THEORY OF CHANGE EVALUATION

Gert J. van der Westhuizen and Mark Abrahams
Centre for Community Development
Vista University

Funders and policy-makers need evaluation information to assess development progress. The authors describe the background and scope of a community development programme in the Western Cape and explore the possibilities of taking a theory of change evaluation to it.

Introduction

The evaluation of social interventions is an ongoing concern for most stakeholders. Programme participants and those directly affected by interventions, such as community education or health development programmes, need evaluation information so as to be able, among other reasons, to document change and learning. Funders and policy makers need evaluation information to assess development progress and return on investment.

In recent times, evaluation researchers have used various approaches in an attempt to meet the variety of needs for evaluations. These include empowerment evaluation approaches (Fetterman, 1993) and utilitisation focussed approaches (Patton, 1987). The limited extent to which these approaches have been able to account for the complex dynamics and interactions in social development interventions, led to greater emphases on the role of programme theory, and the value of articulations of theory on progress of an intervention programme.

Theory of change evaluation is an approach to the evaluation of complex social interventions which has been articulated by people like Lipsey and Pollard (1989), Chen (1990), Weiss (1997) and by participants of the "Aspen Round table" (Connell *et al.* 1995). The approach is an attempt to account for the complexities of social interventions, and draws on earlier articulations of the role of "programme logic" in evaluation research (Rogers, 1998).

This paper explores the possibilities of a theory of change evaluation approach to the evaluation of a Community Empowerment Programme (CEP) in Wellington / Mbekweni in the Western Cape. The Programme was conducted by the Centre for Community Development (CCD) of Vista University, and the evaluation was facilitated by staff of the Centre.

As an approach, theory of change evaluation is prominent in what some evaluation researchers call "Comprehensive Community Initiatives" (CCI), such as

neighbourhood development programmes, inner city development, AIDS education, or poverty alleviation initiatives. These involve interventions / programmes with multiple strands (including economic, political, social), operating at different levels (community, institutional, personal network, family and individual) (Connell and Kubisch, 1998).

In the context of evaluation work, a theory of change has been described as a theory of *how* and *why* an initiative works (Weiss, 1995). Connell and Kubisch described this approach to evaluation as a systematic and cumulative study of the links between activities, outcomes and contexts of the initiative. Stakeholders and evaluators "co-construct" the initiative's theory and use the theory as a tool to plan, manage, and empower participants; also as a guide for resource allocation, and as a way of communicating with the field as a whole (Connell and Kubisch, 1998).

Theories of change in comprehensive community initiatives are complex, precisely because the initiatives have different strands, operate at different levels, are co-constructed, evolve over the course of the initiative, and often require that multiple theories be reconciled (Connell and Kubisch, 1998).

The process of evaluation

The process of evaluation supposedly starts with an initial articulation of a theory of change, and is followed by a process of consensus building to further construct that theory (Philliber, 1995). This process typically involves a series of questions which are discussed in participatory ways, and the purpose is to "generate a theory of change that is viewed by its stakeholders as plausible, doable and testable" (Philliber 1995; Connell and Kubisch, 1998):

1. What does the project plan to deliver, to whom, by when? What are the longer term outcomes the CCI seek to accomplish? [Outcomes on the levels of community, organization / institution, family / personal network, and individual.]

2. What is expected to happen in the short term? What are the interim outcomes and contextual conditions necessary and sufficient to produce the longer term outcomes? [Process measures and short-term outcomes are the "signposts". Statements of outcome are required to be very specific, singular, and the basis of measurement. Statements of outcomes are organised in terms of importance and measurability. This phase involves a broad-based group attempting / beginning to define what the "ultimate" or "longer term outcomes" are supposed to be, after which the interim outcomes / signposts are defined.] .

3. What activities should be initiated and what contextual supports are necessary to achieve the early and intermediate outcomes? With this question, the process / services that are supposed to lead to the outcomes are described. During this stage

discussions often reveal the project logic or lack thereof.

4. What resources are required to implement the activities and maintain the contextual supports necessary for the activities to be effective, and how does the initiative gain the commitment of those resources?

Features and benefits of a theory of change evaluation

Some of the features and benefits of a theory of change approach to evaluation, according to Connell and Kubisch (1998), include:

* It sharpens the planning and implementation of an initiative in that it clarifies purposes and assumptions.
* It facilitates data collection in that it brings focus.
* It reduces the problems associated with causal attribution of impact, in that it clarifies, at least at a theoretical level, the links between cause and effect.
* It encourages and builds on consensus.

