomes. Using Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA), David Byrne illustrates how changes in certain critical parameters, for example the degree of inequality of wealth, can 'tip' society into one 'attractor' or another (Byrne 2002).⁵ Such work may lead to broad policy conclusions around how to promote an enabling environment for health and well-being at the societal level.

Another strand of complexity work draws on 'systems' and 'complex adaptive systems' approaches and recognises that the emergent character of reality demands an emergent approach to evaluation. Work drawing on complex adaptive systems concepts (Eoyang and Berkas 1998)⁶ suggests that when dealing with such systems, the 'theory of change' in an evaluation may change as there is an evolving understanding of the context and as social factors and their interactions change over time. Such work also emphasises the importance of involving people in evaluation early on and strengthens the rationale for participatory monitoring and evaluation approaches. These insights from complexity theory imply a need to address general social processes and capabilities afforded people by social arrangements as well as people's resilience and room to respond creatively rather than focus on technical, targeted inputs.

Participants were encouraged by the interest in complexity theory within the UN and from donors, which was highlighted in this example. They also recognised the need to find compelling stories of change that illustrate that 'reality is like this' and convey the importance of complexity-informed approaches. Discussion noted the dominance of experimental designs in evaluation and the focus on RCTs as the 'gold standard' of evaluation. There was growing discussion of the need to look at a broader mix of evidence, particularly in complex contexts where the assumptions of such experimental trials are usually violated, but participatory and qualitative work was still seen as a poor second in some influential circles. It was felt that in some ways, complexity concepts provided a useful new language of 'legitimation' for existing approaches that focus on participation and the importance of social issues – giving a rationale for the focus on local context and involvement and the need for context-relevant indicators.

When addressing social change in national HIV prevention programmes, there was a need to see simultaneous action at a range of levels including interpersonal, community, institutional and national policy levels. How do you link them? It might be important to recognise explicitly that donors and policymakers are all stakeholders in

⁵ See footnote 2

⁶ Eoyang, G and Berkas, T (1998) 'Evaluation in a Complex Adaptive System': www.chaos-limited.com/EvalinCAS.pdf

the system of learning rather than seen as external or being engaged later on. This could be a productive way of doing things where donors can see benefits, as with some examples from Danny Burns's work.⁷

Complexity and evaluation in practice, Richard Longhurst, Institute of Development Studies

Richard's case study focused on resource constraints. He shared information about his work with the International Labour Organization and previous work where he has tried to incorporate complexity theory approaches. His key question was: 'How far does complexity increase the resources required to carry out an evaluation?' If the key aspects of complexity are non-linearity, diversity and inclusiveness, then what extra resources and space are needed? Given that resources are finite, how much complexity is enough? Richard also noted that in very ordered, hierarchical societies, predictability and control are key. Similarly, in contexts where information is power and its flow is blocked to maintain the status quo, how can arguments for complexity be advanced? Such questions led Richard to emphasise the importance not only of good monitoring and evaluation, but also of design and to highlight the relative importance of monitoring.

Evaluation as action research – community capacity in Wales, Danny Burns, SOLAR/University of the West of England

Danny described an evaluation of the 'Welsh Assemblies First' project for community capacity development in the 100 poorest wards in Wales over 10 years. A key focus of the evaluation was the relationship between on-the-ground realities and policy, so that there were many complex and emergent factors to address.

The evaluation used many action research groups on the ground which fed into a wider strategic learning process that led to changes in design and funding, and fed back into interventions on the ground. What was originally quite a traditional approach using household surveys and case studies, with a little bit of action research, changed into a process where a regular multi-stakeholder meeting, which included senior civil servants, became an action-research hub for reflection and discussion. The commissioners became convinced about the value of the action-research process and this led to a change in the evaluation process, with full-day meetings every six weeks, and a re-working of the original strategy, which ultimately led to changes in the £2 million plan.

Participants were excited about the potential for the action-research process Danny described and about how it was practical and useful even when the project was huge. Could other bodies, such as DFID be as open as the Welsh Assembly? Participants

⁷ See footnote 4

remarked on the way the project took advantage of open and enabling policymakers at policy level, which is often where blocks occur.

