

20 October 2016



Setting the scene

The fourth and final Monitoring and Evaluation colloquium for 2016 was held on the 20 October 2016 and involved a range of CSI practitioners, funders and NGOs. At this meeting, Benita Williams of Benita Williams Evaluation Consultants gave a presentation on systems thinking in monitoring and evaluation, and how it can be used to support sustainable projects.



Overview of presentations

For the purpose of this presentation, the focus was on three key themes:

1. Sustainable development
2. Theories of change
3. Systems thinking

Benita began her presentation by giving a background to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Officially known as 'Transforming our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development', the SDGs is a set of 17 goals for the world's future, through to 2030. The goals are backed up by a set of 169 detailed targets and were negotiated over a two-year period through the United Nations. A total of 193 nations agreed on the goals, on 25 Sept 2015.



i) Why focus on sustainable development and what does it mean?

According to OECD, sustainability is concerned with measuring whether the benefits of an activity are likely to continue after donor funding has been withdrawn. When evaluating the sustainability of a programme or

a project, it is useful to consider the following questions:

- To what extent did the benefits of a programme or project continue after donor funding ceased?
- What were the major factors which influenced the achievement or non-achievement of sustainability of the programme or project?

The difference between sustainable development and development is that development focuses on results. Sustainable development focuses on process.

Sustainable development looks at processes that will leave something behind once the donors depart (e.g. changed behaviours, improved skills, useable resources) which will have a long term impact on the beneficiaries (e.g. teachers, schools and ultimately learners). Benita remarked that funders often want to know about the results and impact at the onset of the project.

The prioritising of results over process often leaves these communities worse off, mostly because expectations change along the way as processes are manoeuvred to meet the anticipated end result. Benita emphasised that process cannot be divorced from results. One needs to look at small milestones along the way, as these form part of the end results.

A result is 'a frozen piece of process' – and things continue afterwards – 'sustainability' can only be judged later on down the road – only thing upfront is to see if there have been processes put in place.

An example would be a school technology initiative. Components of such an initiative would be gadgets and training of teachers with the hope of getting smarter children. However, such projects are not sustained because of factors such as wear and tear of tablets, no replacement plans, lack of plans for training new teachers etc. How you make the technology available and how you train the teachers determines whether you will have a sustained result.