Connell and Kubisch's criteria for a good theory of change evaluation (that it should be plausible, doable and testable) are fairly pragmatic criteria and explore the value of the theory and the extent to which it is useful in the success of an initiative.

Philliber (1998) has emphasised the complexities involved in the processes of formulating theories of change. Draft theories of change often show the confusion about targets, revealing, for example, that working with one group leads to outcomes in another. Theories need to be created with a view that they may / will change, and therefore are written on paper and not cast in stone. They need to surface, and participants need to "buy-in" (Philliber, 1998).

Theory of change evaluations require evaluators to play specific roles. The evaluator, according to Philliber (1998), plays the role of facilitator, listener, educator, and partner, using data to improve the programme. The evaluator is expected to elicit complex theories of change and be able to translate them into evaluation designs, using multiple measures of activities and outcomes, ascertaining links between activities and outcomes, detecting differences between espoused theories and programme implementation and supporting efforts to convince sceptics that evaluation results are compelling.

Strengths of a theory of change approach to evaluation, according to Connell and Kubisch (1998), include the extended social learning, the understanding of the how and why of initiatives, audience participation, and clearer accountability measures.

The Community Empowerment Programme (CEP) in Wellington/Mbekweni

The CEP was sponsored by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation (WKKF). The WKKF is a non-profit organisation whose mission is "to help people help themselves through the practical application of knowledge and resources to improve their quality of life and that of future generations". W.K. Kellogg, the cereal industry pioneer, established the foundation in 1930 with a focus on building capacity of individuals, communities and institutions to solve their own problems.

The CEP's work in South Africa is part of the WKKF Africa programme located in six countries in southern Africa. The Foundation shares with Africa a vision for southern Africa where the quality of life for poor people has visibly improved, organisations and institutions are stronger and more effective in supporting communities, and where civic participation in governance is widespread and valued. The priorities for the Africa Programme therefore, are to develop human capital, increase economic opportunity, and improve civic participation.

The development approach advocated in the WKKF Africa programme is community - based. This involves the provision of tools for participation in change, partnering community-linked organisations and institutions, and helping them link with government and other service delivery agencies towards developing practical solutions to complex problems in southern Africa. The Foundation advocates a change theory with the following elements: building on African heritage of cultural values and practices; recognising human agency; investing in human capacity development and participatory development approaches; developing indigenous transformational leadership at all levels; recognising the fundamental role of economic development; stimulating bottom-up development and policy impact; developing models of integrated rural district development to generate lessons of what can be scaled up; demonstrating the significance of rural economies, and recognising the supportive role of institutions in effecting sustainable development.

The overall programme thrust and direction in southern Africa is to strengthen the capacity of civil society organisations and their public and private sector partners as they seek multi-sectoral solutions to community problems, particularly problems of rural poverty as it impacts on family life, women and youth. WKKF programming is moving towards a more integrated approach where the dynamic relationship between and among human and community development, economic development, quality of life, and sustained healthy communities is acknowledged.

Scope of the CEP

The community empowerment approach was for the CCD to act as support and training agency to existing structures. Through negotiations emerged a focus on Education (Schools, Early Childhood Development, School youth), Youth (in school,

in community, in prison) and Women, specifically, although not exclusively, those within previously disadvantaged areas of the broader community. The initiative was therefore introduced and conceptualised by the CCD but guided by the needs and existing structures within the community. The CCD's capacity building process was articulated via a train-the-trainer model that promised the creation of a cadre of local trainers who could continue the work beyond the community development programme time limits. The general approach was to empower communities through supporting existing structures and working towards the specific objectives stated earlier. This approach was fairly similar across the sites: firstly initial meetings with stakeholders through the RDP (Reconstruction and Development Programme) forum or local community committees, then the establishment of a CEP reference group (consultative forum), then interventions on levels of education, civic, local government and women.

A range of capacity-building workshops were implemented based on the needs expressed by the 'constituent community'. *Constituent community* refers to those sectors of the community who were represented on the RDP or Consultative Forums. The capacity workshops in Education were designed for teachers (to include focuses on for example personal Empowerment, teaching skills, interpersonal relationships, Mathematics, assessment, outcomes-based education, life-skills trainers and train-the-trainer for lead-teachers). The workshops for principals focused on interpersonal skills and conflict management, curriculum implementation, and school management training. School secretaries requested workshops on interpersonal relationships and personal empowerment. Teachers and parents attended school governance and study skills workshops, and some student groups arranged for workshops on life-skills, study skills and students' role in school governance. Early childhood educators participated in basic skills learning interventions.

