A Call to Action

Complexity Matters:
Aligning the Monitoring and Evaluation of Social and Behavior Change with the Realities of Implementation

Follow-up from the Fall 2015 CORE Group workshop entitled, “Behavior Change in the Age of Complexity.”

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The field of SBC is premised on some foundational truths:

• The change process is dependent on the context of implementation and, thus, can be highly variable and difficult—often impossible—to predict.

• Countless factors from knowledge to motivation, current attitudes, local material conditions, social support, social norms, etc. can influence behavior change.

• As change is an emergent, ongoing and complex process, it cannot be captured using pre-set process or outcome indicators or within a short timeframe. Importantly, over-reliance on quantitative data not only fails to capture the complexity of SBC processes, but actually distorts them.

• Difficulties notwithstanding, monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of SBC is both possible and critical if we are to improve upon the quality of current interventions and inform future implementation. The facts of context-sensitivity and complexity should not stand in the way of attaining these objectives.

Evaluation practices designed to provide a comparison of outcomes naturally draw on quantitative methods to answer the question “everything else being equal, did activity X produce statistically better outcomes than activity Y?” But while outcome evaluation usefully flags factors meriting greater scrutiny, it generally reveals little about the process of change. And, as SBC professionals, we know that, in the real-world of programming, controlling for context is not possible. Knowing “what worked” in a particular program (again, the objective of outcome evaluation) does not reliably answer the question of “what works” in general and what will work in future programs facing different contexts and circumstances. Data reflecting the knowledge, perceptions and experiences of program implementers, target populations and other stakeholders can provide a more realistic picture of SBC implementation and the process of change. We believe that aligning our M&E approaches to the actual context of implementation reminds us of two additional truths:
Soliciting the participation of audiences and other stakeholders can create the conditions for sustainable change if it produces a framework that makes sense to beneficiaries as well as researchers. Thus, while the complexity of any given context may not be controllable, it can be anticipated and leveraged to promote change.

A flexible and interdisciplinary approach based on ongoing engagement—and one that draws on research and theory from complexity, systems and implementation sciences—is vital to the relevance and sustainability of SBC initiatives.

**Challenges we face in monitoring and evaluating SBC interventions**

**Behavior change as a moving target**

When speaking of social and behavior change as complex, we can highlight three dimensions of complexity. The first is *Contextual Complexity*. All programs are shaped by myriad determinants both in the environment and as part of implementation process itself. This dimension of complexity is often what comes to mind when we think of the “context” of an intervention. The second dimension might be called *Temporal Complexity* and highlights the dynamism of change that unfolds over time. As we know, the values of contextual variables shift as circumstances change and as stakeholders react to those changes. And finally, what might be called *Constructivist Complexity* refers to the fact that the significance and meaning of variables are perceived and interpreted differently by different audiences and stakeholders. This dimension of complexity is not always considered but in some ways it is the dimension that is the most challenging for both M&E and the future application of lessons learned.

**Attribution vs. Contribution**

The issue of attribution is increasingly recognized globally. For instance, ongoing work led by WHO in partnership with UNICEF, UNFPA, USAID, NORAD, NIH, and the Norwegian Institute of Public Health is designed to improve the assessment and application of evidence in complex interventions (particularly in SBC/community engagement interventions for MNCH) as a means of guiding policymakers in their decision-making and priority-setting.

While measuring SBC activities seems simple enough – for instance, one can tabulate survey results, radio spots aired, SMS messages opened, participants in meetings, people reached, even service uptake are amenable to good data collection – attributing change to process measures or activity outputs is highly problematic. Such measures do not address the quality of the attention paid, the manner in which information was understood, or whether a particular action is a sign of sustainable change. They cannot tell us whether an activity achieved its effects through interaction with other program activities or other variables unrelated to the intervention or the likelihood that evidence of a shift in behavior will spread or evolve.

Every monitoring and evaluation method is therefore limited by the degree to which its target is understood and shaped by the complexities that arise during the implementation process. Because clear *attribution* is impossible in most cases, we believe that framing evaluation in terms of *contribution* is more likely to reflect a realistic appreciation of context and complexity. Claims of contribution are, of course, more provisional than those of attribution, but that is the point; complexity requires a critical stance towards both quantitative and qualitative data. Our understanding of what produced a change in behavior is always open to further
evidence and arguments that strengthen or weaken our claims.

**Limitations of RCTs for the purpose of understanding how interventions achieve their effects**

Methodological choices have often led us to make claims of attribution rather than contribution. In recent years, there has been increased interest among donors in utilizing randomized controlled trials (RCT) for impact measurement and creating standardized indicators to make the evaluation of behavior change more comparable across projects and programs. But as suggested earlier, while RCTs and standardized indicators provide a basis on which to determine and compare outcomes, they are not designed to enable administrators or practitioners to understand the role that shifting norms, political change, economic growth, or implementation practices played in achieving (or failing to achieve) those outcomes. By systematically including community members and implementers in the M&E of intervention activities, we can move closer to richer, real-time understanding of change and use this understanding to design responsive, more sustainable programs.

**SBC within the life cycle of a project**

It is critical that SBC evaluation realistically accounts for the project life cycle. Not only is the SBC process gradual, but, ideally, SBC interventions should anticipate evolution in response to future circumstances. Social norm shifting, for example, should result in cross-generational effects that, by definition, transcend any project’s life cycle. As significant outcomes of SBC interventions lay in the future, the best way to determine a contribution to change is to assess change over time using longitudinal studies or post-project sustainability studies. To the extent possible, practitioners should resist pressure to produce short-term results within rigid and unrealistic timeframes using pre-determined and inflexible indicators.

**A Call to Action: Context-sensitive approaches to real-world monitoring and evaluation of SBC**

Context-sensitive approaches to M&E (and research more broadly) are increasingly seen as critical to areas such as SBC. There are a variety of emerging trends in applying methods that focus on complex interactions, fuller inclusion of stakeholders, and the need for adaptation in keeping with our commitment to the real-world problems of real-world populations. We recognize, however, that without the active commitment and support of donors as well as practitioners, efforts to align the monitoring and evaluation of SBC with the realities of implementation will not advance.

We owe it to the populations we serve to act on what we know about the importance of context to the nature of change. The potential to improve what we are already doing is enormous, and the costs of ignoring the inherent complexities of SBC implementation are much too high.
Recommendations for Advancing an Appreciation of Context and Complexity in SBC Programming

Implementing organizations can:

- Facilitate participation that can generate insightful and sensitive data, integrate activities that promote social advocacy, accountability, social cohesion and networking into interventions.

- Create rapid assessment tools that implementers can use to gauge context and shifts in context.

- Be nimble. Shifts in a project’s context of implementation will occur and practitioners should be skilled in detecting those shifts and responding to them.

- Emphasize in proposals the importance of tracking implementation of projects and signal your organization’s commitment to respond to shifting circumstances.

- Be humble and expect the humility of others. Resist overblown claims of unequivocal attribution and success.

Donors can:

- Recognize that many initiatives have emergent goals that arise as projects unfold and circumstances shift; these may be of significant value to stakeholders and beneficiary populations.

- Take a critical, long-term view of the value of alternative methods for evaluating social and behavior change. Provide adequate resources to strengthen capacity at all levels and over a realistic timeframe.

- Require projects to track the implementation process and adjust projects in line with shifts in context.

- Recognize that the acuity and nimbleness of implementer response to the shifting reality of the implementation is critical.

- Resist promoting overblown claims of unequivocal attribution and success.

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