



Social Impact Consultants



Center for
Evaluation Innovation

Transforming Evaluation Practice to Support Social Innovation

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Foundations, Nonprofits, and Corporations Are Striving to Address a Multitude of Social Issues in a Myriad of Ways



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The challenges we are facing are complex, dynamic, and not easily solved

Curiously, people often argue that when you're doing an intervention for the first time, you should invest heavily in a big evaluation to understand outcomes.

Instead, you might want to invest heavily in the process of how the thing unfolded and what you might learn to do it better next time.

You didn't know what the thing was going to look like until you got it implemented, so what's the point in designing a very structured, systematic evaluation?

- *Mayur Patel, Knight Foundation*

The Need for a Different Approach to Evaluating Social Innovation

Research Study Questions:

- What environmental conditions have created the need for strategic and catalytic philanthropy, and what is the parallel need for evaluation?
- How are funders and evaluators using Developmental Evaluation (DE) to evaluate innovative, experimental, and complex initiatives? What are they learning/not learning from these evaluations?
- How is DE different from formative evaluation?
- To what extent does DE require a different set of evaluator skills and knowledge?
- What does DE look like in practice? What are the tensions and challenges?
- What conditions are necessary for engaging in successful DE?
- What benefits are there to using DE when evaluating change in complex social systems? Why should funders invest in this type of evaluation?

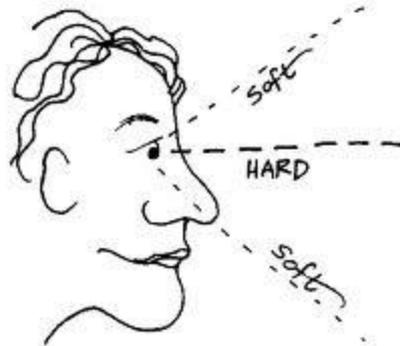
Methods:

Literature review & 19 interviews with funders, nonprofit leaders, evaluators

Defining Developmental Evaluation

An approach to evaluation that is grounded in **systems thinking** and supports **innovation** by collecting and analyzing **real time data** in ways that lead to informed and ongoing **decision making** as part of the design, development, and implementation process.

-Michael Q. Patton



DE is particularly suited for innovative approaches to solving social problems where the path to success is not clear

Developmental Evaluation (DE) Supports Strategic Learning from and about Social Innovations

Focuses on social innovations where there is **no accepted model** (and may never be)

Continuous learning is intentionally embedded to inform decision making

Design is adaptive, responsive, emergent, and dynamic

Evaluator is a **strategic learning partner** performing a non-traditional evaluative role

A **complex systems orientation** is brought to the evaluation

Developmental evaluation requires a certain level of readiness and commitment to learning

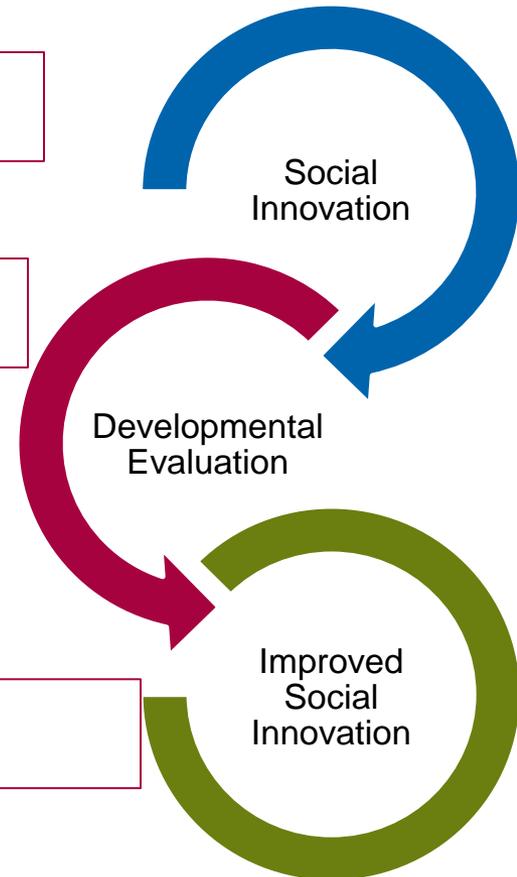
Developmental Evaluation Involves Working Closely with Clients to Inform Learning and Decision Making Processes