Capacity building work for women's groups, including unemployed women, covered needs of personal empowerment, business skills (from setting up to retail and the sustaining of a business), as well as technical skills such as sewing and beading.

Several community organisations requested development inputs. These included the Fisherman's Forum (business skills, leadership and management), Prison Supervisors (interpersonal skills), the broader RDP Forum (needs assessment processes), the Consultative Forum (vision setting and planning), the Community Action in Prison group (leadership skills, trainer programme), the Police Forum (communication and cooperative strategies), Community Evaluators (evaluation skills), Social Services Department (cooperative alternatives for social service delivery and conflict management), and Shop Stewards (negotiation skills). Various youth groups participated in interventions developing leadership and life skills (organised youth and youth in prison), as well as voter and civic education, train-the-trainer and business skills (township youth groups).

The above are the 'formal' education / capacity building sessions for which participants received certificates of attendance. Sessions differed in duration from a short three-hour session up to 30 days training in the case of the early childhood development training. The latter had a formal assessment component and successful candidates could apply for the level 1 and 2 qualifications. Not included in the above list are the meetings held with various stakeholder groups, the networking processes put in place, and the mediation role played by several of the facilitators in situations of conflict. The programme, on each site, was managed by a Project Manager. The Project Manager reported to the local Consultative Forum, his regional office and again to the national directorate of the Centre for Community Development.

Community Empowerment goals

The need for a 'community empowerment' approach was strongly motivated by CCD as the facilitating agency. The argument was that given that South Africa's history, the ways in which power was misused, and the extent of disempowerment on structural, social and individual levels, the need was there for the building of a culture of critical thinking, developing a sensitivity to power issues in the community, and of encouraging independent thought and choice. These reasons were also very much the spirit and principles of the RDP. The specific CEP approach was negotiated with the WKKF and with communities, and was by no means prescriptive.

During the fifteen years of working with formal and informal sector educators in various communities, the CCD assessed the extent to which communities and individuals had been disempowered and how a process of cognitive education and personal empowerment (which CCD had developed for educators) could be extended and adapted to other sectors of the community. The CCD experiences of working with educators, from the then separate education departments, addressing issues of personal change and confronting racism and other social issues were deemed central to a community development programme. The following CEP goals emerged from deliberations with the respective communities and funding partners:

* Identification and prioritising of needs - for the CEP to respond to community needs, and contribute to the articulation of emerging needs.
* Human resource development - for the CCD to play a human resources development role in the community, and for the interventions to be qualitatively acceptable and sustainable.
* Links within/among development work in the community to be established, and these to contribute to change in community life.
* Access to resources - CCD work to increase access within and outside community structures.
* Networking - CCD work to enhance networking in the community.

Towards a change theory

CCD developed its own formulation (theory of change) over the years, and these were generic (personal empowerment of the individual, playing out in leadership capacity development and community change in the long run), with specific reference to the sector foci, e.g. educators, youth, women, and others. For example, in working with community leaders, CCD's theory was that of encouraging participants to embark upon their own journeys of personal development, learning about issues of power in governance, developing skills such as assertiveness, communication etc and changes can be expected in the way groups of leaders function and work together. In turn, the theory is that these changes will lead to community empowerment.

In the evaluation of the initiative, it was found that the CCD theory was well accepted by community participants. Problematic however, were the ways in which context, local experiences and interpretations impacted on the implementation of the theory. In particular, the multifaceted and multi-levelled nature of interventions in the CEP generated a concomitant involved theory of change. The evaluation sensitised participants, notably the lead organizations / facilitating agency, to the need for work / time resources to be spent on developing clarity on appropriate theories of change. These theories are (were) not easy to formulate, and neither are participants (the community) always engaged in discussions.

Discussion: Issues of quality

Meulenberg-Buskens (1997) stated that quality in scientific research is not a straightforward issue. Discussions on quality of qualitative research in particular would touch on issues of process, participation, techniques of data gathering and analysis, as well as interpretation and communication.

On one level, quality is about the relevance, usefulness, applicability, and the degree to which research enhances values such as democracy and social justice, and the degree to which it empowers powerless people (Meulenberg-Buskens 1997). In theory of change evaluations this would mean that quality would be sought in the levels of participation, processes of engagement, how discussions of programme change theories are developed, and the extent to which ideals of social justice and empowerment are achieved.