Evaluation of Dutch support to capacity development in developing countries, Piet de Lange, Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs

The evaluation process Piet described started in 2008 and is currently in its inception phase. It aims to answer the questions of how and under what circumstances capacities are developed, and how support for capacity development can be provided more effectively. The evaluation hopes to identify knowledge and new insights that contribute to further policy development for Dutch Development Partners (DDP – Dutch governmental and non-governmental organisations involved in development support). It was recognised that, both in the Ministry and among NGOs, there was a lack of coherent policy on capacity development, and hence there was a need for this learning exercise.

They were using an open-systems approach – not defining the concept of capacity in advance, but recognising the variety of different organisational experiences of and perspectives on capacity. At the same time, it was acknowledged that organisations are embedded in wider systems that transcend geographical levels (local, national and global), so their units of analysis were organisational networks and systems, and they included both internal and external factors. Capacity development in this context is a non-linear process influenced by a range of internal and external factors – and the ways in which these factors may change in concert, so that changes in an organisation's capacity may interact with changes in outputs and outcomes. Donor support is only one of several such factors. Analysis of location-specific circumstances and external and internal factors therefore formed a substantial part of the evaluation.

The study aimed to produce 30 case studies with field studies completed by mid-2010 and a synthesis report of seven overall evaluations. (More information including the terms of reference is available on the Dutch Foreign Ministry website: www.minbuza.nl/nl/organisatie/evaluatie/IOB.lopende-onderzoeken.html .)

Discussion focused on the challenge of developing indicators from a Southern perspective rather than a Dutch policy perspective and finding an overall framework within which to bring together the 30 diverse case studies and seven different evaluations. IDRC was also finalising a four-year study on capacity building that has used a similar approach to come up with shared definitions and understandings (www.idrc.ca/evaluation_capacity). Finding evaluators who could resist starting from a donor perspective was another challenge. There was concern that with the Accra agenda for action identifying capacity building as a priority and core component, that there was a danger of it being incorporated as a technocratic method.

Evaluation of an 'emergent' programme, Mike Powell, IKM Emergent Research and Communications Programme,

IKM Emergent (IKME) is a five-year emergent research and communications programme with numerous non-linear factors in how it is run (see www.ikmemergent.net). Mike outlined the ways in which the programme has drawn on complexity theory from design through to evaluation.

- IKME is delivered by a relatively open network of researchers and practitioners, some within organisations, some independent.
- Research relates to the programme agenda but what is done, how and by whom is decided through processes of iteration and discussion.
- Supporting the development of a programme of related interests of network members is part of the overall strategy for both the research and the communication parts of the programme.
- Building the network is part of the communications strategy.
- Responding to 'opportunities' is part of the communications strategy.

In IKME's iterative process, some funds are deliberately left to 'fold in' people already doing interesting relevant work, and there is room to deviate from original or previous plans. The programme aims to work in a 'complexity-aware' way and recognises that there are massive implications for the management of information within development organisations. This goes beyond the question of 'theories of change' and the partnerships and alliances (and information exchanges) necessary to achieve them. It is also a question of how programme and project work is conceived, planned, implemented and evaluated.

Mike shared two project models which emphasised the iterative nature of the programme and the need to work out from particular examples of work and locally generated innovations that are brought into dialogue with other parts of the network. In this way what needs to be evaluated also emerges from the process. IKME and their donors (Royal Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs) have a shared recognition that evaluating such an iterative and 'emergent' programme posed real methodological challenges. This led to the idea of having an evaluator 'accompany' the project to generate 'semi-detached' feedback throughout, rather than wait until the end of the project. The evaluation is being undertaken by Chris Mowles of Red Kite Partners, who is also a fellow of the Complexity and Management Centre at the University of Hertfordshire. Chris is using a variety of methods to follow what happens in the programme, with a particular interest in finding out from participants what they thought would happen, what actually happens, what happened that they did not expect and what value the process had for them. He is also interested in exploring the paradoxes inherent in a flexible and iterative programme trying to adhere to the planning and reporting norms of a significant bilateral donor, and he aims to provoke reflection and learning as much as provide definitive judgements (His initial report is available at <http://wiki.ikmemergent.net/index.php?title=File:0807-review.doc> .)

