Evaluating Transformational Development Outcomes

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Introduction

An evaluation exercise is made up of several components.

- Evaluability assessment: this is a judgment by the evaluator that the cost of the evaluation is justified by the anticipated benefits of completing the evaluation.

- Evaluation design: this is the plan that describes the objectives and the activities that will achieve the objectives.

- Data collection and analysis: this is the work that collects and interprets the evidence that is used to support conclusions and recommendations.

- Reporting: this is the work that communicates in various ways the importance and implications of the conclusions and recommendations.

The purpose of this paper is to stimulate Christian community development practitioners to evaluate individual and social transformation in development projects, not just change. This can be done only by integrating spiritual disciplines with sound evaluation practice in each component. It is assumed that an evaluability assessment has been completed that justifies the cost of moving ahead with an evaluation (Cookingham, 2000).

Overview of sections in this paper:

- The backdrop for the content portion of a transformative evaluation design is the nature of transformational development as summarized in the next section.

- The following section summarizes the evolution of my thinking about evaluating community development.

- The third section illustrates various groups of questions or topics that can guide data collection and analysis.

- The next section describes implications of a transformative perspective for evaluation activities such as using a participatory approach, establishing a strong monitoring system, and discerning conclusions.

- The fifth section discusses using in-depth reflection to formulate powerful recommendations.

- The final section is focused on reporting and visioning.

Dr. Bryant Myers, Professor of Transformational Development at Fuller Seminary, Pasadena California, and Dr. Saphir Athyal, retired from World Vision International as consultant for evangelism, have inspired me during this evaluation journey numerous times; praise God!

This is an example of radical change in someone's life. In transformation the person moves from self centeredness to other centeredness, from committing sin against other people to having compassion for others, from exploiting the neighbor to caring for the neighbor.

What causes such radical change in a person? God does the transforming of individual lives, but God uses believers (disciples, followers of Jesus) in the process. Facilitation of transformational development is simply living like Jesus in a community.

Transformational Development (TD) Themes

There are two themes that help me understand the nature of transformational development as a distinct type of development practice. Bryant Myers (1999, 2011) has described transformational development in detail from the perspective of holistic thinking. Anyone interested in facilitating transformative development and evaluating it should periodically study his book, *Walking with the Poor*.

Paul Marshall (1998) states as a simple and spiritual truth that this world is our home and that our service in this world is service to God. Studying this book will provoke fruitful thinking about the nature of transformational development, and thereby ideas for transformative evaluation.

Theme: holistic thinking.

Per Myers (2011) transformational development is based on holistic thinking; therefore, the key to effective transformational development rests in the mindset or worldview of the development workers.

The implication of a development focus on holistic thinking is that transformative evaluation methodology should be based on holistic thinking, and should examine the extent to which holistic thinking is present in the program being evaluated. This can be learned by exploring the prevailing stories in the community and the development agency.

Sustained by kingdom values.

Transformation is much more than change. Transformation is profound holistic change at the root of being. A transformed person is sustained by kingdom values. A transformed society is sustained by kingdom values. Any individual or social change that does not involve living by kingdom values is not transformation.

Outcomes for community members.

Transformational development, which is based on holistic thinking and practice, enables community members to:

- <u>Realize their true vocation as children of God</u>. That vocation is to be more loving and just in their relationships with self, with each other, with the community, with God, and with their environment.

- <u>Confront evil in their personal lives and in the community</u>. Suffering that restores right relationships is an integral part of transformational development; Jesus on the cross is an essential image for understanding transformational development.

Core strategy.

The core of a transformational development strategy is enabling relationships to grow in consistency with kingdom values. Meeting physical needs of individuals or reforming social structures are means to this end, not ends in themselves.

The life style of the development agent is central to implementing the core strategy. The lives of the disciples were transformed as they interacted with Jesus day after day, miracle after miracle, trial after trial. God willing, the lives of community members may be transformed as they interact with a mature Christian development agent day after day.

Theme: this world <u>is</u> my home.

Marshall's book (1998, p.250) will stimulate creative thinking about transformational development. He sums up his thesis like this: "The simple and spiritual truth is that *this world is our home*, that our service in this world is service to God, that what we accomplish here we accomplish forever, that we await the resurrection of our bodies, that we expect a new heaven and an earth wherein God dwells in the midst of this creation, that we should live according to these beliefs."

Transformational development takes place in the present world with all of its propensities for sin and death. Ways to describe transformational development: it brings light to darkness; it encourages hope in the midst of despair; it demonstrates concretely how people can love God and neighbor in their circumstances regardless of how difficult they may be.

After describing our fear of the world in the first section of the book, Marshall organizes his material in four sections.

- He describes <u>our place</u> in the world from the perspectives of our God-given responsibility to be good stewards of all creation, our struggle with pervasive sin, and our need to participate in pervasive redemption in the world.

- <u>Our response</u> to the world in which sin abounds but grace abounds even more involves learning, work, rest and play.