Context Analysis

Feedback Loops

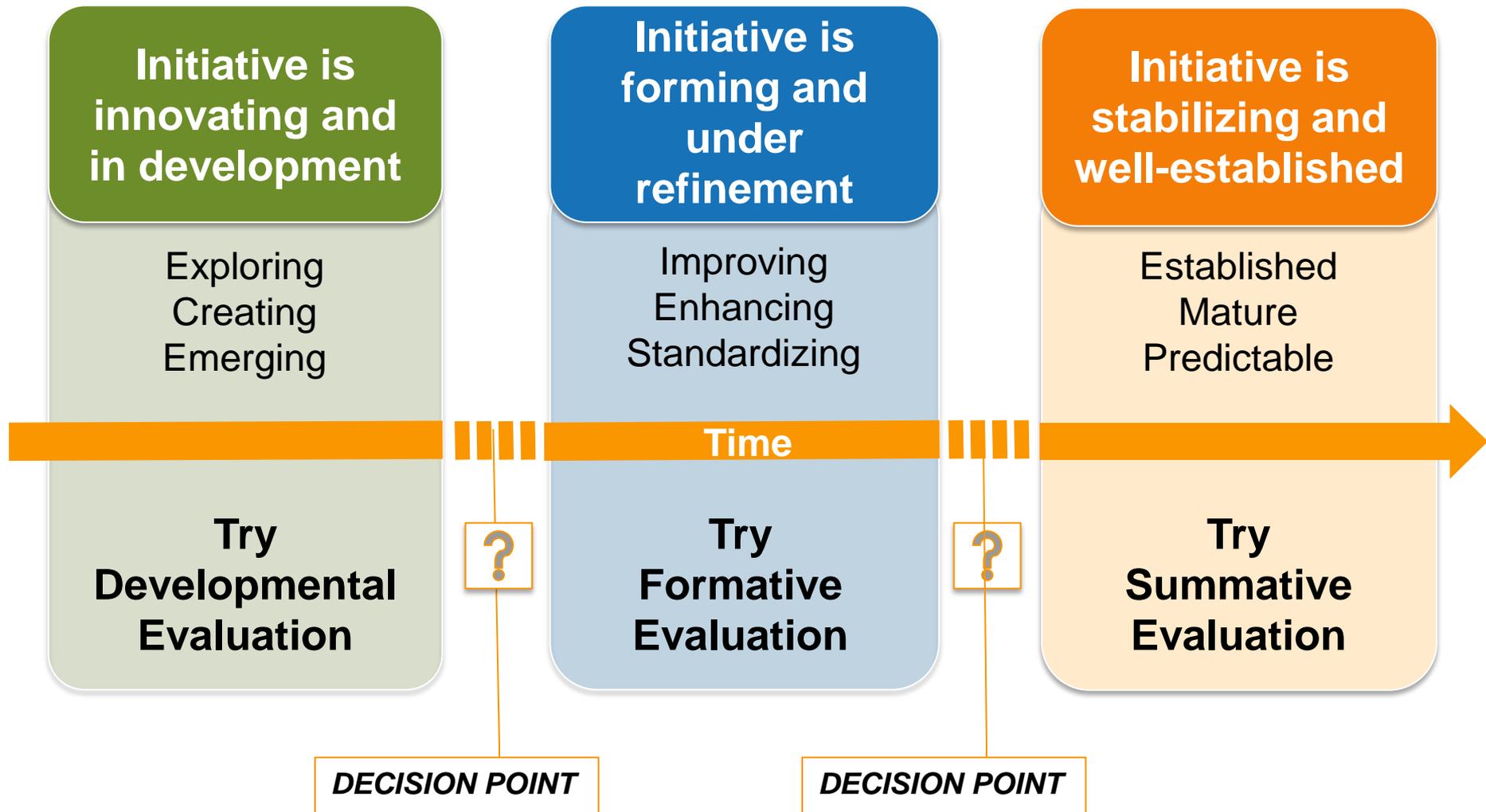
Learning Facilitation

Ongoing Sense-Making



The nature of social innovation requires this integrated, responsive, and adaptive evaluation practice

Developmental Evaluation Is Most Useful During the Design and Early Implementation Phases of a Strategy, Initiative, or Program



Organizational Conditions that Support DE

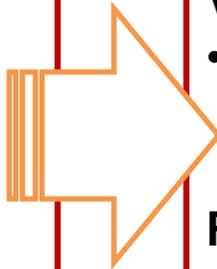
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Problem

- Organization is trying to solve a **complex problem with an adaptive solution**

Disposition

- Organization is open to testing **new evaluation approaches**



READINESS

Leadership

- Board and executive leadership are willing to **take risks**, be **flexible** & make necessary **changes** to the initiative

Values and Culture

- Organization supports **innovation & continuous learning**; adapts to its environment

Resources

- There is sufficient **time, people, & money** for ongoing inquiry

Communications

- Information is **shared, accessible, & used** internally and externally

Sometimes an initiative can be a good fit for DE, but organizations need to be willing to assess and develop their readiness



The Knight Foundation's Community Information Challenge

Context

- 5-yr, \$24 million Community Information Challenge (KCIC)
- Catalyze efforts to use media and technology for informing and engaging communities

Evaluation Approach

- Collaborative, utilization focused, organizational learning
- Continuous feedback to gauge grantees' process and movement building
- Focus on grantee adaptation
- Ongoing feedback to inform tactics and strategy

Evaluation Methods

- Interviews, surveys, focus groups, observation, document review
- Evaluation plan – not fixed; adaptive
- Evaluation findings communicated via briefs, visually appealing reports, blog posts, toolkits, case studies, webinars

Key Learnings

- Helped Knight a) Connect to local leadership, b) Design and implement grantee selection processes, c) Understand what it takes to move a field