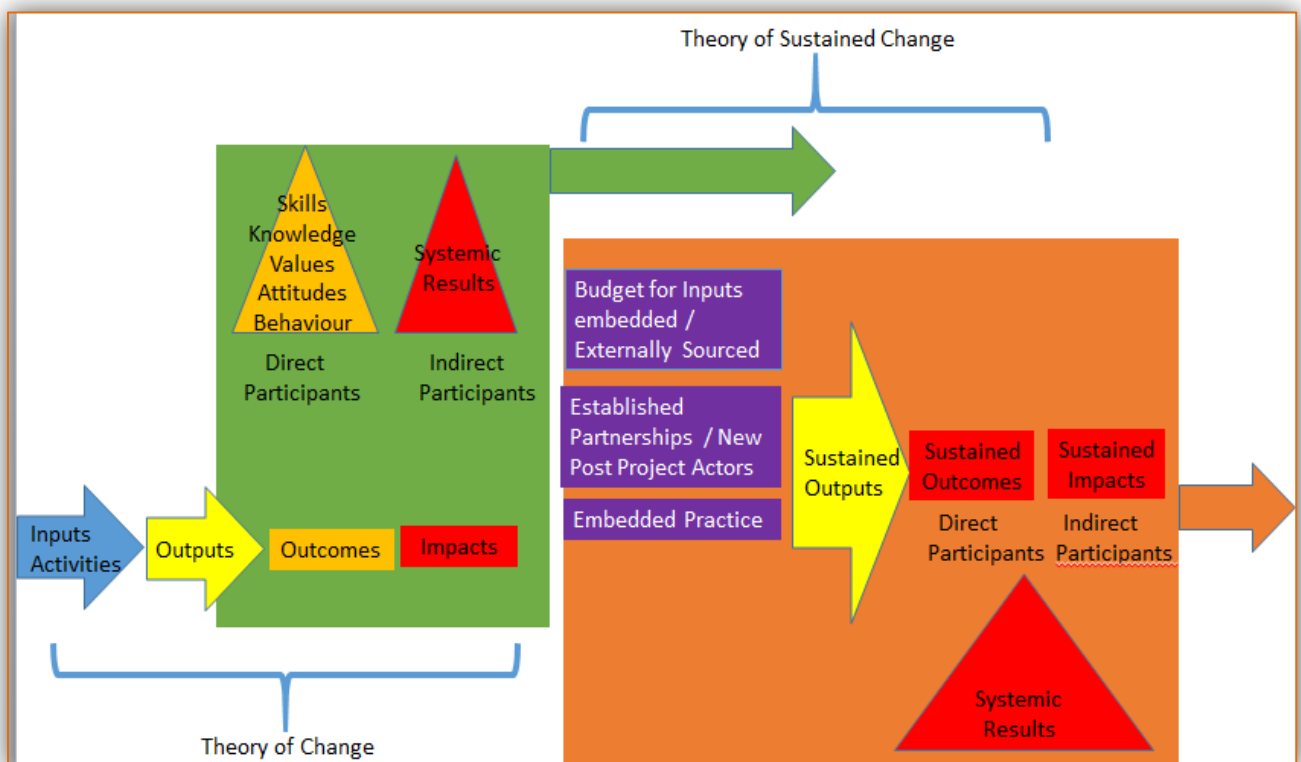
ii) Theory of change

Benita noted that the design of every project should be based on a theory of change. Linking the theory of change to sustainability means that you have to build it in and embed it in the budget at the planning stage. Some key learnings shared around designing a theory of change include:

- ❖ A Theory of Change indicates which inputs and activities relate to different kinds of programme results. These results are typically either observable through the individuals involved in the programme, or with a broader range of indirectly affected participants. For example, a teacher is trained to give better feedback on assignments, which results in better learning outcomes for learners.
- ❖ These individual changes, or the effects they have on the broader system, may be sustained without any additional input from the programme. For instance, if a teacher is now better at giving feedback on marked assignments, it is possible that this behaviour will be sustained even if the project comes to an end. This means more learners benefit from good feedback on assignments.

- ❖ Without support or continued encouragement, teachers might regress back to their previous practices of giving inadequate feedback - especially if the reason why they were giving inadequate feedback in the first place was not because they did not know how to give feedback, or did not think it wasn't important, but because they are generally too busy to be able to do it consistently.
- ❖ If a project or programme's activities become embedded in the system, this may lead to replication and more sustained change. A new set of sustaining inputs or activities may be necessary – i.e. subject Advisors and HODs demand to see better feedback from teachers on assignments every time they check in with a teacher, learners ask for good feedback, universities now train pre-service teachers on how to give good feedback to learners. All of this may require resources, active agents and changed ways of doing.

The diagram below illustrates the transition from a theory of change to a theory of **sustained** change.



Sound bites.....

A Theory of Sustained Change may help to identify which inputs and activities relate to different kinds of sustained programme results.

Together, the Theory of Change and the Theory of Sustained Change may help us to plan for better results that are sustained after interventions end.

iii) What is Systems Thinking and how can it help?

Benita explained that in systems thinking, everything is connected. Systems thinking involves examining the linkages and interactions between the components that comprise the whole intervention project. Some key points to remember when integrating systems thinking into designing interventions include:

Feedback loops: Positive feedback strengthens a pattern, negative feedback reduces a pattern. How feedback is provided, or not, may influence the sustainability of the outcome.

Environmental conditions: An outcome may or may not be sustained, depending on other conditions in the environment. For example, if a project on school governance is initiated soon after new legislation on school governance is enacted, it is more likely that those who are involved in the initiative will continue to build on the school governance work. If no further change is implemented, it is likely that an outcome may be sustained.

Adaptation: The systems we are evaluating are most likely evolving over time; they adapt with the context. Following on the example above on school governance, one can look for two patterns of adaptation: (1) the system evolves, because the environment is changing (e.g. the education policy changed), or (2) the system acts to change the environment. A programme trains school governors and those actors in the system who are responsible for training them. After the initiative the training of school governors becomes institutionalised.