Discussion raised the question of whether this kind of ongoing evaluation feedback could be disruptive. Mike explained that the evaluator was not telling them how to proceed but sharing his observations on what they were doing. There might be tension between wanting a programme to allow things to be enabled to emerge and an evaluation where you wanted to know if what was expected to happen happened. Instead Mike suggested that they would see IKM Emergent as a success if, as well as plenty of interesting things happening, it could provide a coherent narrative of these many one-off activities, since they are more interested in establishing a set of critical questions than reporting impact.

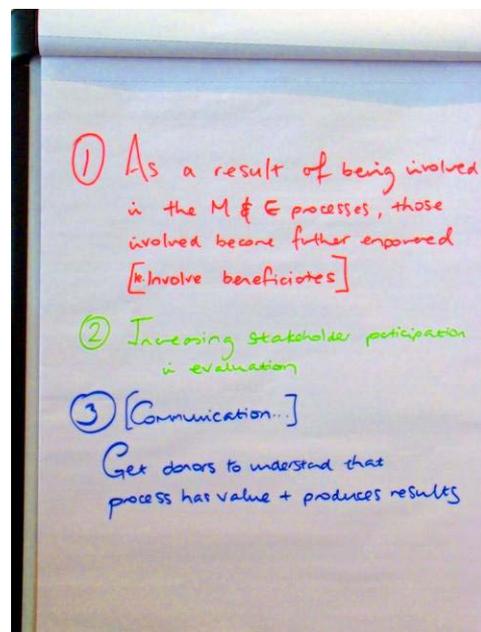
Scope for Changing Evaluation Practice

The next session consisted of two rounds of small group discussion that focused on the question: what scope is there for changing aid evaluation to account for complexity?

Round 1 What should be changing?

Small groups identified three things each that need to change in order to account for complexity, and recorded them on flipcharts. These were:

- *Incentives.* More rewards (donor funding) for prioritising or demonstrating learning over the achievement of results and for being honest about what worked and what did not work.
- *Evaluation approaches and ToRs.* Keep them simple. Participatory self-assessment should be self-reflective rather than judgement-oriented, but also lead to decisions around what to continue and what to ditch.
- *Don't take it too seriously.* It's out of your control anyway. Practitioners should think honestly about the bigger picture, and not focus too much on their own role. The report is the final goal in a complex process.
- Evaluation should be part of the whole project process.
- *Continuous review* in 'Design, Monitoring and Evaluation'. We should articulate the theory of change, and continually review of areas of complexity.
- The evaluator has a distinct but not independent role.
- *Legitimise through stories*, not through theory.
- There should be greater focus on monitoring and ongoing learning.
- Donors and evaluators are part of the system.



- We need to incorporate (or translate) concepts from complexity theory into very professional evaluations (building up a body of expertise).
- *Concrete, practical tools and guidance* on complexity-inspired evaluation are needed, as are local theories of change to counter top-down strategy.
- *Self evaluation and localisation*. Relocating responsibility for evaluation to Southern organisations.
- *Change the language*. Get words like 'emergence', 'non-linear', 'unpredictability', 'network' embedded.
- *Negotiation (by evaluators and commissioners)*. Use creative, multimedia, innovative communication instead of reports.
- *Put more emphasis on relationships and processes* rather than methods.
- Action research should replace or transform evaluation or allow it to evolve.
- Greater focus on conversations and stories, process, methods and communication.
- *There is a need to document and share* innovative approaches. Is there a role for this group in that process?
- *Expectations of and the approach to evaluation should be honest, realistic and explicit approach..* Who, why...what will happen?
- *Involve beneficiaries*. As a result of being involved in the monitoring and evaluation processes, those involved become further empowered. Increase stakeholder participation in evaluation.
- *Communication*. Persuade donors that this process has value and produces results.

