**AEA Conference Evaluation 2014**

**Documentation of Think Tank**

**‘Realizing the Vision: What Helps and Hinders the Use of Systems ideas in Evaluation...Voices from the Global Field’**

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**BACKGROUND**

The application of systems ideas to evaluation has been discussed for over a decade. So what’s happened in that time? What has helped the application and what has hindered the application? What can evaluators do to help the helps help and hinder the hinders hindering?

These were the core questions of a session held at the 2014 American Evaluation Association Conference. The 100 or so participants were divided into 8 tables with a balance between those who were ‘experienced’ (ie had a story to tell about applying systems ideas to evaluation) and those who were ‘interested’ (ie had the job of listening and commenting on what they heard).

The first phase of the discussion explored what ‘helped’ and ‘hindered’, and a second phase focused on what can be done to enhance the helps and reduce the impact of the hindering factors. This was done with pairs of tables – and the information below is reported on a table by table pair basis.

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**SUMMARY**

Here is our summary of the session. It may not be yours, so please read the original text also

**Summary of main points from the Think Tank**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **What Helps** | **What Hinders** |
| * Fits with (complex) realities experienced by evaluators * Visualizations to help capture complex realities * Involvement of stakeholders, evaluations with participatory approaches * Positive experience with several tools and methods (e.g. CLD, SNA, SSM) * Be pragmatic not dogmatic about use of tools * Acknowledgement that other approaches, framings are not working. | * Clients who do not know about systems, are accustomed to linear paradigm * Restrictions of evaluation assignments (e.g. time, money, flexibility) * Language and technical jargon makes systems ideas hard to communicate * Uncertainty in applying systems ideas (how to do?, when to know that they are applied properly?) * Systems ideas can be threatening (e.g. for clients, evaluators) * Unwillingness to shift perspectives or deliberate on boundaries |
| **Helping the helps** | **Hinder the hindrances** |
| * Train evaluators on systems ideas (and on choosing appropriate methods) * Emphasize the simplification aspect of systems ideas (e.g. identifying leverage points) * Sensitize funders and commissioners of evaluation for the potential benefits * ‘Experimental’ and ‘pilot’ are good labels for selling systems ideas in evaluations * Incorporate systems ideas already at the design stage of projects / programs | * Make good examples of successful applications available more widely * Better communicate advantages (also involving funders / clients of successful applications) * Elaborate / disseminate material on systems thinking in simple language * Emphasize the need for expertise in using systems ideas, define quality criteria * Regard systems thinking as a mental model (e.g. for redefining performance criteria) |

**WHAT HELPS?**

**Tables 1&2**

* Not linear, fits with reality
* Look at what makes a system work
* Works with participatory programs
* Ask questions from systems approach to be more accessible to answer ‘why’ questions
* Barrier: How to select appropriate method
* Jargon can be problem
* ID (International Development?) needs to understand complexity, bring in experts to help ID approach to address needs
* Metaphor works well “Is it like this”, bathtub example
* Complexity – Systems Thinking (Interrelationships, Perspectives, Boundaries)
* Stakeholders / Stakes
* Use pictures, draw, maps
* Show people they have taken some steps
* Allowing people to express things in terms they know
* Experiential learning
* Works well in flat organizations
* Surfacing / challenging assumptions
* Showing successful examples
* Embed in organizational processes
* Interdisciplinary teams
* Be sensitive to context
* Willingness to change
* Not for minor interventions
* Tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty
* Need adequate resources – can be costly

**Helping the Helps**

* Mainstream a systems approach to reach the ‘silos’
* Cultural shift to connectivity
* Getting it to the design process
* Building internal capacity
* Making successful examples more available
* Capturing higher level (social fabric) outcomes
* Staying in the space long enough to let higher level outcomes emerge
* Evaluate evaluations using systems criteria
* Using monitoring data as a leverage
* Embracing discomfort
* Highlighting the essence vs. limited by logframe
* Highlighting systems (in Conferences) to bring more people to the table
* Growing comfort in ambiguity (where our role is)
* Scoping study / design stage before starting
* Having something to start with, so not from scratch (seed it)
* How to convince funders this is good / useful / more effective
* Comparing ‘old way’ and conundrums, convince to prove utility
* Speaking to alleviating pain / focusing on benefits.

