

4. Three Questions to Support Dealing with Complexity Under Real World Constraints¹⁶⁴

RICARDO WILSON-GRAU

Independent evaluator
Consultoria em Gestão Empresarial Ltda

INTRODUCTION

I came to consciously cope with complexity 15 years ago as I began to develop, with colleagues,¹⁶⁵ the Outcome Harvesting approach to evaluation.¹⁶⁶ This approach has proven to be useful when applied with one or more of these four purposes:

1. Monitor the implementation and evaluate the outcomes of an innovative approach to an intractable challenge or to a new, emerging problem;
2. Provide evidence and insights on the outcomes achieved by a goal-oriented project, programme or organization that was launched without pre-defined objectives or even pre-determined activities beyond the short-term;
3. Learn about the changes in societal actors' behaviours (i.e., outcomes) that an intervention influences (but does not control) directly but also indirectly;
4. Evaluate an intervention that underwent so much change that it is not useful to assess what it did and achieved against what was originally planned, as is customarily done in evaluation.

Each one of those uses is laced through with the uncertainty and dynamism that characterize "complexity". Over the last 10 years or so, the term has become a buzz word in social change and development. Therefore, first, I will begin by explaining the understanding of complexity

164 Write-up of presentation in panel Session 19: New Directions: Dealing with complexity in evaluation under real-world constraints, National Evaluation Capacities Conference 2017, Istanbul, Turkey, 20 October 2017.

165 Bob Williams is the colleague from whom I have learned just about everything I know about systems thinking. His comments on this text were invaluable but of course in no way does this mean he fully agrees with my understanding of complexity.

166 See the website (www.outcomeharvesting.net) and the Outcome Harvesting Forum (<http://bit.ly/2eU0AhN>) that I sponsor.

that has proven useful to me as an evaluator.¹⁶⁷ Second, I will share the three questions I have found useful for framing an evaluation of a complex intervention, with an example.

A big word of caution. There is a wide range of contentious meanings given to the concept of “complexity” that I know send shudders through complexity scientists. Although I have been interested in complexity for 15 years, I am not a student of the field and much less an expert. What I will present is solely those aspects of what I understand to be complexity that have proven useful to me. For a full explanation of complexity in relation to evaluation, I suggest beginning with Jonny Morell.¹⁶⁸

IDENTIFYING COMPLEXITY

Let me begin by explaining how I understand the opposite of complexity: a *simple* situation (Exhibit 1). If you are on the shore of this body of water and want to reach the island, with the information you have at hand about your own resources and the challenges in front of you, you can fairly well decide what is the best way to get to the island—swim, rowboat, motor boat. You can also set a reasonable time for arriving at that goal. That is, you can readily make decisions about the challenge in front of you and the best course of action. The reason is that the *relationships of cause and effect* between what you will do and the results you will have are *known* at the moment you are planning to take action. This is a simple situation, which does not mean that swimming to the island will be easy.

EXHIBIT 1. A SIMPLE CHALLENGE



167 My understanding of complexity comes from two seminal thinkers. One is the late Brenda Zimmerman who is renowned for adapting Ralph Stacey’s ideas to explain complexity in terms of uncertainty and disagreement (Zimmerman, 2001). The other is Dave Snowden of Cognitive Edge whose Cynefin framework serves to make sense of complexity in order to take management decisions (Snowden, 2017). I realize both authors present views about complexity that are not universally accepted in the complexity community.

168 Email jamorell@jamorell.com, Blog <http://evaluationuncertainty.com/> and YouTube channel <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCqRIJjhqmy3ngSB1AF9ZKLg>. Particularly relevant is Funder Evaluator Dialogue on Complexity (September 2017).

In a simple situation, logic models and results-based frameworks make a lot of sense. You can plan with considerable confidence what resources you need in order to carry out the activities that will produce outputs to influence outcomes and eventually have the impact you wish to achieve. At the moment of monitoring or evaluating, you can assess the plan against performance in order to determine if you have been efficient, and the results against the plan to see if you have been effective. For example, running an annual polio vaccination campaign, managing a literacy programme, building a road or constructing schools usually are interventions with tried and proven models for how to do it. Evaluating the original plan will provide you with the information you need to decide the merit, worth or significance of the process and the results.

In a complex situation (Exhibit 2), however, at the moment of deciding how to get to the island that you know is in front of you, you are very hard pressed to decide if swimming, rowing or a motor boat is your best bet, and much less are you able to calculate how long it will take you to reach the island. That is, you cannot decide on just what is the challenge or on how to tackle it, if not both. That is, at the moment of deciding what to do, the *relationships of cause and effect are unknown*.

EXHIBIT 2. A COMPLEX CHALLENGE



Because of the uncertainty and dynamism, your initial plan will necessarily change. By the time you get started, more or fewer resources may be required because things will have changed—the storm intensified or abated. In fact, your original plan may be shelved altogether if the storm blows over before you start. For example, in an advocacy campaign to address a new health issue, there are no models. You have to create a solution. Some planned activities will bear fruit, others will have to be abandoned as the need for unplanned activities emerges. There will be unanticipated outputs and outcomes—and some activities will never have results at all! Thus, the greater the unpredictability when planning and implementing, the more you require a different evaluation approach that will take into account unintended developments and outcomes.