- <u>Our</u> tasks in the world as good stewards include treating all aspects of God's creation in the ways that God intends, and being accountable to God for what we do; working for justice and enlisting popular support for justice; being artistic in the ordinary arts of daily living such as dressing ourselves, cooking meals, and conversing with one another; and coping with technology.

- <u>Our hope</u> for the world is expressed by taming idols, sharing gifts with others rather than trying to convert them, cultivating patience and long-suffering as God allows good and evil to co-exist, believing that good is everlasting, and focusing on being obedient to God's ways regardless of how the world defines success.

An evaluation team that studies this book before planning the evaluation will be in a better place to pose transformative evaluation questions and issues. Referring to key ideas in the book as evidence is analyzed and interpreted will help team members discern implications for transformation.

It took years for me to realize that informed judgments must be based on God's wisdom before a development program can be a means of transformation that really matters.

Evolution of Transformative Evaluation (TE)

Before I describe the distinctive features of transformative evaluation (TE) I summarize the phases in the evolution of my thinking about evaluating community development while I was Director Evaluation at World Vision International. See www.wvi.org for information about World Vision International; see Cookingham (2002a) for a detailed description of the journey.

First phase of the evolution: evaluation as facilitation.

> Facilitate informed judgments by stakeholders.

Often "evaluation" refers to a written document that contains conclusions and recommendations about a program. This document or report is the result of a long process of accumulating evidence to answer significant questions about the value of a program. Evaluation work will be more effective, however, if other significant outcomes are kept in mind.

• First, an evaluation process can develop greater understanding among stakeholder groups about the program theory or logic. This happens during the planning phase of an evaluation that is based on evaluation utilization principles combined with a participatory approach.

• Second, an evaluation process can increase understanding among stakeholder groups about how reality is perceived differently. Groups can develop a greater appreciation for how different perceptions contribute to more meaningful interpretations of evidence. This happens when data collection and analysis is done by a team that includes representatives from different stakeholder groups.

• Third, persons who participate in evaluation work are more likely to apply evaluation findings. They are more likely to make personal resolutions about changing their practices to be more effective.

These considerations led me to define program evaluation in the 1980s as follows.

Definition – Program Evaluation

Program evaluation is the facilitation of informed judgments by stakeholders about the merit or worth of a program, based on verifiable evidence

Second phase: evaluation from a holistic view.

Focus on people loving God and neighbor through the program.

Colleagues within World Vision challenged this definition because it made no reference to the spiritual dimension of community development. As I struggled to respond to criticism of this secular view of evaluation, I read Newbigin's *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society* (1989). Then in 1997 I formulated a definition for holistic program evaluation and my initial thoughts about holistic evaluation (Cookingham, 1997).

Definition – Holistic Program Evaluation

Holistic program evaluation is the facilitation of informed judgments about the merit or worth of a program, based on verifiable evidence, in relation to people loving God and neighbor within the scope of the program.

The terms "*holism"* and "*holistic"* mean different things to people who are concerned about the relationships between physical and spiritual dimensions of development. I choose to focus on concern for love of God and neighbor as core characteristics of transformational development. Holistic program evaluation, then, collects and analyzes evidence about the relationships between a program and people loving God and neighbor.

On one hand, a program can achieve its objectives for health and economic development efficiently and effectively. It may still be judged as having little worth by a holistic evaluation if it has not had any effect on people loving God and neighbor. Worse, a successful health and economic development program could increase the disparities between the poor and the less poor in a community. Such disparity hinders greater expressions of love for God and neighbor.

On the other hand, suppose that a program fails to achieve its health and economic development objectives due to external factors that overwhelmed program efforts. It may be judged in a holistic evaluation as having worth because it has encouraged and enabled more people to love God and neighbor.

Thus, the purpose of a holistic program evaluation is to – according to God's will – identify and interpret God's activity within the scope of the program.

Third phase: Is impact evaluation appropriate for community development programs?

> Technical impact evaluation is beyond the capacity of most transformational development programs. Furthermore, it may not be very useful.

About this time I was thinking quite a bit about resolving challenges in using impact evaluation for community development programs (Cookingham, 1996). As I worked out implications for this holistic perspective, however, I began to see that evaluating the impact of transformational development programs may be less important than learning what helps and hinders transformation. Consider the following points.

We use "impact" imprecisely.

Practitioners often use 'impact" when they mean "effect" or "outcome." Lawrence Mohr (1992) defines impact as some measure of the difference between the actual value of the outcome after program implementation and the estimated value of the outcome if the program had not been implemented. "Impact" refers to documented differences that can be attributed to the program rather than to something else. In ordinary language, we want to know if the program caused observed results.

Cause-effect relationships are complicated.

There are different schools of thought, however, on what constitutes a cause-effect relationship and what evidence is required to establish that a particular relationship is a causal one. The ordinary account of a cause as a necessary and sufficient condition for another event called the effect is not satisfactory. Philosopher John Mackie (1993) suggests that we think of causes as an Insufficient but Necessary part of a condition which is itself Unnecessary but Sufficient to cause the result. (This can be called the INUS condition.)

