WHAT WE KNOW SO FAR ABOUT

Sets of Principles for Evaluating Systems Change Efforts

The idea of using principles to guide evaluation is not new. Evaluators learned a long time ago that it was difficult to describe the "best" design or methods: an evaluation to determine if a Bangladeshi micro-lending program is replicable in a New York City neighbourhood will differ from one conducted by a Health Ministry in the United Kingdom, that uses rapid improvement cycles to reduce wait times in hospital emergency rooms. There is an endless variety in issues, interventions, user questions, available resources, evaluator skill, etc. It is impossible to arrive at a single design that can address all of them.

As a result, evaluators have increasingly focused on developing universal principles that identify key considerations to keep in mind when carrying out an assessment. It is then up to evaluators and innovators to figure out how to apply these principles, case by case. Take, for example, the simple principle: "We cannot evaluate everything we want to assess, so we must focus our attention on what is important." How that looks in practice depends entirely on the unique context of an initiative.
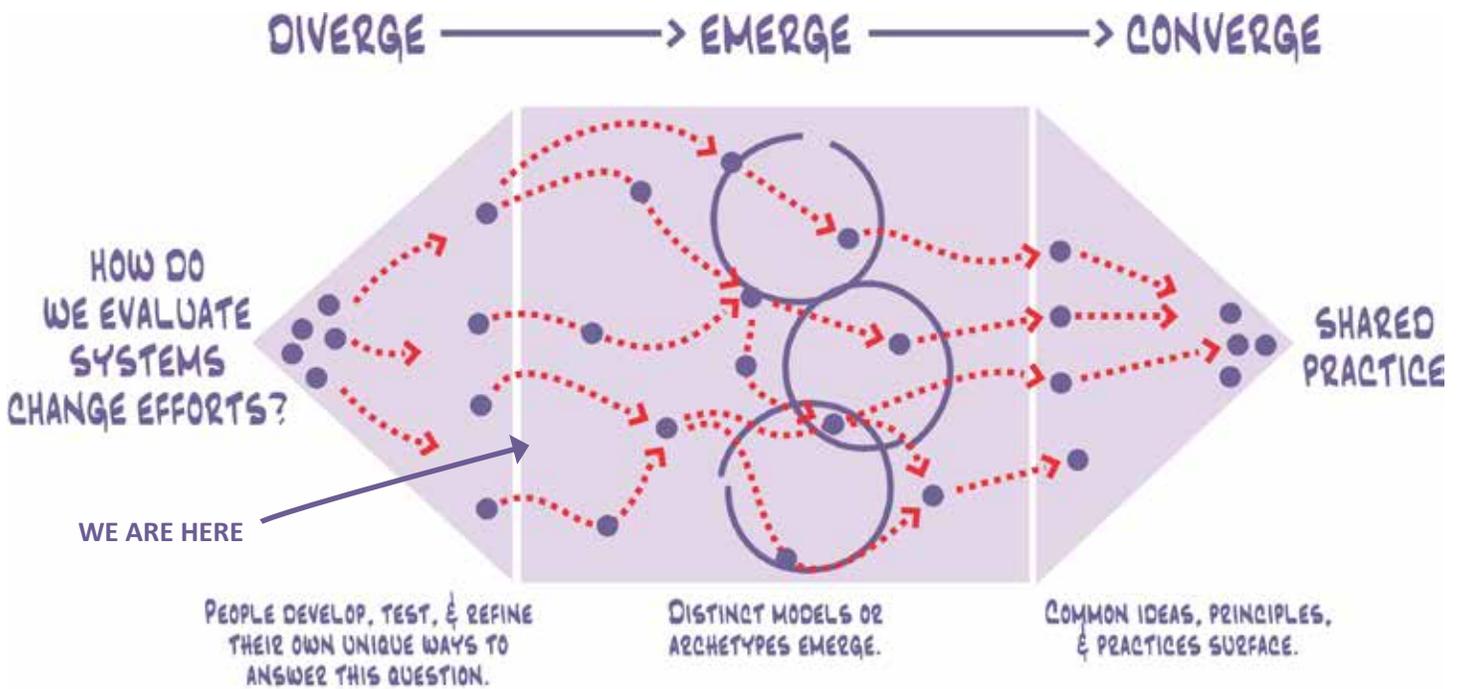
Evaluation principles are now popping up everywhere. The Hewlett Foundation created its own set to help design internal (and contracted) evaluations of its granting programs

(Twersky & Lindblom 2007). In Canada, the Collaborative Opportunities to Value Evaluation group has developed principles to guide collaborative approaches to assessment (Shulha e al. 2016). Fetterman (1994) has put together a set of principles to guide an empowerment model of evaluation. Once you start looking for evaluation principles, you can see them everywhere.