Round 2: What are the limits of such changes? What might prevent such changes? As a result of discussion, which ideas stand up best to scrutiny?

A second round of discussion built on the first to explore the issues further and reflect on what might be barriers to the desired changes. A number of common issues emerged that threaded through the two rounds of discussion.

Strengthening the focus on ongoing learning

Evaluation should be much more explicitly focused on ongoing learning and on adaptation of development programming, and several groups suggested that incentives needed to be changed in order to reward learning and honesty about challenges and mistakes. Learning was often explicitly on donor agendas, but not necessarily clearly defined or encouraged, given pressures to produce 'results' and pre-determined objectives. It may be useful to require applications for funding to explicitly address how the complexity of development processes will be accommodated in the proposed work. A greater emphasis on ongoing monitoring, rather than discrete evaluations at the end of projects was also recommended.

Recognising the reality of development is complex and planning should be done accordingly

Both organisations and donors needed to work in more flexible ways to accommodate the complex nature of development processes. Planning should explicitly address complexity at the outset and provide institutional mechanisms for adapting programmes to address shifting contexts and circumstances and to take account of unexpected outcomes. Being explicit about the expected theory of change was still important, but with a recognition that it may need to evolve and change as the programme unfolds in a dynamic context. The theory of change needs to be subject to continual review with those affected and involved. There are already a number of tools to aid such ongoing reflection, and there may need to be a greater emphasis on recording the actual activities and changes of direction as the programme goes along. At the same time, more advocacy was needed to promote the recognition of complex realities and their different evaluation needs in the face of entrenched interests and ways of doing things, as well as to resist the pressure for clear 'accountability' and audit.

Better promoting the understanding, practical application and profile of complexity-based approaches

In a number of ways participants felt that complexity-based approaches needed a clearer, more confident profile. More case studies of successful applications of complexity theory concepts are needed. Some of the language and terms needed to be demystified or more clearly explained. More of the concepts of complexity need to be turned into practical approaches, and examples more widely shared. It was important to avoid the impression that 'we have no idea of what we'll do or what will happen', but to be explicit about the need for robust processes for planning, reviewing and being responsive that are based on evidence and learning in the face of a complex reality. Part of the task was perhaps to promote a more realistic approach to evaluation – recognising the limits of what can be done, while emphasising the learning process, adaptation and use of evaluation findings to make programmes responsive in the real world

Making greater use of innovative methods for multimedia documentation and communication, including stories

Moving beyond written reports to make use of alternative forms of documentation, such as audio, photography and video was discussed. Action research processes may make use of a variety of different ways of 'sense-making' and evidence, to promote reflection and evaluation. Alternative kinds of reporting, such as 'ten things to remember' rather than the usual narrative may also be useful. Stories are valuable because they can convey complex and ambiguous realities in a concise way and help illustrate and enhance other forms of data and evidence. Methods such as Most Significant Change can add rigour to the gathering of stories that goes some way towards addressing issues of power that may subtly guide which stories are recounted and recorded. One group focused on the way evaluation itself can be seen as an ongoing dialogue.

Attention to who evaluation is for and who needs to be involved

It was stressed across the groups that those most affected by development processes should participate in designing and conducting evaluation. Participatory evaluation was seen as indispensable, given the importance of local understandings of context and the need for local ownership of the evaluation process to make it sustainable. The value of developing evaluation in the direction of an ongoing action research process was also recognised by some, drawing on examples of Danny Burns's work. Ensuring that evaluation has a 'utilisation' focus is focused on lessons for the future was also a concern for some, and finding ways to link across the levels so that evaluation was useful for beneficiaries, organisations and donors was important. In the latter case, there was a need to balance the participation of local people to bring relevance and ownership, with the relative independence of an outside perspective.

Recommendations for change – Plenary feedback

From the preceding two rounds of discussion, participants selected key areas for change to accommodate complexity that appeared most promising.