Consider a burning candle as the cause of a house fire. By itself a burning candle will not set the house afire; it is insufficient. But with other conditions present, such as combustible material near the candle flame and no attempt to extinguish the initial smolder, the house burns. The burning candle is necessary; the fire would not have started if the flame had not been close enough to combustible material to raise the temperature to the point of igniting.

But this complex condition of burning candle near combustible material is sufficient to start the fire. Since a house fire can start in other ways (e.g., through faulty wiring that overheats, or a lightning strike during a storm,) with no burning candle present, however, the complex condition is not necessary.

Reflection on this example illustrates some of the complexities in trying to establish whether a ten-year community development program causes reductions in poverty. The fact that so many factors outside the control of a development program can affect the outcomes makes it very

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difficult to measure development impact in a meaningful way. It becomes even more difficult to defend a measure of development impact when the other observations below are considered. As practitioners of transformational development we should not be afraid to acknowledge this fact of life. <u>As stewards of God's resources we should avoid being pressured into allocating resources to a measurement task that cannot be done properly.</u>

Qualitative research approaches can help practitioners understand transformation.

Things that really matter to us as followers of Jesus may not be measurable in the sense of using numbers in a meaningful way. But trustworthy evidence can be collected and analyzed objectively to support conclusions about what helps and hinders transformation.

Consider the following goal: To distribute emergency food so that people survive with dignity.

Within the scientific worldview impact could be measured be comparing the number of deaths that occurred during the food distribution with the estimated number of deaths that would have occurred if no food had been distributed. Since dignity is a quality that varies in individuals according to many factors, some of which are unknown, within the typical scientific worldview program impact on dignity be measured with great difficulty if at all.

But relevant objective evidence could be collected to support a conclusion about the relationship between people's dignity and program operations.

• Program personnel could describe what they did, and why, to maintain the dignity of people. Experts in emergency food distribution could then review this description and describe what they would have done differently in the same situation. Their failure to advocate different procedures is confirmation of the appropriateness of operations for achieving the goal.

• Survivors could be asked to describe their experience during the distribution period. References to the attitudes and behavior of program personnel towards them are clues to how well dignity was maintained.

Personal stories that impact has occurred need to be analyzed along with other types of evidence. Such stories can be powerful evidence for impact when they are consistent with other trustworthy information. Advances in qualitative research allow an evaluator to substantiate stronger claims related to achieving transformative outcomes.

Worldviews can be in conflict.

Scientists focus attention on discovering relationships among things that don't change over time. They focus on relationships that are not affected by people's perceptions or feelings. They focus on relationships that are predictable.

Christians focus attention on relationships that can change mysteriously. They are interested in relationships that are dramatically affected by people's perceptions or feelings. They are more interested in relationships that are transformed. Scientific methods can help Christians understand some program outcomes related to transformation, but they are not adequate by themselves. This will be discussed in more detail later in the paper.

Although there is much pressure from different stakeholder groups to do impact evaluations their expectations often are unrealistic. I recommend that meager resources for evaluation work be concentrated on pre-project research and needs analysis, and rigorous monitoring throughout project implementation. Other types of evaluation work should be done when an analysis of evaluation feasibility shows that it will yield useful information to justify the evaluation cost.

God loves all people in creation, regardless of goals and objectives they set for themselves, dreams they have, or visions they create. Let's measure impact to understand better what God is doing through our development programs, not just to understand how well we are doing.

Current phase: TE.

> Renew thinking about what really matters, and include that as an objective in the evaluation design.

As I considered implications for evaluation from both the nature of transformational development and the challenges posed by impact evaluation, I realized that an evaluation activity provides an opportunity to facilitate changes in stakeholder perspectives on what really matters in transformational development. What really matters should be the starting point for designing any program evaluation.

> Definition – Transformative Evaluation (TE)
> *Transformative evaluation* is holistic evaluation of a transformational development program that includes the objective of renewing the evaluator's thinking and stakeholders' views regarding what really matters in transformational development.

To accomplish this objective TE examines the sustainability of profound holistic change that is taking place in people and social relationships as the development program is implemented. Particular attention is given to understanding the attitudes and behaviors of development workers, and how those attitudes and behaviors influence change in people and communities related to transformation.

I still believe that effective program evaluation involves facilitation of judgments by stakeholders about the merit and worth of the program, based on verifiable evidence. I still believe that collecting and analyzing evidence about the ways in which a program has affected how people love God and neighbor, or do not love God and neighbor, is holistic program evaluation. But transformational development can be viewed in other ways so evaluation of a

transformational development program may focus on other forms of evidence that support different perspectives on program merit and worth.

TE is planned and implemented for transformation of people's thinking about the core objectives for transformational development. It then collects trustworthy evidence regarding the extent to which such objectives have been achieved. It should be a profound learning event for everyone who participates in the evaluation or seriously studies the evaluation reporting.

In planning transformative evaluation there are two primary considerations: content and style.

- The questions and topics that will be explored by the evaluation is the first consideration. This is the evaluation content.

