

Evaluating Systems Change Efforts: Where to Start

February 28, 2020

Hosted in partnership by:



Land acknowledgment

We would like to acknowledge that this virtual coffee is presented and recorded on the traditional land of the Ohlone people, the Waccamaw Siouan people, the Coast Salish people, and the Duwamish people past and present.

We honor with gratitude the land itself and the Ohlone, Waccamaw Siouan, Coast Salish, and Duwamish tribes.

Thank you.

Welcome to the discussion

- We want to hear from you! Share your **questions** in the question box on the right.
- A **recording** of today's discussion will be made available within 24 hours. We'll send you an email once it's online.
- Download a PDF of this presentation and several other **resources** in the Handout Section on the right of your screen.



**Jennifer Splansky
Juster**
Executive Director,
Collective Impact
Forum

Thank you for joining

Ways to Join the Conversation

1

Ask a question

Send questions via the Q&A box on the right of your screen.

2

Share on Twitter

@CIForumtweets
@FSGtweets
#SystemsChange

Technical Assistance

E-mail Ask for assistance in the Question box on the right or email info@collectiveimpactforum.org

Today's webinar presenters



Hallie Preskill
Managing Director
FSG



Joelle Cook
Director
FSG

We received hundreds of questions you'd like answered today—thank you!

At the beginning, what are the key evaluation issues to consider?
What are the cons to this model?

What are some suggestions for assessing context when evaluating systems change?

What are so far the successful theories of change for systems change?

What are examples of measuring the impact of systemic capacity building provided to community-based organizations?

How does one evaluate unintended consequences of external efforts as a result of systemic changes?

How might system change look different in different sectors: nonprofit, government, private, faith based?

How to set the boundaries of the system?

Do you have thoughts on evaluating systems change involving First Nations, Metis, and Urban Indigenous populations in B.C.?

Have you developed and tested evaluation tools that can be adapted?

What is difference between Impact measurement and System Change Evaluation?

How might this be possible with limited grantee resources?

How do we know and recognize that a system is changing?

How will we know if we're on track or not in the first 3 years of system change work?

What are the informal ways (low cost, low staff time) to measure and evaluate systems change?

How do you assess the influence of media on perceptions of change?

What should be the core principles and focus in evaluating public sector system changes?

While we would love to answer all of your questions...we have limited time with you today 😊

What we won't be talking about:

- Not a master class in evaluating systems change
- No definitive answers or simple solutions to many of your questions — we're still learning
- How to set up or implement a collective impact initiative

What we will be talking about:

- The concepts and language of systems thinking and change
- The differences and similarities in program evaluation and systems change evaluation
- Guidelines for planning, implementing, and learning from systems change evaluation
- Resources to further explore and use in your practice
- Some of your questions that are not included in our presentation

*And, we honestly don't know all of the answers to your questions
— we too are still learning!*

Let's start by reviewing some definitions

System: “An interconnected set of elements that is coherently organized in a way that achieves something (function or purpose).”

(Donella Meadows, 2008, Thinking in Systems: A Primer)