Negotiation and mainstreaming: As evaluators and people who commission evaluation, we can take a bolder role.

We should incorporate some of the concepts and approaches from complexity theory into evaluations in practical ways, even if new language like 'emergence', 'non-linear', 'unpredictability' and 'networks' may need to be clarified and demystified. We need to recognise that the starting point of evaluations needs to be different. We could be creative by using reporting that is innovative and multimedia rather than traditional written reports.

Discussion of this point emphasised the need to avoid unhelpful language even if the concepts were important. Some delegates did not like the term 'emergence'.

Need to document and share innovative approaches.

More concrete examples of innovation in this area are needed and more of them need to be accessible and publicly available than are at present. Which audiences do we need to reach with persuasive examples of working with complexity theory, and can we usefully draw on examples from a range of different fields? There needs to be a greater degree of honesty and more willingness to share mistakes, as well as a recognition that, while resources are often a barrier, we may also limit ourselves if we continue with traditional ways of doing things.

Discussion focused on whether those at the meeting could begin to build up a network of knowledge about who is trying what in terms of complexity and evaluation. One suggestion was that if each participant of the workshop committed to sharing two examples of innovative work we would immediately be in a stronger position.

Articulate theory of change and continual review of areas of complexity.

We should make explicit some of the implicit ideas or thoughts going on, and review and adapt the theory of change regularly, stating in the terms of reference that it will need to be revisited. The learning from such an approach can help to maintain institutional memory and help programmes to adapt to circumstances. Such a combination of clear expectation and ongoing monitoring creates more clarity about assumptions and areas of uncertainty, which guides the focus of ongoing monitoring. While the log-frame has been popular for providing a sense of being in control, it may actually have been counter-productive and eroded trust – as it has in the realm of public services. Strategic action research provides an alternative that involves continual review of the theory of change and small cycles of enquiry which feed into the overall macro-change process.

It was acknowledged that a range of approaches, even those apparently more participatory can be used in a top-down way, although some frameworks had more room to allow for complexity – such as Outcome Mapping. While log-frames had often been criticised for being used as an instrument of power, it was important to see how different approaches could contribute to the empowerment of organisations in the South. For some, an important measure of the value of complexity approaches was whether they could contribute to such empowerment, as was how much the approach could better bridge the differences between the real world and the world of reporting.

Relocate responsibility for evaluation to Southern organisations, including ongoing learning process.

The importance of a more bottom-up process that involves people in design and implementation of evaluation fits well with the emphasis in complexity theory of only being able to see parts of the whole system and capture its concrete reality in particular local contexts. Discussion focused on the fact that local action however could also be dominated by those with a 'Western' education or by local power interests.

Need to focus evaluation more toward learning and less toward results and link this to incentives and rewards (e.g. around securing future funding).

It is important to have trust and honesty, and to share failures as well as successes. Rewards and incentives were needed to encourage people to talk about challenges and work to overcome them. There is a need to improve ways of incorporating learning and demonstrate how to do this. There needs to be leadership from the top to make these changes.

Next steps in the meeting series

The full workshop report is available on the IKM Emergent website:

<http://wiki.ikmemergent.net/index.php/Documents>

Discussion of complexity can be joined on the IKM Emergent workspace:

<http://wiki.ikmemergent.net/index.php/Workspaces:7. Complexity>

A complexity-related blog on complexity-related themes such as networks, leadership and participation, connected to a book being written by Ben Ramalingham and Harry Jones can be found at <http://aidontheedge.info/>

The next session in the emergent set of meetings on 'complexity theory, aid and development' will be on complexity and conversations in October 2009. Another meeting will be in early 2010. It may be hosted by IKM Emergent in The Hague, The Netherlands, where there is a community of interest. Further details will be available on the IKM complexity workspace

We have learnt of a related initiative: BOND organisational learning group and donors (including Comic Relief, The Diana, Princess of Wales Memorial Fund, Bernard van Leer Foundation) are developing guidelines on evaluation. This report could possibly feed into them and make practical suggestions.