Yet, despite this mainstreaming of principles-based approaches to evaluation, there has been relatively little work on creating principles to guide the evaluation of systems change efforts. The reason is simple: evaluation practitioners are a few steps behind the social innovators' rapid and widespread adoption of system change strategies. It's a big game of "catch up."

Thankfully, there has been progress. The table below describes three sets of principles developed by leaders in evaluation in North America (and beyond). They are excellent: I refer to them regularly. However, I also draw on my own set which I created and refined 2001-2011 while directing the Vibrant Communities initiative, a network of 15 urban collaboratives seeking to reduce poverty. Much of its work concerned changing

Principles	Description
Developmental Evaluation Exemplars: Principles in Practice (Patton, McKegg, & Wehipeihana 2015	8 principles to guide complexity-based, developmental evaluation, one of which includes "systems" lenses.
Evaluating Complexity: Propositions for Practice (Preskill, Gopal, Mack, Cook 2014)	9 propositions that are embedded in a complexity world view of stubborn social, economic, and environmental challenges.
Framework for Evaluating Systems Change (Coffman 2007).	11 principles focused on systems change, with an extra focus on human services systems.

DIVERGE ——————> EMERGE ——————> CONVERGE

HOW DO WE EVALUATE SYSTEMS CHANGE EFFORTS?

WE ARE HERE

SHARED PRACTICE

PEOPLE DEVELOP, TEST, & REFINE THEIR OWN UNIQUE WAYS TO ANSWER THIS QUESTION.

DISTINCT MODELS OR ARCHETYPES EMERGE.

COMMON IDEAS, PRINCIPLES, & PRACTICES SURFACE.

the systems that underlie poverty. We struggled mightily to escape the constraints of traditional program evaluation and instead to craft an approach that allowed us to understand and track progress in changing systems.

The 15 principles described below are the latest iteration of that thinking. That being said, they remain works in progress. It's still early days in the development of these ideas. Practitioners and evaluation writers are still "learning-as-they-go." The practice of systems change evaluation is somewhere between the "divergent" and "emergent" phase. So evaluators and innovators alike should be informed by these principles, but feel confident to develop, test, and refine refining their own approaches as well.

15 Principles

	Characteristics of System Change Efforts	Evaluation Principles	Illustrative Practices & Methods
Framing Interventions			
1	Innovators are often unclear about the characteristics of the system they want to change.	Map the system that social innovators want to change with "user-friendly" techniques.	• Causal Loop Diagrams • Stakeholder Analysis • Critical Systems Heuristics • Ecological Framework
2	Innovators may struggle to describe their change strategy and hoped-for outcomes.	Conceptualize a strategy using whatever method innovators find most useful and fits the "stage" of their efforts.	• Emergent Learning Tables • Principles Focused Evaluation • Umbrella Strategy • Theory of Change
Designing Evaluations			
3	There are multiple users (e.g., innovators, partners, funders, those most affected) each with their own focus, questions, and preferences.	Employ a design orientation to evaluation, focusing on user questions, preferences, and context to inform the evaluation.	• User Profile • Evaluation Canvas • Scope of Work/Design Brief • Utilization-Focused Checklist
4	Social innovators typically have more evaluation questions than can be addressed within the time and budget available.	Prioritize "mission critical" evaluation questions and users.	• Distinguish between primary and secondary users • Utilization-Focused Checklist