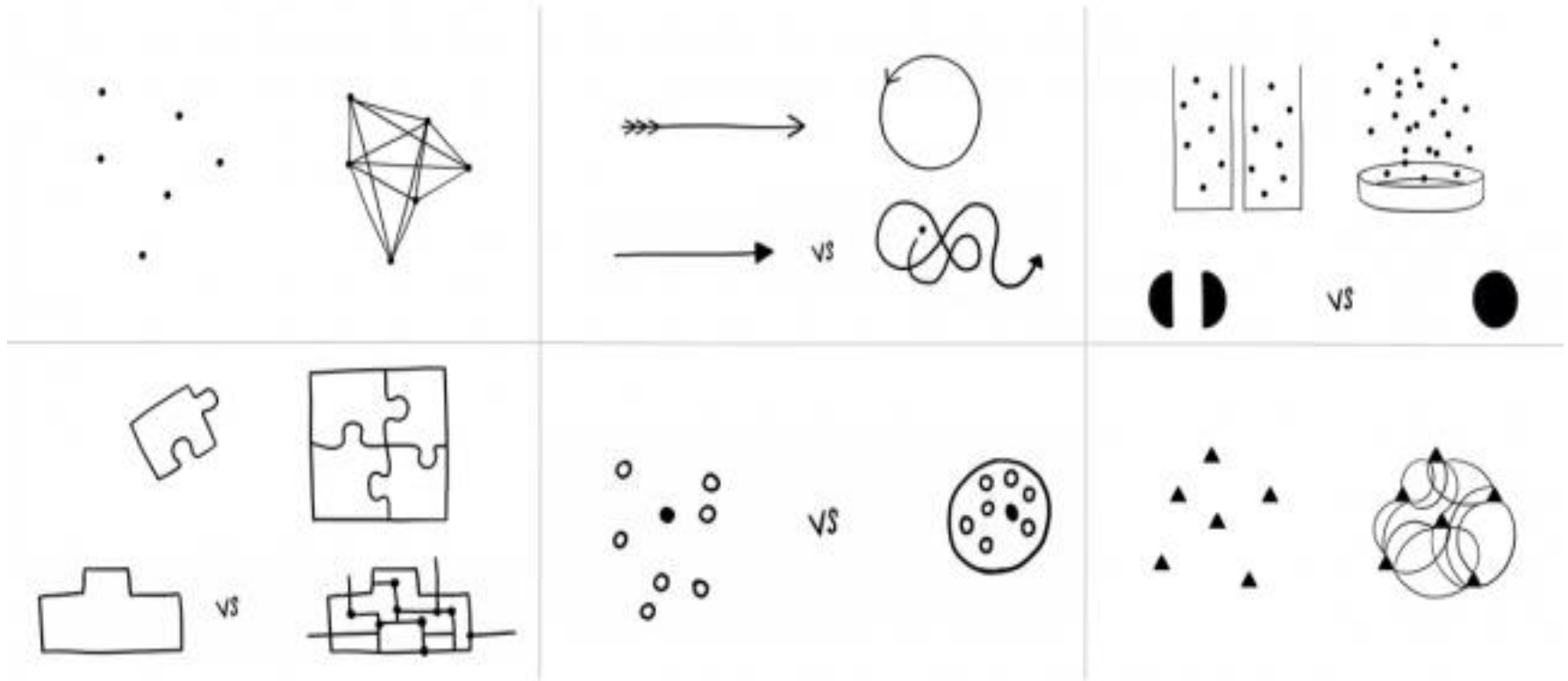
Systems Change: “Shifting the conditions that are holding the problem in place.” (<http://www.sigeneration.ca>)

Systems Thinking: Systems thinking is defined as the ability to see how organizational systems, sub-systems, and their parts interact with and influence each other; and how these systems create and contribute to specific problems.

Adapted from: <http://www.scontrino-powell.com/2013/systems-thinking-how-to-lead-in-complex-environments>