- Results are being used to inform next round of strategy development



The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation's YouthScape Initiative

Context

- Focus on young people who feel disconnected from school/organizations
- Testing assumption that engaging young people enriches democracy
- Conventional evaluation methods inadequate for complex, long-term initiatives

Evaluation Approach

- Wanted to know how a cluster of complementary prototypes are doing
- DE embedded rather than detached, continuous rather than episodic; goal is learning, not accountability.
- Provides useful information to the do-er rather than cover for the giver

Evaluation Methods

- Each YS community had a part-time developmental evaluator
- Data was fed back to community organizations immediately
- National DE communicated key national trends to the managing agency and to the funder on a quarterly basis, and more often informally

Key Learnings

- DE illuminated tensions and misunderstandings that, had they gone unattended, might have undermined the entire initiative
- DE help revise program designs, provided training, convened partners, created spaces for airing concerns

Developmental Evaluation as a Balancing Act

- Balancing **accountability** and **learning**
- Balancing **rigor** with **timely information**
- Balancing the role of the evaluator; **critical friend/objective observer**
- Balancing **reflection and dialogue** with **decision making and action**
- Balancing the need for a **fixed budget and the need for budget flexibility**
- Balancing expectations about **who is expected to adapt and change** – funders and/or grantees



Insight: Growing interest in DE





Insight:
Conceptual
clarity is
elusive

Insight:
Many
outstanding
questions

- *How do organizational factors support or hinder DE?*
- *How can we navigate the challenges and tensions of DE?*
- *Where has DE influenced real change, adaptation and learning?*
- *As DE is not for the faint of heart, how many are truly ready?*