Mark Hoffman’s discussion of the Action Evaluation process is, on the whole, accurate and insightful. However, there are a few corrections I would like to point out as well as respond to his provocative questions about the possible limitations of the still-evolving methodology.

Action Evaluation (AE) has evolved over the last 8 years in parallel with my conflict resolution process called ARIA (Antagonism, Resonance, Invention and Action). AE builds on ARIA (i.e. the last phase of ARIA is the first of AE), yet for clarity they should be distinguished (for a full discussion of the ARIA framework, see Rothman, 1997, or www.ariagroup.com; for a full discussion of AE, please go to www.aepro.org).

AE was developed in part to address what I found to be a serious limitation in my own conflict resolution work (it is useful to note that in trying to improve my own work, I have also aimed at contributing to the field itself, and yet it is perhaps most accurate and less over-reaching to speak purely in first person here). In my decade-and-a-half of conflict intervention, I am satisfied that by using the ARIA process I have effectively assisted many disputants to reframe their differences constructively – from antagonism to resonance (see Rothman 1997). Moreover, I have contributed to their ability to invent creative options for deepening their resonance of shared goals and needs between them. However, I am less satisfied that I have been successful in helping disputants sustain action that promotes lasting and structural changes. This led me to ask two questions: What could I do in my work as an intervener to help disputants move from good ideas to good implementation for social and structural change?; and, How could I know?

This led me to develop Action Evaluation, a methodology designed to assist key stakeholders in a conflict intervention initiative (e.g. third-parties, participants, funders) to collaboratively define
success (baseline stage) as a vehicle for helping to promote and enact it. Moreover, having systematically articulated a shared and operational set of definitions of success, the ability for systematic monitoring and self-evaluation would also be fostered (formative stage). Then, participants’ interest in systematic self-reflection and self-evaluation, as part of their overall experience in a conflict resolution initiative, should grow as they help to define and then monitor “success”. As Ross concludes in his comments on *PCIA as Peacebuilding Tool* “[o]nly when people feel sufficiently secure with the knowledge that failure is not an end but a new beginning will practitioners embrace evaluation as a tool rather than a seeing it as a problem to be overcome.”

As outlined in Box 1, the three stages in Action Evaluation are: *establishing baseline, formative monitoring* and *summative assessment*. The first, *establishing a baseline*, begins by having key stakeholders individually articulate their prospective definitions of success prior to the launch of a given project or intervention; Hoffman accurately describes this first part. The next step is rather different from Hoffman’s description. What he described as the “second layer” of negotiating shared definitions between individual stakeholders, is the second step in establishing a baseline. Here the individual definitions are interwoven into a single platform through a collaborative negotiation process (for an example of this go to [http://www.aepro.org/inprint/papers/aedayton.html](http://www.aepro.org/inprint/papers/aedayton.html))
The second phase of action evaluation, “formative assessment” is similar to what Hoffman describes as the “third layer”. In this process, baseline definitions of success are enacted and then self-consciously adjusted to give a systematic monitoring of how well those definitions are or are not matching up with the reality of real-life activity (as distinct from theory-driven hypotheses that are made during baseline stage). Finally, there is a summative assessment stage, or more traditional “evaluation-as-judgment” in which, based on evolved criteria of success, questions are asked and measures are taken to see how well an intervention has “stacked up” against its own internally derived and consciously evolved goals.

In seeking to summarize some general criteria of success, Hoffman has expanded on definitions that were derived from one specific project between Greek and Turkish Cypriots and, after us, has suggested these could be used more broadly (see his discussion of “illustrative standards”, and chapter 13 in Ross and Rothman 2000). This is indeed a goal of action evaluation, but as it evolves, it can begin to probe for more data-driven generalizations, and not by extrapolating from just one intervention as was the case here. Rather, our goal now is to draw conclusions and generalizations by employing the now extensive data base of stakeholders goals we have developed of over 75 projects, and begin to develop something of a contingency based analysis of success. We concur with Hoffman’s first challenge, or goal, that AE must move from specific project focus to generalizations across projects if it is to be usefully applied in the field (Hoffman, in this volume, p. 28). We believe that by focusing on specific cases, and comparing them with many other cases, we may be able to generalize useful hypotheses about patterns where we can begin to match types of conflict intervention, such as training, needs-based, interest based, and the goals that are developed for each with different types of conflicts.