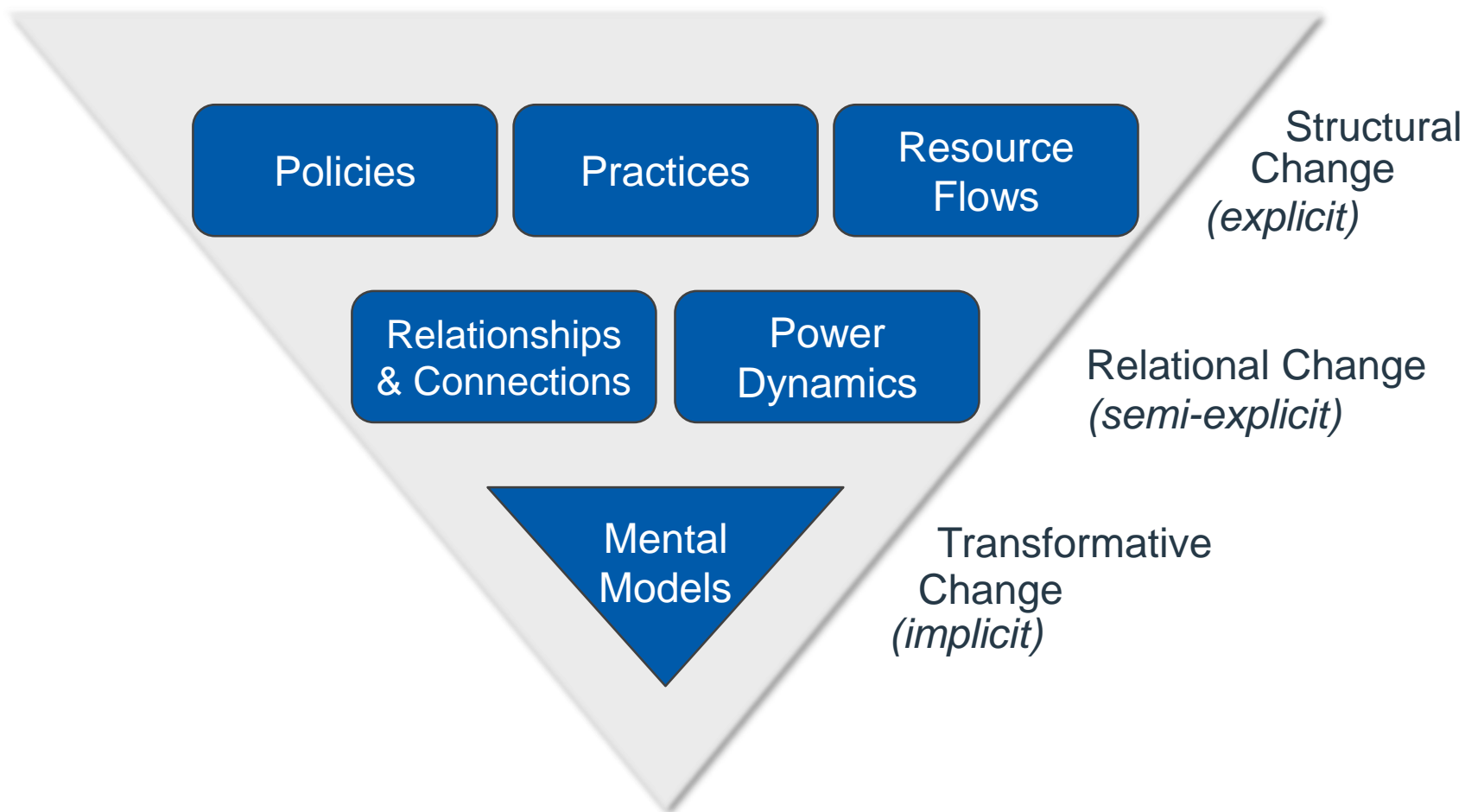
Systems change involves seeing things differently

SYSTEMS THINKING



To affect systems change, we need to focus on the conditions that have been holding the problem in place

Six Conditions of Systems Change



So, what role does evaluation play in evaluating systems change?

What Evaluation Looks Like

Evaluation involves the **systematic collection** of **relevant, credible and useful** information for making **decisions** and taking programmatic and strategic **actions**.