Characteristics of System Change Efforts	Evaluation Principles	Illustrative Practices & Methods
5 Social innovators and evaluators feel pressure to adopt "gold standard" evaluation designs in all situations.	Apply a level of methodological rigour that matches the purpose and questions of the evaluation and available resources and expertise.	• Canadian Evaluation Society Standards • American Evaluation Association Program Evaluation Standards • "Bricolage" or "Cooking" Metaphor
6 Innovators usually change their initiative – in minor and major ways – in response to new learnings, shifts in context and arrival of new actors.	Continually adapt the evaluation design to match the evolution of social innovators' strategy, expected results, and questions.	• Flexible/Iterative Evaluation Plan • Agile Design Techniques • Adaptive Learning • Problem-Driven Iterative Adaptation
7 Efforts often involve many diverse stakeholders with different cultures, worldviews, power, and stakes in an issue.	Engage stakeholders at all stages of design and implementation, ensuring culturally-relevant methods and measures to address power imbalances.	• Participatory Evaluation • Empowerment Evaluation • Democratic/Social Justice Evaluation • Indigenous Evaluation • Gender Analysis
Capturing Outcomes		
8 There is often a lag time between activities and results.	Provide innovators with real time feedback on their progress in intermediate outcomes.	• Interim Indicators of Progress • Sentinel Indicators • Process Monitoring of Impacts
9 Many results are difficult – even impossible – to capture with quantitative data and methods alone.	No numbers without narrative, no narratives without numbers.	• Mixed Methods design • Most Significant Change • Outcome Mapping • Case Studies
10 All interventions into systems generate a splatter of intended and unintended effects.	Seek out all outcomes – anticipated an unanticipated – in an evaluation.	• Ripple Effect Mapping • Outcome Harvesting • Unanticipated Outcome Budget
11 Involve changes to systems that are influenced by a variety of factors, not just the activities of innovators.	Focus on estimating social innovators' contribution – rather than attribution – to outcomes.	• Contribution Analysis • Stakeholder Estimates • Counterfactual Scenarios • General Elimination Methods
12 Diverse stakeholders usually have unique perspectives on the value, significance, and effectiveness of changes.	Facilitate a process where stakeholders can provide 360 degree "judgement" of results.	• Evaluation Rubrics • Collaborative Outcomes Reporting • Beneficiary Assessment • Democratic Evaluation
13 "Defence immune responses" can make change short-lived: systems can easily "snap back" into old patterns.	Be vigilant in monitoring systems changes over time.	• Bellwether monitoring • Context Monitoring • Adaptive Management Cycles
Learning & Accountability		
14 The more engaged innovators become in an effort to change a system, they more they learn about the challenge, the system, their strategy, and themselves.	Approach "strategic learning" – the gathering, making sense of, and data-informed adaptation of strategy – as seriously as measuring progress.	• After Action Reviews • Learning Memos/ Lessons Learned Report • Strategic Learning Debriefs • Blandin Foundation Mountain of Accountability
15 Efforts to change systems are full of dead ends, failed plans, tough breaks, and mistakes.	Embrace failure as inevitable, and treat them as opportunities for learning and adaptation.	• Post Mortems • Failure Fairs • Failure Reports

Some Extra Assistance

The case might be clear for employing the 15 principles described above, and the illustrative practices and methods offer some insights as to their application. Still, many social innovators and evaluators will appreciate more grounding in a principles-focused approach. Michael Quinn Patton's latest work, *Principles Focused Evaluation: The Guide* (2017), offers a systematic description of how to develop, apply, and even evaluate principles-focused approaches.

Key References

Coffman, J. 2007. A Framework for Evaluating Systems Initiatives. Build Initiative Evaluation Symposium. Retrieved from: http://buildinitiative.org/WhatsNew/ViewArticle/tabid/96/ArticleId/621/Framework-for-Evaluating-Systems-Initiatives.aspx

Fetterman, D. M. 1994. Steps of Empowerment Evaluation: From California to Cape Town. Evaluation and Program Planning, 17(3), 305–313. Retrieved from https://www.betterevaluation.org/en/plan/approach/empowerment_evaluation

Shulha, L, Cousins, B., Whitmore, E., Al Hudib, H. 2016. Principles to Guide Collaborative Approaches to Evaluation. American Journal of Evaluation. Vol. 27. No. 2. Retrieved from: https://evaluationcanada.ca/news/7515

Patton, M.Q., McKegg, K., Wehipeihana, N. (editors). 2016. Developmental Evaluation Exemplars: Principles in Practice. Guilford Press. Retrieved from: https://www.tamarackcommunity.ca/latest/developmental-evaluation-exemplars-principles-in-practice

Patton, M.Q. 2017. Principles-Focused Evaluation: The Guide. Guilford Press. Retrieved from: https://www.tamarackcommunity.ca/evaluating-impact-principles-focused-evaluation

Preskill, H., Gopal, S., Mack, K. and Cook, J. 2014. Evaluating Complexity: Propositions for Practice. Retrieved from: https://www.fsg.org/publications/evaluating-complexity

Twersky, F., Lindblom, K. 2012. Evaluation Principles & Practices: An Internal Working Paper. The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. Retrieved from: https://hewlett.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/EvaluationPrinciples-FINAL.pdf

For more information on most of the illustrative practices and methods, go to the Better Evaluation website (https://www.betterevaluation.org/). Those that are not there can be found through a simple website search.

What we Know So Far is a series of documents that summarize some of the latest thinking or developments in the field of social innovation and community change. This particular document was developed in cooperation with Tamarack Institute as part of its efforts to build capacity for community change makers.

http://here2there.ca/

http://www.tamarackcommunity.ca/