- The second is the style of the evaluation. This is the activities that enhance the possibility of transformed thinking to occur in stakeholders as the evaluation is planned and implemented. This includes methodology for collecting and analyzing evidence, but it goes beyond the typical scientific considerations to include spiritual activities.

For those who are concerned that spiritual activities are not objective and therefore not appropriate for program evaluation, I encourage them to consider the advice of Richard Foster (1998, p.23). "Let me suggest that we take an experiential attitude toward spiritual realities. Like any other scientific endeavor, we form a hypothesis and experiment with it to see if it is true or not. If our first experiment fails, we do not despair or label the whole business fraudulent. We reexamine our procedure, perhaps adjust our hypothesis, and try again. We should at least have the honesty to persevere in this work to the same degree we would in any field of science. The fact that so many are unwilling to do so betrays not their intelligence but their prejudice."

The leader of a Transformative Evaluation event should expect to engage in spiritual warfare. The devil will hover nearby looking for every opportunity to thwart searching for truth about the program. Only the armor of God can protect him or her such that the truth emerges undistorted.

TE Topics

In the typical midterm project evaluation the evaluator documents what has been accomplished against project goals, and explores reasons for both under- and over-accomplishment. Then recommendations are developed to enable accomplishment of appropriate goals effectively and efficiently within existing constraints including the project timeframe.

But does our desire to be in control of things by setting and achieving goals reflect rebellion against being submissive to God's unfolding plan for salvation and redemption? If one purpose of program evaluation is to seek truth about progress toward goals, a broader purpose is to illuminate the truth that sets people free. This is done by describing the context within which program activities related to goals take place. There are important things to consider like the following.

• There is a <u>mix of motives</u> that can be placed on a continuum from selfish gain to selfless service to those who are in need.

• There is a <u>mix of perceptions</u> about God that range from God is at work for the greatest good of people from a divine perspective; to understanding God is irrelevant for describing the dynamics of community development.

• There is a <u>mix of faith touchstones</u> from God is compassionate but single-mindedly focused on salvation; to people mean to do good deeds but get diverted easily.

Typically an evaluation involves searching for knowledge that we can use to change the world so that it is more like our vision of the good life. An alternative approach to evaluation involves seeking knowledge that we can use to worship and serve God in more ways in our day-by-day living. A reflection on knowledge is presented to illustrate this point.

Then two illustrations are given to show how topics in TE can be organized. In the first illustration progress toward project goals is examined in light of four overarching questions to guide the collection and interpretation of evidence. The second illustration is a frame for developing more specific questions

related to Christ-centered witness, church partnerships, and spiritual formation of staff and community members.

Three types of knowledge: heart, sin, world.

> *See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ.*
>
> *Colossians 2:8* NRSV

Evaluation (including monitoring) is the business of making informed judgments about the value of something, where those judgments are supported by various kinds of knowledge. For the Christian evaluator there are three primary kinds of knowledge.

First, there is knowledge of the heart that is based on loving God and neighbor. As one grows in this love; as one allows his or her decisions and actions to be directed toward strengthening selfless relationships with others; one makes more informed judgments about value. Without knowing how precious each person is as a creature of God, without knowing the wonders of ecological balance through the eons, how can one make informed judgments of value about community development? This knowledge comes through concentrated study of God's word revealed in scripture, deep listening to God's direction through prayer, and interior examination of one's feelings in the presence of neighbors.

Second, there is knowledge of sin, which is based on personal experience of failure to do what one knows is good, and failure to not do what one knows is bad. Sin pervades our lives, warring against the bonds of love. The value of community development must be determined by assessing how both love for God and neighbor and the human sinful nature are at work. This knowledge comes through deep listening to God in prayer, and the expressed feelings of those who are in the situation. Evaluators will be deceived about the outcomes of community development if they have shallow knowledge about sin and grace.

Third, there is empirical knowledge of God's world, tested by the critical skepticism that is the foundation of the scientific worldview. Why did drinking the water from the unprotected well make people ill? This knowledge comes through careful observation and sound reasoning about relationships among the contents of those observations. All qualified evaluators are skilled in discovering and applying this type of knowledge.

Christian evaluators need to be just as skilled in discovering and applying the knowledge that comes only through concentrated study of scripture and regular communing with God in Christ, both in solitude and in fellowship with the body of Christ. They also need to heed Paul's warning to avoid becoming a victim of hollow and deceptive philosophy (v. 8). Scholars believe that Paul was referring to Gnosticism, which regarded knowledge beyond faith in Christ as the ultimate reality.

In evaluation work the Christian must struggle again and again against becoming a captive of the principles of science. For example, one touted principle is that only things that can be

measured should be included in an evaluation design or a monitoring system. (A corollary is that program design should include only measurable objectives.) How can meaningful numbers be obtained for changes in social relationships that are more just in a community, taking into account its culture? If such measures can be obtained, how can they be divided into the portion caused by program activities and the portion caused by other things? If I cannot do this according to principles of science, where only empirical evidence is valid, then I cannot evaluate social relationships, no matter how important they are to my development paradigm.