**Tables 3&4**

* Partnerships between types of organizations
* Bringing together actors form different positions in a system
* Network mapping – revealing connections
* Making things visual
* Getting a ‘whole’ system in the room
* Using words participants are already familiar with (jargon is off-putting)
* For focusing efforts – system mapping and bringing additional perspectives in
* Involving stakeholders in defining the system
* Helps to have client receptive to systems orientation
* Big visual, color coding, amenable to adjustment by participants
* Matching degree of systems language to level of group
* Not being too dogmatic re. approach nor too obsessed with exact protocol e.g. adapting useful concepts such as CDE (Container, Difference, Exchange)
* Being pragmatic, not dogmatic
* Talking about identifying leverage points – places to intervene in a system (D. Meadows)
* Having a BIG idea or goal
* When having a BIG goal, use Causal –Loop Diagrams and systems mapping to identify leverage points
* Use mapping to bound the system in ways that clarify appropriate levels / areas for action
* Ask members of a system who are their influencers to push beyond boundaries
* Soft systems modeling good for identifying alternative approaches
* Outcome Mapping demarcates the program implementation people / organizations from the broader network, assigns change responsibilities
* Bring in quantitative folks to innovate with evaluators (e.g. GIS, Social Network Analysis, Agent-Based Modeling)
* More recognition of systems practitioners as having competency – systems work as an area of competence
* Advance the notion that the system needs to function

**Helping the Helps**

* Recognized training programs; more powerful if accessible, rigorous, affordable
* Evaluation Policy Task Force work with policy makers and funders to recognize systems approaches as robust and rigorous
* A shared understanding of quality application of systems approaches
* Accessible computer programs for mapping and creating visuals
* Some addressing of the contradictions between the training of evaluators who learned to focus on what’s doable and the broader scope of systems thinking. Limiting vs. wider scope
* Use the learnings form ‘traditional’ evaluations which uncover interactions as factors in program outcome as a means of building link to systems orientations (translation)
* Look at the policy / funding / regulatory systems that impede fast, useful research
* Find ways to reconcile the mindsets of ‘accountability’ and ‘systems’
* Look at the pathways for researchers to advance and make space in their work for recognition of interactive, unanticipated forces
* More systematic approach to change the culture and paradigm of management (have a change management strategy)
* Highlight examples of reconciling conventional approaches with systems
* Evaluate use of leverage points as a theory of change
* Promote systems approaches as germane to translational science and implementation evaluation

**Tables 5&6**

* Identify all stakeholders
* Go beyond traditional stakeholders
* Find points of friction or tension
* Simple visual representation of stakeholder relations, evaluation processes, paradigms
* Conscious drawing of boundaries of evaluations (facilitated, structured processes)
* Make space to find consensus on boundaries
* Building relationships with stakeholders
* Understanding the context(s)
* Good understanding of Theory of Change
* Involvement of stakeholders in determining evaluation questions
* Having necessary time and resources, technical expertise to do it
* Opportunity where stakeholders can leave silos
* Hear new aspects
* Professional graphic designers for visuals
* A convincing case for donors – quick wins, use
* Frame the informal as formal – already done subconsciously
* ‘Experimental’ or ‘pilot’ sell
* Willingness and readiness of stakeholders to engage, re-examine / challenge boundaries, step out of comfort zone
* Stakeholders hold already aligned paradigms or openness to them
* Being honest if not comfortable with boundary
* Getting right people in room, critical mass, respected champions
* Funder on same page, supportive
* Appreciate fears of stakeholders
* Non-jargon: Learning vs. evaluation, avoid systems jargon (boundaries etc.)
* Interdisciplinary site visits / training (understanding, common language)
* Crash existing meetings to get diverse stakeholder perspectives

**Helping the Helps**

* Sensitizing leaders, prepping them
* Tailored education, message, means, level dose
* Understanding a smorgasbord of tools, models
* Appreciation of global connectedness, threats, urgency, turf
* More educated stakeholders in evaluation
* Education for evaluators and better materials in Systems Thinking (how to do it?, tools, methodology, case studies)
* Michael Bamberger’s book
* BIG data, help with linkages, identifying trends, different dimensions
* Bring in multiple perspectives, voices around table
* Original program design needs systems thinking to include systems in the evaluation, evaluate on ground at the beginning.