Critical paths/elements: There may be some critical paths or critical elements in a system, and identifying them may be key for providing an explanation for the evaluation findings. An example would be involving someone who does training of school governors, who then moves to a National Education department where he / she writes policy which also influences the bigger system.

Aggregate of small change in many programs: For instance: (1) The intervention showed a small amount of change, and other interventions did as well; (2) Many education programmes have taken place within the same geopolitical entity. The aggregate impact of all these small changes may account for what an evaluation team finds.

Distributions: How did the programme affect different groups differently, or different areas, or both? The extent to which the results are distributed are important. For example, there is a higher likelihood that a difference will be found if an intervention addresses all 20 schools in a district, as opposed to 20 schools across the country.

Phase shifts: It is a characteristic of systems that sometimes they change incrementally and then sudden dramatic change appears. For example, evidence may show how incremental changes may have taken place for seven years, then in year eight (which is the year of the intervention) the change increased dramatically.

Perhaps incorporating Systems Thinking into our Theories of Change, may help us to design better, more sustainable programmes, and do more useful evaluations.

To access the presentation, click [here](#).



Discussion

The following issues were raised in response to Benita's presentation.

- ❖ In an ideal world, programme design and M&E design should be done at the same time. However, our funding landscape does not allow for this due to limited funding. We need to change our own practices in our proposals: as project implementers, we need to punt our models, find a sympathetic donor, and make sure we gather evidence to prove our case. This will also inform future projects going forward.
- ❖ Initial project implementation and M&E design need to look at whole project. The plans have to be directly linked to the log frames.
- ❖ Projects frequently don't have an exit strategy. This should be done at the start, and include a sense of how the benefits of the project will be sustained.
- ❖ There is a need to incorporate systems concepts into Theory of Sustained Change. This will help with sustainable projects.
- ❖ The Department of Monitoring & Evaluation (DPME) insists that there is evaluation of the design government programmes in order to ensure that programmes are of good quality.
- ❖ We need advocacy for M&E as a vital element of programme interventions. The benefits of M&E need to be clearly articulated so that it becomes accepted practice for M&E funding to be built into projects (and their budgets), and not simply tagged on as an afterthought.
- ❖ Evidence gathered by M&E can help inform decision making by policy makers and funders. However, evaluators often feel that many of those involved in projects ignore the evidence. A campaign for demystifying M&E as well as advocating for it could help programme implementers, funders, researchers and project beneficiaries as a whole.
- ❖ The issue of evidence is also linked to questions around what can be measured, what can't be measured, and the complexity of whether or not you can attribute learnings, changes or impacts to the project intervention or to other factors. Different evidence-gathering tools in a project gather different kinds of data and these methodologies (especially those related to attribution) and analyses can be very technical. Ideally any programme intervention should include technical evaluators (especially for the quantitative data) as well as the researchers, who often tend to focus on the qualitative data.

Check-out.....

CoP participants checked out with comments such as the following:

-
- **Take system boxes as criteria for self-evaluation**
 - **We need to demystify and advocate for monitoring & evaluation**
 - **Systems thinking accommodates complexity**
 - **Sustainability should be taken into account during planning**

-
- Appreciate small changes in pushing the system
- Life isn't linear
- I am an optimist of the world, but pessimist of reason. We still have huge challenges
- Change starts small and grows big
- Programmes respond to environment
-

Annexure

Surname	Organisation
Benita Williams	Benita Williams Evaluation Consultants
Benter Okelo	BRIDGE
Christina Nchapha	Sci - Bono
Cynthia Xoli Malinga	Sasol Inzalo Foundation
Daleen Botha	Benita Williams Evaluation Consultants
Edcent Williams	Independent
Helmut Bertelsmann	Funda Afrika
Leticia Taimo	Khulisa Management Services
Marina Burger	Self
Melissa King	BRIDGE
Moipone Malkeka	GDE
Najma Agherdien	SAIDE
Nic borgese	enke: Make Your Mark
Phathu Sadiki	GDE
Phathumusa Mdladla	Sci-bono
Plaatjie Mashego	
Thandi Lekeba	StudyTrust
Tracy September	StudyTrust
Zarina Khan	Facilitator
Zenobia	Petersen
Anacletta	Koloko