For example, Ghais in her AE of CDR’s intervention in Bulgaria (Ghais 1999 available at www.aepro.org/inprint/conference/ghais.html), surmised that the further away a given set of stakeholders are from the intervention, the more wide-ranging are their goals (e.g. CDR’s goals were to build local capacity, enhance democratic processes and pilot test a model that could be applied in other settings); while those closer to the situation itself would have more immediate and concrete goals (e.g. the Bulgarian participants sought to improve education and social welfare of Roma youth). Ghais concludes “[a]t the end of the baseline section of this paper, we noted that the four stakeholder groups, participants, conveners, supervisors and sponsors,
articulated goals that differed along a spectrum from practical, direct charity work for the underprivileged (expressed by participants) to such lofty goals as building a culture of democracy and dialogue (expressed by sponsors).“

With such a detailed analysis of a single case study, we can now begin to see if we might hypothesize goals of various stakeholders based on their proximity to an intervention and see if the kinds of goals they articulate line up with Ghais’ experience. More generally, Ross, in his above-mentioned essay, comments on this inside/outside difference in goals: “There are often tensions between the development of local capacity building and meeting immediate human needs and service delivery.” As we articulate broad goals by the end of the baseline phase in one project, we can begin to analyse the types of goals that are generated across types of conflicts and interventions. Thus, the systematic collection and documentation of multiple cases across type and level could contribute to systematic and comparative research on this and other applied hypotheses, which in turn could help expand the field.

While both Ross and Hoffman inquire about how to generalize from specific interventions, to the “field” itself, my proposition (still awaiting a sustained effort to test the voluminous data we’ve collected over the past half dozen years from 1,000’s of stakeholders in almost 75 projects) is that by supporting contextualized efforts to define success in specific, small scale, often NGO-directed efforts, we can begin to find all sorts of rich and theory-driven hypotheses to test (e.g. such as Ghais’ hypothesis about distance from intervention influencing types of goals) across a range of projects.

Hoffman’s second question about AE (Hoffman, in this volume, p. 29), about the danger of goals falling to the level of the lowest common denominator, misses the important emphasis in AE about evolving goals; indeed, this is perhaps the most important aspect of the entire iterative process that constitutes AE. Thus, in addition to giving participants a “place at the table” in the project design from the start, and indeed it is true that the goals first articulated are usually broad and overarching, as they are consensual and inclusive, it also facilitates a process of successive approximation of “success” as the initial and general goals are translated into practice and revisions of those goals are required to ensure project vitality and relevance. Thus, goals become more nuanced, operational and practical.

Concerning Hoffman’s third point that AE is rooted in the Western (and more specifically Burtonian) problem-solving approach, and therefore may be guilty of imposing a framework even as it asserts
its desire to elicit “local models,” is well-taken. I would be the first, in fact, to agree that AE is linear (although also iterative) and clearly rational in orientation. However, what systematic social science is not? This, it seems to me, is a challenge for the conflict resolution field generally as it seeks to extend itself beyond its Western roots and orientation. However, clearly the beginning of wisdom here is clarity about the origins of this work, not apology for them, and where such origins may run counter to, or nicely dovetail with, local contexts and culture.

I join Marc Ross in applauding this initiative to dialogue about the challenges and opportunities of rigorous evaluation of conflict resolution initiatives. This is still the next frontier in our developing field and is well-served by serious efforts of scholar-practitioners such as Hoffman and Bush to frame the agenda and respectfully, if frankly, debate the issues they raise. Thank you for inviting me to lend my voice as well.
Reference and Further Reading


DANIDA Evaluation Reports (various), at www.evaluation.dk.


PIOOM 1999. Armed Conflicts, PIOOM.


World Bank, Governance and Public Sector Reform — Institutional and Governance Reviews (IGRs).
About the Contributors

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