**Tables 7&8**

1. Trust in systems ideas / approaches
2. Simple framework: Interrelationships, perspectives and boundaries
3. Clear definitions and communications
4. Interactions / co-creation practices to ensure buy-in
5. Previous efforts to understand what is happening (linear vs. dynamic / complex)
6. Increased familiarity of systems thinking
7. Availability of data – quantity!
8. Obvious inherent complexity of the evaluand
9. Use of broad theory-driven approach
10. Having a leader / champion
11. Resources ($)
12. Concrete successful examples
13. Availability of accessible training
14. Incremental approach to introduce systems thinking (little pieces)
15. No templates
16. Realistic expectations

**Helping the Helps**

1. Context and applied theories and models
2. Flexibility
3. Take time to clarify paradigms
4. Concept mapping exercise and valuing each stakeholder perspective / role
5. Funders along the way
6. Use appreciative inquiry in the process
7. Distill main systems thinking concepts to make understandable
8. Utilize software
9. Make sure champions understand / share benefits, limitations and appropriate usage of systems thinking (value, importance).

**WHAT HINDERS**

**Tables 1&2**

1. Translating terminology to evaluation users
2. Defining systems boundary
3. It is counter to formalized Western organization (silos)
4. Power relationships were hidden (and hiding) in the system
5. It seems ‚black-box-ish’ to users
6. I don’t understand the terminology
7. My recommendations end up phrased so generically they’re hard to use
8. Building shared systems understanding takes time
9. Lack of independent evaluators
10. Lack of non-systems option to use in non-complex situations (e.g. using systems ideas when it is not appropriate)
11. Not knowing to what extent to apply it
12. Coming in late to the game, when program wasn’t designed systemically
13. Very open-ended in terms of time, resources and deliverables
14. Data synthesis is very difficult (especially when I do it alone), different types of data have different standards of evidence
15. Requires more people
16. Evaluation client feels not responsible for larger system
17. Funders prescribe approaches that hinder systems ideas
18. Evaluators don’t evaluate systems
19. A systems evaluation may point to actions out of control
20. We are often held to evaluating indicators that are not fit for systems perspectives
21. We are afraid to propose systems ideas (my paycheck!)
22. Which systems ideas can attribute causation ?

**Hinder the hindrances[[1]](#footnote-1):**

12. Bring systems ideas anyway

1. Learn to describe evaluation as intervention not just observation

1,2. Learn to describe boundary setting as an ethical act

1,6 Learn to redefine ‚performance’ ‚criteria’ in systems thinking as a way of knowing

1. Learn to explain systems thinking as a mental model

1,6,5 Helping people find when they’re already thinking in systems (a.i. approach)

17. Change the frame of ‚evaluate’

21. From once-for-all to ongoing

13. Set evaluation milestones

13. Build system partner’ capacity to do ongoing evaluation / learning (indicators related to organizational capacity)

3. Frame the evaluation approach as ‚this is useful’ vs. ‚this is systems’

22. Build a dossier of strong evaluations that used system ideas to show contribution

14. Better methods for synthesizing data.

**Tables 3&4**

* Ignorance
* People who know it and reject it. Perception of individuals, ie. Think it complex, time consuming and expensive
* Narrow focus, narrow resources
* Having templates (restrictive)
* Not enough tools and techniques to apply in real life situations
* Complexity of ideas
* Not knowing when you’ve done it, or how to do it
* Lack of plain language translation
* Non-participatory focus – limited access to key stakeholders
* Cultural context, Language barriers
* Previous bad experience with system
* Pre-conceived notions, not being open to new information
* Best practices that do not allow context
* Budget – perception of time frame
* Desire for/or belief in a quick fix
* Evaluators being in love with methods
* People don’t want to be told all the things they have no control over
* Presentation approach / style

**Hinder the hindrances:**

* Need more knowledge on how systems thinking advances evaluation – and how to deal with ‚overwhelm factor’
* Speaking into the ‚listening’ – help the helpers to have better sense of the whole picture
* Better communication strategies – focus on what resonates with audience
* Get buy-in upfront from stakeholders and cultivate generative commitment
* More ongoing engagement throughout
* Have a general way of communicating value added
* Find advocates (ie- client testimonies)
* Help people through the application
* Evaluator lets group know that they don’t know their work AND would like to learn (authentic invitation), more points of entry for an authentic invitation of their gifts.