Such reasoning is hollow and deceptive, not only from a Christian perspective, but for many social scientists. Verifiable empirical information, rigorous analysis, and willingness to subject both to critical scrutiny by qualified persons are essential for evaluating or monitoring -- measurement is not. But knowledge of the heart, knowledge of the abundance of sin and the even greater abundance of grace, are foundational for evaluating and monitoring what matters most.

Four overarching questions for TD evaluation.

The purpose of these overarching questions is to stimulate new thinking about what really matters in TD, which is a key objective for TE.

In this area of communities what aspects of <u>sin</u> are keeping people in bondage? (How can the content and style of the evaluation enable appropriate confession and repentance?)

- In the area <u>communities what is God calling</u> staff and various groups of development stakeholders to do about the present situation? (Use participatory scripture exercises and transformative prayer in the process of discerning appropriate recommendations based on sound evidence.)

- What do staff, community members and other <u>stakeholders envision</u> for this area of communities that will make manifest God's establishment of the kingdom of God? (How can this evaluation enable kingdom visioning?)

- Do staff and community members (including church leaders) <u>believe that God is powerful enough</u> to transform this area of communities according to the overall purpose of transformational development? (What does evaluation evidence say about their belief and unbelief?)

I encourage transformative evaluation teams to reflect on Isaiah 55 at least once during the evaluation process. Discuss what really satisfies the deep longings in every person, regardless of the person's condition and situation. Discuss what really gives people confidence and power. Discuss what really leads to changed thinking that is more consistent with the ways of God, which are built into the fiber of everyone's being. Explore what God's higher thoughts may be about this community in this period of history. Discuss what can cause mountains and hills to sing, and trees to shout for joy.

Christ-centered triad for transformation.

> To achieve the overall purpose of transformational development
> - Include spiritual development as explicit objectives.
> - Nature partnerships with the various manifestations of the church.
> - Let all project activities be a witness.

The overall purpose of transformational development can be stated as to enable people to know their true identity and true vocation, restore just and peaceful relationships and confront the evil in principalities and powers. (This purpose statement is based on the discussion of TD goals by Myers, 2011, pp. 177-183. Confrontation of evil is implicit in his discussion of restorative justice. I wish to make it explicit.) In terms of the Christ-centered triad for transformation initiatives developed by a group of countries served by World Vision International the purpose is achieved by:

- concentrating on the <u>spiritual formation</u> of staff and community members

- nurturing <u>partnerships</u> with the local churches and church bodies that address injustice and poverty

- <u>witnessing</u> to the gospel through the way that development activities are planned and implemented.

A 3x3 matrix suggests questions and topics to guide collection and interpretation of evidence from this perspective. The matrix is intended to stimulate creative thinking about what really matters; don't get bogged down trying to decide where a particular question belongs in the matrix.

	True identity; true vocation	Just and peaceful relationships	Confrontation of evil
Spiritual formation	How does the project encourage and enable various groups to deepen their faith while respecting diversity among faiths? Examine evidence related to what people believe about their identity and vocation. Examine evidence in the program design for enabling people to know their true identity and vocation, and evidence regarding implementation of relevant activities.	What do people say prevents people from living in harmony with each other? What do they say makes peaceful relationships possible? Examine evidence related to the typical nature of relationships in the community: individuals with God, individuals with enemies, individuals with individuals for building community, individuals with self, and individuals with the environment (stewards rather than masters). How does the program design deal with facilitating just and peaceful relationships?	How do various stakeholders describe evil influences in the community? What has been done through the project to help people confront evil and injustice?
Church partnerships	How do church leaders describe their mission to the community? How do churches enable individuals to discover and appreciate their identity and their vocation?	In what ways to churches relate to each other? How do churches deal with conflict in the community?	How do churches help people to understand the dynamics of sin and grace in their personal lives and in society? How do churches support people in their struggles to resist evil in its various forms?
witness	How do project staff describe examples of witnessing through life, word, deed and sign?	What has the project done to encourage and enable reconciliation of various types of brokenness?	What do people say about how good and evil works in their lives?

For a more elaborate frame for developing transformative evaluation questions see Cookingham (2003a). The evaluation team may create other frames as the members discuss the essential features of transformational development.

Implications for Evaluation Practices

My journey towards transformative evaluation has revealed several implications for evaluating transformational development as defined above.

• The evaluation work must be <u>participatory</u>, led by a mature Christian with evaluation experience with a small core team of stakeholder representatives.

• Sound <u>monitoring information</u>, including appropriate baseline information, must be available for the period covered by the evaluation.

• The evaluation team must be skilled in collecting and analyzing different types of <u>qualitative data</u> that may be quite sensitive. Crafting methods that work in a particular situation while respecting privacy and dignity requires creative attitudes and skills. People providing information must trust team members to the extent that they are willing to share honest opinions about sensitive matters.