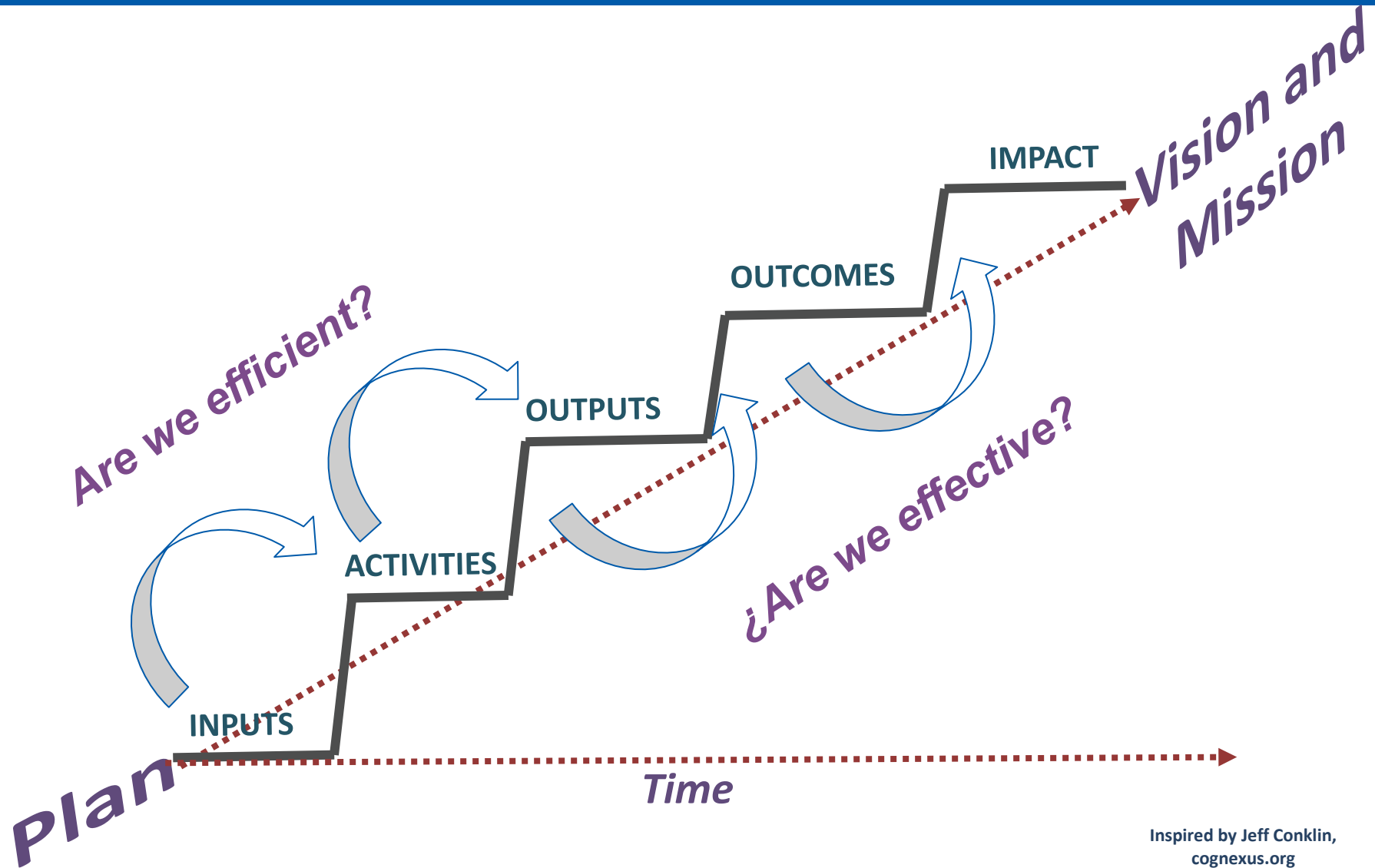
Purpose of Evaluation

Ultimately, evaluation is about: **sense-making, reality checking, assumption testing, and answering questions** — increasing our ability to take risks and learn from both failures as well as successes.

“Too many of us, and those who commission us, think that it’s all about methods. It’s not. It’s all about reasoning.”