THREE QUESTIONS TO SORT OUT COMPLEXITY'S IMPLICATIONS FOR AN EVALUATION

How to bridge this conceptual or abstract understanding of complexity compared to simplicity, and its implications for an evaluation? I find it useful when discussing terms of reference with the primary intended users of an evaluation to explore three interrelated questions, the answers to which when considered together add up to a picture of the unpredictability the intervention faced or faces.

When planning or during implementation, to what extent did you or your team:

1. **Disagree about what was the development problem or challenge you were facing?**

In over 50 evaluations in which Outcome Harvesting has proven useful, I have found that at the moment of planning their interventions, the implementers often faced substantial disagreement about the nature of the problem they wished to solve or the development challenge they wanted to address. For example, civil society organizations (CSOs) attempting to directly influence change and development funding agencies who work to influence change through their grantees, disagreed about the political and economic dimensions of, for example, eco-health, human rights or poverty and injustice. This was because they were working in very different national and regional contexts.

2. **Disagree about what was its solution?**

In other cases, there was agreement about the problem or challenge but considerable divergence of opinion about what to do about it. This was true whether the CSOs or donor agencies faced endemic problems such as violence against women or relatively new issues such as information technology and communication, climate change, water management or deforestation. In these instances, where there were no tried and proven models, they had to innovate and experiment to discover what would work and understand why.

Of course, I also found disagreement about both the challenge and the action to be taken as well.

3. **Were uncertain about what will be the results of your actions to solve the development challenge?**

In any of these disagreement scenarios there will be considerable uncertainty about the results. Nonetheless, even when there was considerable agreement about the development challenge and what to do about it, there often was still high uncertainty about what will be the effects of an intervention. For example, in all the evaluations I have done, the commissioners agreed that either their original plan had been overtaken by changes in the environment in which they were being implemented, were too general in their definition of expected results, or simply did not exist in any evaluable form.

The greater the disagreement about the problem, what to do about it and, in any case, the uncertainty about what will be the results, the more appropriate an alternative way to evaluate will be. Although of course it is far from being the only possibility, Outcome Harvesting has proven to be useful in these situations of substantial unpredictability.

A CONCRETE EXAMPLE

To exemplify, I used Outcome Harvesting as an inquiry framework to begin a developmental evaluation with an intervention to create a regional peace-building programme. The team had carried out a year-long desk review covering 146 actors operating in the region and interviewed 21 organizations. They found there were simply no best practices or even best principles for doing regional peacebuilding in that part of the world. Thus, they recognized the considerable lack of agreement amongst the team members about the nature of the challenge the organization faced to develop an effective regional programme for building peace was not unreasonable.

On the other hand, there was considerable agreement within the team on what this action-research organization with an ecumenical mission could do (and would not do) to attempt to contribute to effective regional peacebuilding. Although they had found great conceptual and empirical differences amongst the peacebuilding initiatives by other similar, non-State actors, “capacity-building” was a common strategy that others had tried. They learned that locally owned and supported initiatives work best, a finding that echoed their own experience in using training as an intervention component. Furthermore, initiatives by State actors in the region shared a remarkable record of cordial and cooperative inter-State relations. In fact, inter-State conflicts, compared to the rampant intra-State conflicts, were relatively rare and bilateral and multilateral cooperation among the governments in the region was on the rise. Similarly, continental and subregional intergovernmental actors were successfully cooperating on trade and economic integration, which were considered as contributing to an enabling environment for regional peace and security.

Therefore, they agreed that a capacity-building programme with State actors was what they could do to address the problems of conflict and insecurity in the region. Nonetheless, the team had little certainty about what would be the results because in their own experience and that of the sources of their research, there were no consistent, discernible patterns of success of training programmes for regional peacebuilding.

Thus, there was disagreement in the team about the problem but considerable clarity of what the organization could and should do. There was agreement about which categories of social actors the intervention should explore influencing through its activities and outputs but the specific changes they could aim to influence in these actors—the outcomes—were unforeseeable. Everyone, including their donors, accepted that they could only reasonably plan activities and outputs for the first 12 months. The organization decided to use Outcome Harvesting as a monitoring tool, simply tracking actual changes in societal actors they influenced (i.e., outcomes)—instead of worrying about predefining indicators. They then reflected back every six months to understand the process of change they were influencing as it emerged.

In sum, in my experience, unknown relationships of cause and effect between what an intervention plans to do and the results it will achieve poses a serious challenge to evaluating development and social change initiatives but one that can be overcome. When there is a considerable degree of disagreement about the challenge they face or what to do about it and uncertainty about what the results will be, innovation in planning, monitoring and

evaluation is required. Objectives and the paths to achieve the desired results are largely unpredictable, and strategic plans must be modified over time to adapt to changes in the context. To identify and understand what has been achieved and how, implementers and evaluators can opt for goal-free methods from the systems field, the organizational development field, the strategy field and the evaluation field.