• <u>Spiritual discernment</u> is a key to understanding the truth about the project influences in the community; what really matters in the lives of people as they encounter sin and grace through project presence and activities. Sectoral achievements are important. But more important is how the project hinders or helps people in the ongoing battle between forces for good and forces for evil.

• Using <u>reflection</u> to formulate recommendations for adjustments is more likely to motivate practical change that improves project effectiveness.

• Reporting without <u>visioning</u> saps the wisdom from the knowledge generated during the evaluation work.

Participatory approach.

Understand reality at a deeper level.

"Participatory evaluation is facilitation of informed judgments by stakeholders about the merit or worth of a program, based on verifiable evidence, in which representatives of various development stakeholder groups have a special type of relationship as an evaluation team. They deliberately seek to understand their reality at a deeper level, especially in terms of what is good and what is bad about community conditions and project work, so that together they can decide the direction for the next part of the development journey (Cookingham, 2002b)." A key objective of TE is to assist stakeholders in examining what really matters in TD. Almost by definition TE must be participatory.

Participatory evaluation in a <u>transformative sense</u> is important for examining the social justice goal of TD. The following brief description is based on Cousins and Whitmore (1998).

The emphasis in Transformative PE is empowerment of less powerful participants to foster social change that is just. It is assumed that the production and use of scientific knowledge must be more democratic. It is further assumed that knowledge is shaped by power and control relationships; there is no "truth" independent of social power relationships. Therefore, knowledge production and use will be more equitable only to the extent that inquiry is extended to those with less power.

This approach developed as social scientists, primarily in Latin America and Africa, struggled to apply knowledge to alleviate suffering. It has Marxist roots in that it recognizes that emancipation requires more than objective criticism of existing social structures -- it requires radical action consistent with social theory that realigns social relationships. The aim of social inquiry is action plans that will change social systems to be more consistent with social ideals.

Freire's (1996) work is central to this approach. Internal and external discourses, relationships, intuition, emotions, experiences and empathy are sources of knowledge that must be explored. Reflection on the dynamics and values inherent in the research process and context for research is a legitimate way of making sense of the world.

Importance of having monitoring data.

Invest scarce resources in sound monitoring; in many cases there will be no need for evaluation beyond reflection on monitoring results.

Suppose an evaluation is requested midway through the project. The evaluator discovers that there is no monitoring data. The best service the evaluator can provide is to work with stakeholders and project staff to design and implement an appropriate flexible monitoring system for the duration of the project. If

necessary, an evaluation can be done later when an appropriate amount of monitoring data is available.

The evaluator could also facilitate a reflection exercise to elicit impressions about project progress, and then include appropriate indicators in the monitoring system to test the validity of those impressions. This is no substitute for an evaluation; it is merely preparing the project for an evaluation later that can provide meaningful evidence for conclusions and recommendations.

An evaluator that proceeds with an "evaluation" despite the absence of monitoring data must point out the limitations prominently in the evaluation report and executive summary.

Qualitative data.

There is more to reality than what I can see with me eyes.

Evidence is at the core of the process of acquiring knowledge by completing an evaluation. Observing and listening to community members and project staff; documenting reliably what is observed, heard, or felt; measuring quantities when it makes sense to do so; these are activities for accumulating evidence.

In spite of the safeguards we use in evaluation work to accumulate objective evidence, our senses mislead us. They reveal to us only part of what is real. Sometimes the part that is revealed is much less significant than the part that remains hidden. How important is it for me to know that a farmer's crop yield has increased, if I know nothing about that farmer's relationship with God? How important is it to know how many boreholes have been drilled and pumps installed to produce clean water, if I know nothing about how the users of that water assist their neighbors in meeting other basic needs?

To understand such aspects of reality the transformative evaluator should use sound procedures for collecting and analyzing qualitative data. To get a sense for the diversity of qualitative research procedures see the four volumes edited by Denzin and Lincoln (1994, 2000, 2005, 2011) and Miles and Huberman (1994). Examine the web site for Sage Publications for leading textbooks, journals, and handbooks. Patton's (1980, 2001) book is a classic text.

Discerning conclusions.

Sense what God intends for us to understand about the program

Conclusions and appropriate recommendations, the ultimate product of an evaluation exercise, are based on analysis and interpretation of evidence. Competent evaluators work diligently to accumulate sufficient trustworthy evidence within the constraints imposed by deadlines and available resources. The quality of the conclusions and recommendations is directly related to the quality of the evidence.

A conclusion is the answer to a specific question included in the evaluation design, or an interpretation of outcomes related to a particular information need. A conclusion must be logically consistent with available evidence as well as relevant knowledge and experience. Sometimes the evaluation will conclude that the question cannot be answered by the available evidence, knowledge and experience. If this is the case it should be clearly stated along with a description of what would be required to answer the question.

Discernment can be defined from two perspectives ("Spiritual discernment," n.d., para. 1).

- In general it is "the quality of being able to grasp and comprehend what is obscure; an act of perceiving something; a power to see what is not evident to the average mind." Every good evaluator must have general discernment skills in examining evidence.