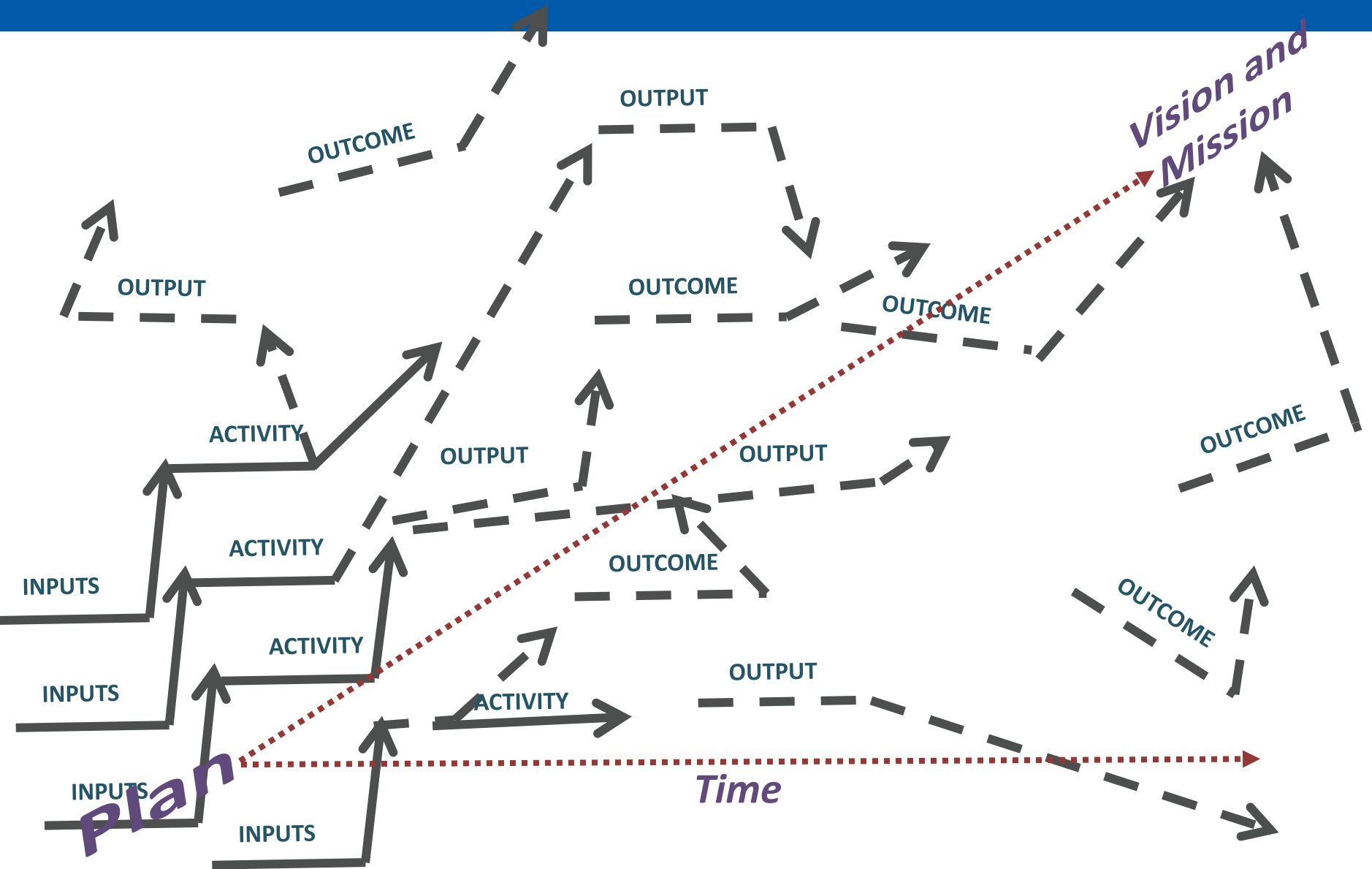
Michael Q. Patton, 2013

Simple intervention



Inspired by Jeff Conklin,
cognexus.org

But, in complex interventions



Therefore, evaluating programs is different from evaluation systems

What's the same:

Purpose — use findings to make judgments about merit, worth, value, and significance

Stakeholders — Intended use by intended users

Process — planning, implementation, use of findings

- Importance of context
- Importance of embedding an equity lens
- Judgments, recommendations or considerations are offered

What's different:

Increased focus on:

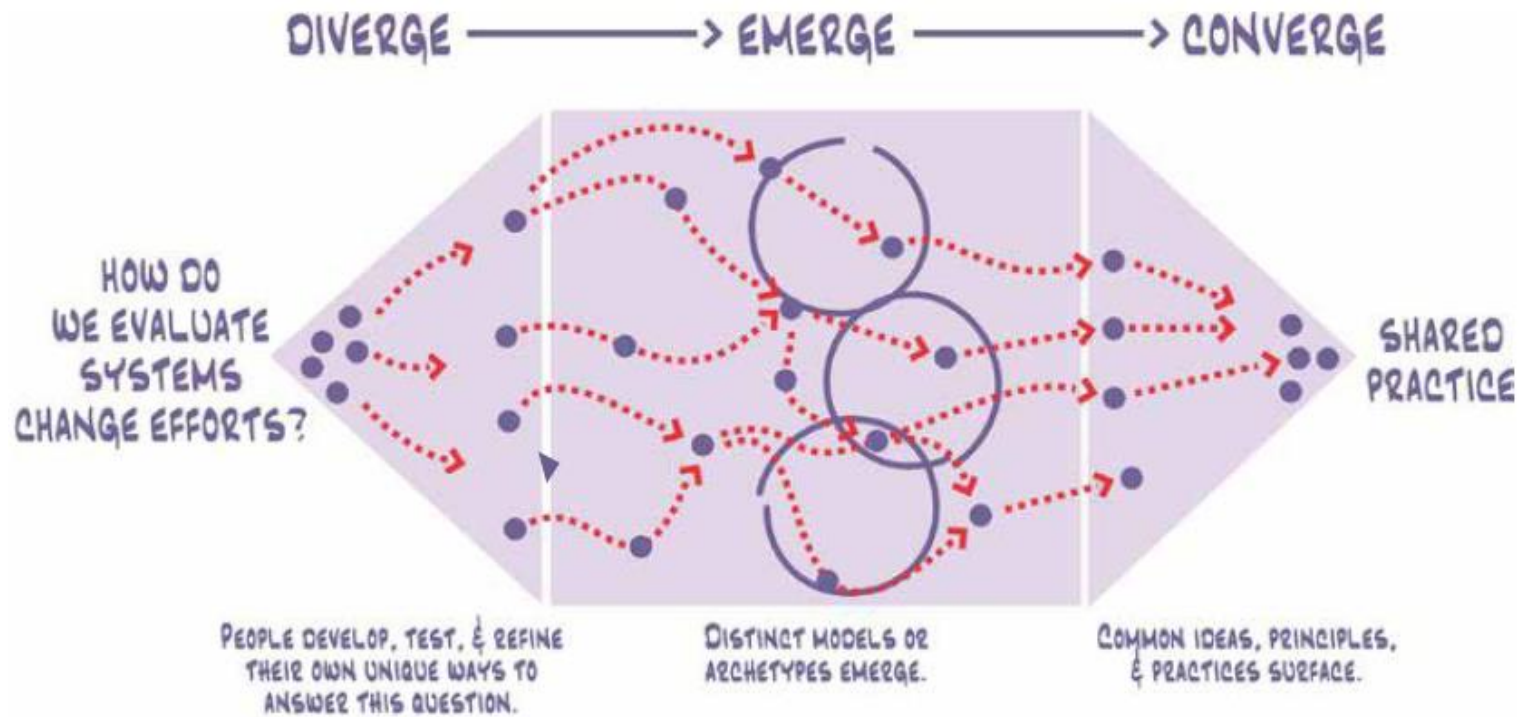
- The range of system elements
- How structural inequities are influencing the social issue and change processes
- The multiple influences of context on systems elements
- How systems are always changing; creating new patterns of interactions
- Interrelationships of actors within the system

Nature of judgement / timeline for change

- Criteria for what works, what success looks like are not easily predetermined
- Systems change is long-term, and the ultimate outcomes might take years to shift
- Outcomes are often non-linear and counter-intuitive (size of outcome does not correlate with size of input)

Need for collection methods that can capture changes in the system

What we know about evaluating systems change is still evolving



“Practitioners and evaluation writers are still ‘learning-as-they-go.’ The practice of systems change evaluation is somewhere between the ‘divergent’ and ‘emergent’ phase.”