On another level, quality also refers to the technical aspects of methodology and the extent to which acceptable requirements and expectations of a scientific community are met (Meulenberg-Buskens 1997). These would include explicit criteria which are used to assess the design of the evaluation, as well as methods and techniques of data gathering, analysis, and interpretation.

Role of language

Language is a significant factor in research, both as medium of communication and as instrument in the research process. The language of a researcher is a set of unique meanings which shape the way we conduct and interpret research work. This may be well illustrated with reference to equivalent words in different languages relevant to the evaluation of the CEP. The equivalent for word *meaningfulness* is *maikemisetso* (n), *bonnete* (n), or *sinvolheid, sinrykheid, betekenisvol*. The first Sotho equivalent carries the connotation of determination, and the second one that of truthfulness. This is to illustrate that determination has truthfulness about it, meaning that if we seek to understand the meaningfulness of a gesture, we are actually seeking to understand its determination. In this sense, meaningfulness is actually interrogative in that it goes beyond the surface and seeks to understand the underlying intention of an action. The Afrikaans equivalents speak of something rich in meaning and sense. In comparison, the equivalent words used seem to add to the meaning of meaningfulness. Applied to a qualitative research study, the strength of multiple languages may go a long way to the construction of "thick descriptions" of experiences and observations.

It may be very meaningful for qualitative researchers for whom English is an additional language, to work in the languages they grew up with. "Going back" into your own language could be like a visit to what is familiar, getting a closer sense of self, of identity. In this way, the crucial activity of inner dialogue as researcher promotes levels of growth and quality work that may not be possible in an additional language.

Quality in theory of change evaluation

Theories of change seem to be very dynamic and often develop a life of their own. The theory of change advocated by WKKF served as a reference point to the initiative. What we discovered through the initiative is that several of the elements of the theory stayed in a sphere of vision and will always be present as a kind of generic goal, e.g. building on the African heritage of cultural values. The initiative worked on this level in different ways - education groups, youth groups and women projects.

Elements of the theory, that the initiative should recognise and build human agency, participatory development approaches; developing indigenous transformational leadership at all levels; recognising the fundamental role of economic development; stimulating bottom-up development and policy impact, etc, were well articulated and implemented in the initiative. Again, the articulation and implementation took different forms.

Processes to formulate and review theories of change are often unbudgeted for, and seen as additional work. Theories seem to be dictated by agendas and not free from power plays in communities. These are a function of histories, where people come

from and what they wish to gain from access to resources. The needs-driven process allowed for agendas to influence the theory of change. The CCD intervention operated essentially on assumptions albeit informed assumptions, but the lack of base line data at the various levels - personal, organisational - complicated the evaluation process.

With hindsight, we attempted as evaluators to clarify: (a) the processes the theory of change went through in it's development, and: (b) the factors that influenced the articulation and change. The initial formulation was fairly easy, and was drawn by a sense of mission - South African communities have been disempowered, and there is a very clear need for redress, transformation. Discussions of initial formulations were fairly informal during the first phases of the initiative, and mostly affirmative.

Some factors played a role in the development of the intervention theory: logistical and practical problems of limited opportunities to have broader stakeholder meetings, power plays in people advocating positions, political parties lobbying for votes, the racial divide in the community and the lack of resources, all contributed to a lack of integration.

The intervention generally operated with a core theory of change, i.e. the personal change within a community context. This theory of change however was forced to deal with an ever-changing policy environment that affected individuals directly and indirectly. Unlike other environments (normal?) where the development task is to challenge the status quo - the latter being static and entrenched - the ever-changing policy environment within this intervention provided opportunities for real change as well as bringing about insecurity for individuals.   The evaluation process had to accommodate this unique context and focus not only on the outcomes, but also on the historical and contextual realities for the individuals, the projects and the programme.

References

Abrahams, M. and Van der Westhuizen, G.J. 2001. *Evaluating Community Empowerment Initiatives in South Africa.* Paper presented at the Bellagio Conference on "Examination of complex social programmes", 6-10 August 2001, Bellagio, Italy.

Centre for Community Development. 2001.*Human Development in Further Education and Training in South Africa - concepts and principles.* Human Research Council, Pretoria.

Chen, H.T. 1990. *Theory-driven Evaluations*. Newbury Park, Sage.

Connell, J.P., Kubisch, A.C., Schorr, L.B. and Weiss, C.H., eds. 1995. New Approaches to Evaluating Community Initiatives: Concepts, Methods and Contexts. Washington D.C., Aspen Institute.