- Spiritual discernment is the ability to tell the difference between truth and error, good and evil, from God's perspective. It is the ability to differentiate right from wrong within the emerging kingdom of God here on earth. Every Christian evaluator should continually enhance his or her skills in general and spiritual discernment.

Someone skilled in discernment can get to the heart of an issue by identifying what really matters from a core-values perspective. Working with what really matters a discerning person applies scriptural wisdom to frame next steps for action. How do Christian evaluators get better at discerning conclusions? One author ("Spiritual discernment," (n.d.), para. 8) offers this advice:

"We [Christians] must know the authentic so well that, when the false appears, we can recognize it. By knowing and obeying the Word of God, we will be 'trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.' We will know God's character and will. This is the heart of spiritual discernment – being able to distinguish the voice of the world from the voice of God, to have a sense that 'this is right' or 'this is wrong.' Spiritual discernment fends off temptation and allows us to 'hate what is evil; cling to what is good' (Romans 12:9)."

See Challies (2007) for an in-depth study of the discipline of spiritual discernment. In TE spiritual discernment skills are applied to evaluation evidence to distinguish truth from error regarding project presence and influences. Also they are essential for understanding the will of God for the project in the community.

Discerning meaningful TE conclusions is an artistic endeavor rather than a step-by-step procedure. The quality of transformative evaluation conclusions is influenced greatly by the spiritual maturity of the evaluation team members and their willingness to listen for God's guidance (see Foster, 1998, and Willard, 1988). Prayerful discussion among team members that is based on principles of dialogue rather than persuasion is the primary means of discerning meaningful conclusions.

Various techniques for working with data to discern conclusions have proved to be useful.

- As conclusions form in your mind, always write text explaining them. Make the conclusions explicit. The process of writing the conclusion and why it is supported by the evidence will lead to reformulation, additional clarity, and other ideas for further analysis.

- Check your initial conclusions against original source documents and field notes. If a conclusion doesn't feel right, revise it by moving back and forth between the pieces of information and the matrix chart that organizes those pieces until it does feel right.

- Include specific illustrations from your field notes in the explanations that accompany each conclusion. Avoid the temptation to include vivid or interesting examples merely to make the text more stimulating. The role of illustrations is to show the connections between evidence and conclusions, not to make the report more interesting.

- Describe how the conclusions are related to appropriate elements of transformational development theory. Explain what the conclusions mean in this project setting regarding facilitating development such that personal and social transformation are more likely.

- Document the procedures you use to discern conclusions. Early in the analysis phase ask others with appropriate evaluation experience to review your work.

- Include enough information in the technical report so that the reader can make sound judgments about the strength of the connections between conclusions and evidence, as well as connections between conclusions and transformational development theory. In most cases this will mean that all primary matrix charts, and the text that you wrote as you analyzed them, will be included in appendixes. The reader should be able to reconstruct how the analysis developed and the validity of the conclusions with respect to the evidence.

Using reflection to formulate recommendations that can make a difference.

Reflection is a process of deeper thinking that should be used throughout evaluation planning and reporting. It is the process that enhances the learning potential for any evaluation. In some cases it is a reasonable alternative to evaluation.

A recommendation is a statement offered as worthy of acceptance or approval by stakeholders. Based on available evidence, knowledge and experience the evaluator is saying that it is reasonable for stakeholders to adopt the action included in the statement.

It is essential to keep in mind, however, that as stakeholders consider the recommendation in light of other factors stakeholders may decide reasonably not to adopt the recommendation. If stakeholders are involved in the interpretation of evaluation results before the report is prepared, the report is less likely to contain recommendations that are not adopted.

Recommendations should be developed in consultation with various stakeholder groups. Ideally, conflicts that emerge should be resolved through reflection as described below. If they cannot be resolved the core of the disagreement should be included in the report respectfully and fairly.

In transformative evaluation the recommendations should be an outcome of <u>prayerful reflection</u> regarding all conclusions along with insights about how God is at work in the communities. Alvarez, Avarientos and McAlpine (1999); Cookingham (2003b); Robb (2003) and Scripture search in the Philippines (n.d.) are helpful resources for thinking about how Scripture and prayer can inform TD work.

In TE both individual and group reflection are important. In either case the primary purpose is to discern what God is calling forth in this situation from those who seek to live as they were created to live. In brief, <u>reflection is an empowering activity that is essential for learning how to facilitate transformation through development work with communities and partners</u>.

Facilitating a reflection event is much more than chairing a meeting.
- Mutual trust and respect among the participants is required. This usually means that they have had positive interactions prior to the reflection event.
- It is best if someone not involved with the program facilitates the event so that all key partners can participate fully.
- Ideally the facilitator understands reflection from a variety of perspectives, such as Freire's (1996) approach to pedagogy (discussed below) and action learning. The sections that follow unpack this brief description.

Reflection is a dialogical activity.

Richard Schaull in the introduction to Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1996) summed up Freire's concept of critical reflection as comprised of dialogical activity, vocationally focused discussion and critical thinking that empowers individuals and groups to initiate humanizing change.