Mark Cabaj

The following guidelines can be helpful for evaluating systems change efforts



Adopting a Learning Orientation

Planning



Implementing



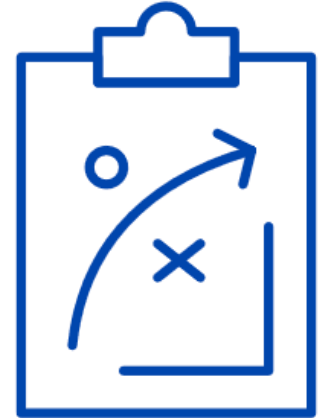
Adopting a learning orientation

- Make space and time for ongoing **sense-making** with multiple partners
- Establish **feedback loops** between / among multiple partners
- Continually test your **assumptions**
- Be open to **various perspectives** / interpretations of the data
- There's **no one simple answer** or one set of recommendations that will solve the problem
 - The evaluation will leave you with a lot of new questions!
 - The goal is to continue learning, adapting, and responding to these new questions.
 - Learning doesn't end when you get a final report.



Planning the evaluation

- Be clear about and agree on your **strategy** and **expected outcomes**
- Identify **key stakeholders**
- Describe and understand the system(s) and its historical **structural inequities**
- Understand the **context** (cultural, social, economic, historical, political)
- Develop strategic systems-oriented **learning questions**



Implementing the evaluation

- Identify systems-oriented data collection methods and sources that reflect **multiple perspectives**
- Collect and analyze data using **equitable evaluation** practices
- Consider how **small changes** may be influencing larger changes (zoom in an out throughout the evaluation)
- Look for **unintended effects** and consequences, as well as ripple effects; catalytic moments
- Attend to **changing patterns**, perspectives, narratives, and energy in the system; Look for increased or decreased energy, commitment, engagement



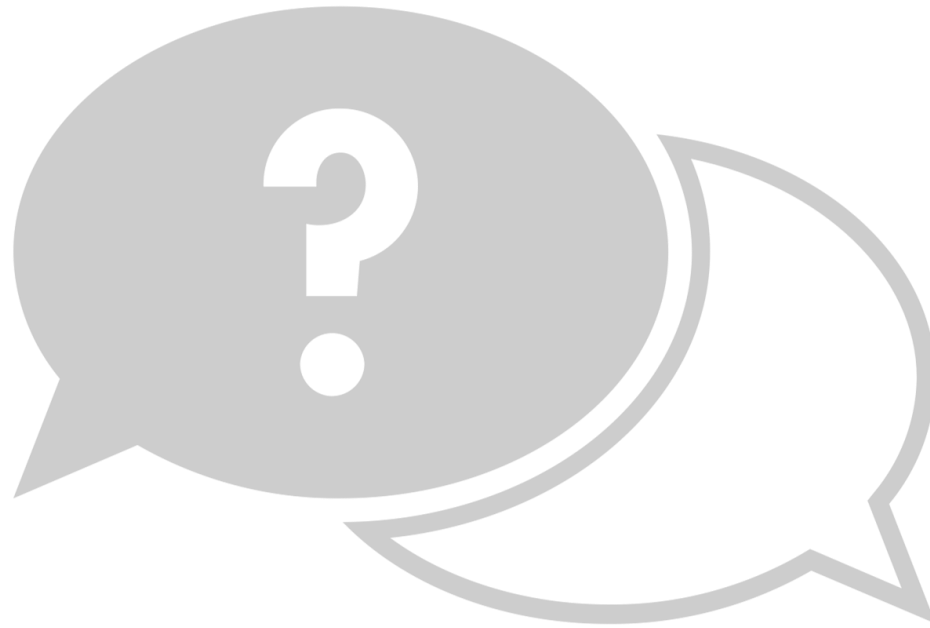
Takeaway thoughts

- There is no one right way to evaluate systems change; meaningful evaluation requires a mindset shift
- Accept that the evaluation will not result in a definitive “answer” to any of your questions—but you will gain deeper insights about what it takes to bring about change
- Use the findings to inform your decisions, but don’t expect the findings to make the decision for you
- Be okay with findings that show contribution, and not attribution
- Be okay with the messiness of systems change—the lack of control, predictability, and in many cases, causality

Mountain West example



Now it's time for some of your questions!



