The Network for Peacebuilding Evaluation
Thursday Talks
“Systems Thinking and Evaluation, Part II”

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Part 1: Overview

Ziad’s Thursday Talk on “Systems Thinking and Evaluation” was part II of the Network for Peacebuilding Evaluation’s series on systems thinking. The first talk was led by Diana Chigas on June 12. View video and transcript here.

About the Speaker

Mr. Ziad Moussa is a Senior Research Associate at the Environment and Sustainable Development Unit of the American University of Beirut and an internationally acknowledged evaluation practitioner.

Over the past 15 years, he has managed complex multi-country evaluations across the Arab world and the global South in well over 40 countries and with almost every major donor on the circuit.

His approach blends a very solid understanding of the major quantitative and qualitative methodologies and paradigms to development evaluation, coupled with a pragmatic hands-on approach on how to put these approaches and paradigms into practice. His Credo is that there is no development without a solidly anchored Theory of Change (ToC) in the project design and that contribution (rather than attribution) is key in understanding the development outcomes from a complexity perspective.

Ziad is credited for the Arabization of the reference book “Outcome Mapping: Building Reflection and Learning into Development Programs” in addition to several other publications on R&D in MENA. His recent work includes a meta-evaluation of complementarity in Finnish ODA, assisting the evaluation group at OECD in developing a joint donor-partner evaluation framework at the global level and the evaluation of the UNHCR response to the Syrian Crisis.

As part of his social corporate responsibility vis-à-vis the profession, he volunteers up to 15% of his time to the framing and professionalization of the evaluation profession in the MENA region and around the world. As such, he currently chairs the MENA Evaluators Network (EvalMENA) which he helps establish back in 2008. He is also an elected Board Member of the International Development Evaluation Association (IDEAS), member of the Advisory Committee of the International Peacebuilding Evaluation Network (IPEN), and member of the Board of Stewards of the Outcome Mapping Learning Community (OMLC).
Presenter Remarks

What is important about using Systems in Peacebuilding Evaluation?

Systems will make you think differently. They will make you work across silos and pay attention to emerging patterns. Up until 2005 there was a mismatch between Systems Thinking as a concept and Systems being put to work within evaluation. Work is continuously being done to bridge that mismatch, and the more we embed and use Systems in evaluations, the more we can demonstrate their worth.

Top down models and rigid designs are on their way out. When you consider that the three main attributes of peacebuilding are:

- Non-linearity: small action can beget large reaction
- Dynamic interactions between, amongst and within subsystems
- Emergent characteristics and factors

It becomes clear that rigid models will not accommodate the realities of peacebuilding work, and will not be as successful as a more flexible, learning focused, inclusive Systems Thinking approach.

A System is more than the sum of its parts, so, how to monitor? Later, how to evaluate?

When creating a plan for how to monitor and evaluate a program with Systems Thinking, there are three key concerns:

- Interrelations: changes/evolutions in relationships between system components
- Boundaries: appropriateness of boundaries used to delimit the system; how to bridge the vastness of the world and the limits of an evaluation
- Perspectives: accounting for and listening to different perspectives on what changes and how it changed the system

The Stacey/Zimmerman Matrix is a useful tool for guiding M&E in Systems Thinking

The Stacey/Zimmerman Matrix distinguishes between situations that are simple, complicated, and chaotic, as represented on gradients of agreement and certainty.
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Situations and environments that fall into the “Complex” zone necessitate Systems Thinking. When challenges are both socially (agreement axis) and technically (certainty axis) complicated, Systems Thinking will map the different components acting on a program, community, or situation.

From an M&E Perspective, the greater the complexity, the more sense it makes to keep planning “light” and imaginative and flexible.

There are many approaches to, and ways to use Systems Thinking. Ziad recommends

- Outcome Mapping: helps anchor theories of change in concrete realities
- Outcome Harvesting: systemic understanding, especially useful when reflecting retrospectively
- Developmental evaluation

If an evaluation does not tell you how to improve the conditions of the people/community you are working with, then it is a purely academic exercise, and does not provide value.

Part 2: Question & Answer

Robert Ricigliano (Co-Moderator): We are constantly trying to fit complex situations into a traditional, linear based evaluation. In the complex realm, the emphasis must be on learning. When you are doing evaluations, and you are in the complex realm, but donors or communities want a more traditional, straightforward outcome oriented evaluation, how do you get them out of that traditional paradigm?

Ziad: When you get donors and other traditionally-minded partners into the hybrid accountability and learning mode, they become more open to external factors. Bringing partners into hybrid accountability and learning mode can be achieved by:

- Building a very solid dialogue
- Mapping different aspects of a constituency
- Consciously avoiding too many technicals
- Reinforcing that if the evaluation doesn’t lead to something actionable, maybe you don’t need the evaluation.

John Kepner (Attendee): The shift is being made, from model thinking to learning thinking. We need to make the latter more systematic. How do we move this realization forward in the field of DM&E?

Joel Braunold (Attendee): So much of the complexity within peacebuilding is the need for tailored solutions for each grouping of peoples within each conflict situation. E.g. in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict context, what works for ultra-orthodox Jews will be different for secular Jews, or what you need to do for refugees living within the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT) is different for Palestinians who are not refugees living in OPT. Given that, does one need a different evaluation approach for each community and if so, how do you build a system approach that does not collapse into chaos?

Ziad: Excellent questions! We must acknowledge that there is no magical fit. Each context is different; you cannot promise replication of success stories. In complex situations, things are only understandable in perspective and sometimes only when reflecting retrospectively. We need to stop behaving as if complexity inspired evaluations need to be super complex. We make Systems
approaches relevant and sustainable by demonstrating and demystifying Systems evaluations, by making them accessible to the widest public possible.

**Robert (Co-moderator):** One of the things we need to build into practice is to work in effective networks, and sharing information. We need to overcome resistance to change in peacebuilding. Peacebuilding as a field needs to think fundamentally differently, to take a more learning and developmental approach. Maybe we need to find ways to make it easier for rigid, bureaucratic organizations to experiment with change, so they can ease into using the kinds of processes we’re talking about.

**Debbie Parush (Attendee):** All three dimensions you mention - relationships, boundaries and perspectives - are based on ‘understandings’. What tools would you recommend to map the different ways different groups interpret the same actions within a system analysis?

**Ziad:** The tools would be dependent on the size and complexity of what you’re looking at. There are many ways to arrange qualitative data beyond a simple narrative with anecdotes. I am open to being contacted about more specific tools.

*To listen to the recording of the talk, please visit the Thursday Talk Discussion Forum*