Connell, J.P., Kubisch, A.C. 1998. *Applying a Theory of Change Approach to the*

Evaluation of Comprehensive Community Initiatives: Progress, Prospects, and Problems. In: Fulbright-Anderson, K., Kubisch, A.C. and Connell, J.P. (Eds.). New Approaches to Evaluating community Initiatives, Vol. 2, Theory, Measurement and Analysis. Washington, Aspen Institute.

Fetterman, D. 1993. *Empowerment Evaluation.* Keynote address. HSRC, Cape Town.

Fullan, M. 1991. The New Meaning of Educational Change. Teachers College Press, New York.

Fullan, M. 1993. *Change Forces.* Falmer, London.

Fullan, M. 2000. The return of Large-Scale Reform. *Journal of Educational Change*, 1: 5-28.

Lipsey, M.W. and Pollard, J.A. 1989. Driving toward theory in programme evaluation: More models to choose from. *Evaluation and Programme Planning*, 12: 317-328.

Meulenberg-Buskens, I. 1997. Turtles all the way down? On a quest for quality in qualitative research. *South African Journal of Psychology,* 27(2): 111-115

Patton, M.Q. 1986. *Utilization Focussed Evaluation*. Beverley Hills, CA Sage.

Philliber, S. 1998. The Virtue of Specificity in Theory of Change Evaluation: Practitioner Reflections. In: Fulbright-Anderson, K., Kubisch, A.C. and Connell, J.P. (Eds.). *New Approaches to Evaluating Community Initiatives,* Vol. 2, Theory, Measurement and Analysis. Washington, Aspen Institute.

Rogers, P.J. 1998. *Alternative causal models in programme theory evaluation and monitoring.* Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Evaluation Association. 4-7 November, Chicago.

Van der Westhuizen, G.J. 2001. *Socially Critical Evaluation.* Unpublished paper for the Gauteng Institute for Curriculum Development, Johannesburg.

Van der Westhuizen, G.J. and Schamberger, M. 1999. *What happens to data in evaluation research?* Paper presented at the Qualitative Research in Education Conference, RAU, Johannesburg.

Van der Westhuizen, G.J., Schamberger, M., Abrahams, M. and Smargiasso, L. 1999. *Evaluation Report of Community Empowerment Projects.* Centre for Community Development of Vista University, Centurion.

Weiss, C.H. 1997. How can a theory-based evaluation make greater headway? *Evaluation Review,* 21 (4): 501-524.

ANNEXURE

Meaningfulness: *Betekenisvol, sinryk, sinvol*: to be full of meaning and significance; to make sense to people; to be understandable or intelligible; *veelbetekenend, veelseggend*: to mean much, to have a lot of meaning, to say much. Also *vorm aanneem*: to take shape and become familiar.

Openness: *go bulega* (v): the Sotho equivalent of 'to open' is *go bula.* The extended meaning here is *go tsenega* in other words access. So, openness creates an expectation for access, whether the latter is granted or not is another matter. This

means that openness without accessibility is meaningless.

Access: T*oeganklik*: to be open, to be approachable and available without reserva-tion, *Toegang* vind means to gain entry, to find ways of accessing a place, a situation, an opportunity.

Participation: *go tsea karolo* (v): *karolo* means a part, a portion. The concept sug-gests action, meaning that participation can never be dormant or benign. Thinking about it in this light conjures images of belonging, and defines the balance of power as equal. It's not the same as empowerment, because whether we like it or not, empowerment has clearly defined power levels. Those levels are blurred where participation is concerned, and only emerge if the individuals concerned decide to create them. *Karolo* has an extended meaning of dependency, illustrating that it is part of a whole, and unless all the parts are pulling together or are willing to be attached to each other, then we can never have any whole.

Participation: *Deelneming, deelname:* to take part in, or be part of; inspraak: to have a say, to make an input; *medeseggenskap*: to have a say with others.

Dialogue: *ukushintshisana ngemibono:* exchanging views or ideas; discussing each others' views; discussing why that particular view is worth taking; discussing differ-ent opinions about a certain issue (the aim is to have a common understanding or conclusion at the end of that discussion). Also *ukubonisana*: sharing ideas; putting different ideas for discussion on the table and analysing which is worth taking. Also *ingxoxo*: conversation (about an issue); talk about something to get to know what others think about it.

Responsiveness: *Reagerend, gehoor gee aan, antwoordend:* to listen, to respond and react, to give answer, to reply to; *simpatiek:* to show sympathy and empathy; also *sensitief:* to be sensitive, open and inviting.