**Tables 5&6**

* Not everyone likes complicated diagrams, doesn’t always resonate with stakeholders
* Paradigm shift to complexity feels like a threatening world view
  + seen as either/or choice vs. expansion
  + can become professionally threatening, becomes political / emotional vs. technical shift
* Reality of programs often siloed
* Message of larger responsibility threatening, want to focus on sphere of control
* Hard to find space/time/energy for program people to reflect
* Mismatch between performance monitoring data and information from systems evaluation, sometimes data from monitoring not good/valid
* People want to know impact of their individual program, but how to get them to look at all programs together?
* Permission and funding for data from multiple sources and sectors – novel, hard, expensive; scope issue of multiple data systems
* Predominant perspective is linear, controllable program logic; narrows to program centric approach with more clear accountability, which isn’t always as clear with systems approach
* Slippage re. term ‚systems’, label can get confusing
* Pushback from GAO – also worldwide issue
* Theory of change different for program vs. systems – ignore multi-levels to achieve change at program level
* Need different gold standard for how we think about systems evaluation
* Takes longer to explain systems lens and get folks comfortable
* Scale up ideas, but socio-ecological suggests need for state / regional policy that supports
* Funders set up grants without a systems lens and don’t evaluate with systems perspective
* Funders require a linear logic model
* System approach is about constant dynamic change, so lack of understanding how to track outcomes with stakeholders
* Level of trust needed with evaluators because of emergent nature of evaluation and deliverables
* Systems thinking requires inclusivity and giving up control, can be threatening
* Don’t invest time for bringing together programs for systems-level learning
  + but they are sometimes competitors and won’t be transparent
  + internal organizational practices and trust to learn re. staying on path over time
* Willingness to engage / struggle with nonlinearity / ambiguity
* Systems thinking can seem hard / threatening; we’re not making it accessible very well

**Hinder the hindrances:**

* How to mix and match methods of evaluation, focusing on picking right tool for what we want to accomplish
* Set the right expectations
* Create the environment for right type of conversation, include right stakeholders
* Thinking of systems versus other types of thinking shuts down conversation, probably need both
* Have a narrative that makes loss of control less threatening and acknowledges accountability issues
* Being creative about accountability
* Unpack concepts of accountability with a systems lens
* Funders may not know how to do systems approaches, though they’d be willing
* Bring funders together to talk about how to do systems work
* FAQ: link b/w accountability and systems approaches
* How are evaluators communicating to each other re their successes in getting systems work funded; clarity around how we use data, how we see successes – create more clarity between evaluators and funders and get rid of mythologies. Communication problem between our communities?
* Sell the outcomes you gain with a systems perspective, not the process.

**Tables 7&8**

* Partners not willing to collaborate, won’t look at other perspective
* Expectation Management – Outcome Mapping
* Reductionist mentality vs. holistic /systems approach
* Avoid involving stakeholders with opposing perspectives
* Education – isolation (teachers in private ?), mobility of leadership
* Systems science – complex language
* Complexity discourages rigorous evaluation – too many moving parts (‚it can’t be measured’)
* Silo mentality
* Tendency to focus on narrow outcomes that may seem manageable
* Compliance mentality
* Reluctance to be evaluated on things they cannot control
* Only evaluate ‘safe’ areas
* Some hard to measure areas must use qualitative techniques
* Gap between understanding of evaluation outcomes and how intervention contributes to change at local/implementation level
* Conflicting complex paradigms – are very complex
* Poor execution of evaluation methods – lack of support
* Funders support programs not systems
* Evaluation capacity of stakeholders and evaluators to understand systems evaluation
* Quick change mentality
* Ability to define outcomes
* Lack of adequate training of evaluators about systems
* Difficulty in measuring distant outcomes
* Big egos of evaluators

**Hinder the hindrances:**

* Simplify the systems explanation language (common vocabulary)
* Better training / evaluator preparation
* Use visualization to help stakeholders see / understand the system to be evaluated
* Tie the system components to their day-to-day experience / relevance
* Identification of realistic systems outcomes
* Use a systems lens to help stakeholders be change agents
* Share results at all levels of the system
* Manage expectations
* Establish buy-in for systems approach to evaluation
* Build systems evaluation capacity
* Plan and design interventions that impact systems
* Systems approach to program design by funding agency – joint appropriation
* Evaluators should support policy makers / systems to allow constituents to leverage multiple resources / funding streams to address systems need.

1. The numbers apparently refer to the numbering of the hindrances [↑](#footnote-ref-1)