Today's webinar presenters



Hallie Preskill
Managing Director
FSG



Joelle Cook
Director
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2020 Minneapolis

COLLECTIVE IMPACT CONVENING

2020 Collective Impact Convening **Minneapolis | May 6–8, 2020**

The 2020 Convening will feature an array of keynote talks, case studies, how-to sessions, and tool sessions on topics such as community engagement, use of data, mental models, narrative change, policy change, building relationships, and systems change.

Plus: local site visits and an opportunity to connect to a diverse audience of backbone leaders, funders, and community partners from across the United States and around the world.

Save your spot: We encourage you to [save your seat](#) early.

The Convening fills up in advance every year!

Thank you for joining us!



Appendix—Resources

Resources on systems change

- Abercrombie, R., Harries, E., & Wharton, R. (2015). Systems Change: A Guide to What it is and How to do It. <https://www.thinknpc.org/resource-hub/systems-change-a-guide-to-what-it-is-and-how-to-do-it/>.
- Aronson, D. (1996-8). *Overview of Systems Thinking*. Thinking Page. http://www.thinking.net/Systems_Thinking/OverviewSTarticle.pdf
- Ashoka et al. (2020). Embracing complexity: Towards a shared understanding of funding systems change. <https://www.ashoka.org/en-us/embracing-complexity>
- Kania, J., Kramer, M., & Senge, P. (2018). [*The Water of Systems Change*](#).
- Lannon, C. (Ed.). (2008). *A Beginner's Guide to Systems Thinking*. Pegasus Communications, Inc. <https://fifthgradewinterhaven.org/wp-content/uploads/2008/06/beginnersguide.pdf>
- Management Assistance Group and Grantmakers for Effective Organizations. (2016). *Systems Grantmaking Resource Guide*. Retrieved from <http://systems.geofunders.org/>.
- Meadows, D. H. (2009). *Thinking in systems: A Primer*. London; Sterling, VA: Earthscan.
- Williams, B., & van't Hof, S. (2014). *Wicked Solutions: a systems approach to complex problems*. Self-Published.

Resources on evaluating systems change

- Cabaj, Mark. (nd) [What we know so far about evaluating systems change](#): Sets of principles for evaluating systems change efforts
- Coffman, J. (2007). *A Framework for Evaluating Systems Initiatives*. BUILD Initiative. Retrieved from <http://www.buildinitiative.org/Portals/0/Uploads/Documents/Framework%20for%20Evaluating%20Systems%20Initiatives.pdf>.
- Coffman, J., & Reed, E. (2009). *Unique Methods in Advocacy Evaluation*. The California Endowment. Retrieved from http://www.innonet.org/resources/files/Unique_Methods_Brief.pdf.
- Community Approaches To Systems Change: A Compendium Of Practices, Reflections, And Findings. (November, 2019). Equal Measure, Spark Policy Institute, MPHII
- Davies, R. and Dart, J. (2005). The “Most Significant Change” (MSC) Technique. <http://www.mande.co.uk/docs/MSCGuide.pdf>
- [Equitable Evaluation Initiative](#)
- Funnell, S. C. and Rogers, P.J. (2011). *Purposeful Program Theory: Effective Use of Theories of Change and Logic Models*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Resources on evaluating systems change (con't)

- Hargreaves, M. (2010). *Evaluating System Change: A Planning Guide*. Mathematica Policy Research, Inc.
- Latham, N. (2014). *A Practical Guide to Evaluating Systems Change in a Human Services System Context*. Learning for Action.
- Patton, M.Q. (2011). *Developmental Evaluation*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Preskill, H., Gopal, S., Mack, K., & Cook, J. (2015). *Evaluating Complexity*. FSG. Retrieved from <https://www.fsg.org/publications/evaluating-complexity>.
- Preskill, H. & Tzavaras Catsambas, T. (2006). *Reframing Evaluation Through Appreciative Inquiry*, Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Tamarack Website <https://www.tamarackcommunity.ca/evaluating-impact-evaluating-systems-change>
- Wilson-Grau, Ricardo. Outcome Harvesting. Better Evaluation. Retrieved from: http://betterevaluation.org/plan/approach/outcome_harvesting