<u>Freire's starting point</u> for understanding reflection is:
A person's ontological vocation is to be a Subject who acts upon and transforms his world, and in so doing moves towards ever new possibilities of a fuller and richer life individually and collectively. In other words, meaningful "being" beyond merely existing involves making a positive difference in the world as an individual and in concert with others.

Don't let "dialogical" distract or puzzle you. It simply means that reflection is a learning activity that involves talking and acting with other people on something that is important to everyone engaged in the reflection activity. The learning activity is much more than storing information. It involves identifying what is helpful and unhelpful in changing one's personal and social context so as to experience living at its fullest.

Reflection is focused discussion.

Freire views the world as a problem to be worked on and solved. The world is the material that a person uses to create history and to overcome that which is dehumanizing at any particular time and place. Reflection is discussion that has such a vocational focus, or a focus on what God created us to do and be.

Focused discussion becomes reflection as emphasis is placed on identifying barriers to individual and social transformation. Program reflection is focused on specific information about the program rather than individual impressions or concerns. Documented quantitative and qualitative data are important for effective program reflection. Acknowledge and appreciate the good things that are happening, but concentrate on resolving issues or concerns.

For the Christian transformation occurs as God works within a particular context to redeem persons and groups from the consequences of sin. God often works through people to create opportunities for transformation, but transformation itself is God's work. Focused discussion becomes reflection as the participants move beyond discussing what they can do to solve a problem to discussing their perceptions of the activity of God in their situation and how they can align their actions with it.

Reflection involves critical thinking.

Some time should be given to enhancing critical thinking skills in each reflection event. Freire believed strongly that every person is capable of looking critically at his world in a dialogical encounter with others. Given the proper tools a person can gradually perceive his or her personal and social reality as well as the contradictions in it. He or she can become conscious of personal perceptions of that reality and deal critically with them. Each person, through such a process, wins back the right to say his own word, to name the world.

Critical thinking involves probing ideas from different perspectives looking for different understandings of what is real in the context. The probing must be done respectfully, assuming that each person's perspective has value as the group describes the parts of reality that they have in common.

0o-Reflection can lead to empowerment.

When people are able to name the world from the perspective of being fully human they are empowered with a new sense of dignity and hope. They are more likely to take upon themselves the struggle to change the structures of society which until now have served to oppress them.

Prayer throughout the reflection exercise is very important. For the Christian empowerment is based on understanding the will of God for the individual or group and intentionally aligning behavior with it.

Reporting and visioning.

The written transformative evaluation report should be an inspirational document rather than just a list of conclusions and recommendations. Spiritual insights that occurred to the evaluation members should be shared

Provocative propositions, a key concept within the appreciative inquiry framework, may be adapted to encourage propelling a project forward based on conclusions and recommendations (see the website Appreciative Inquiry Commons, and Elliot (1999). A provocative proposition is designed to inspire imagining a better future. It is stated in the present tense to describe something just beyond reach at the moment, something that calls members of the organization toward an attainable vision.

Provocative propositions are not recommendations; they do not describe what should be done. They portray something that stimulates imaginative, creative thinking about a better future. They describe what the organization would look like if it were designed to maximize the best practices and the peak experiences in a sustainable way. Some variables to consider as propositions are framed are strategy, style and structure in the organization.

Reporting to stakeholder groups should be done using media and exercises that encourage visioning into the future. For example, stakeholders could be asked to frame 3-5 provocative propositions as they internalize evaluation conclusions and recommendations. The propositions cast conclusions and recommendations as a compelling vision for a better future. If stakeholders cannot develop provocative propositions with a skilled facilitator this raises serious doubts about commitment to the project that should be identified and explored.

Cookingham (2013) provides a hypothetical example of provocative propositions developed from evaluation conclusions and recommendations. See Preskill and Catsambas (2006) for a detailed case study of an in-depth appreciative inquiry for an alternative health center that sought to build stronger relationships with other health providers; see the website Appreciative Inquiry Commons for leads to other applications.

Examples of indicators that reporting may lead to improved facilitation of transformation outcomes in the situation that has been evaluated:

- Reservations about the financial and organizational cost of proposed changes have been expressed. Appropriate people have been assigned to work out the details so that all stakeholders can move forward toward achieving the program goals and objectives more effectively.

- Key people have described how spiritual disciplines will be exercised in planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluating in the program.

- Disagreements among stakeholders have surfaced. They have been explored in ways that value the divine spark that resides in every person. Disagreeing stakeholders have expressed improved understanding of other viewpoints.

- Project progress reports include insights that surfaced during reflection exercises about the quality of relationships among program staff and program participants.

- There is increasing documentation of program participants helping each other achieve outcomes and meet individual and family needs beyond the scope of available services.

Closing Thought

It has been a long journey, but I feel as if it is just beginning. I hope that this overview will stimulate conversation and dialogue among Christian evaluators that is pleasing to God and beneficial to those who participate in community development programs. Let's talk and pray!

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