Representing the focus of a program evaluation

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Most program evaluations are designed to either demonstrate accountability to stakeholders or document what has been learned about planning and implementing a particular type of program.

Evaluation as demonstrating accountability for meeting agreements.

The program goals and objectives are explicit agreements between stakeholder groups and the implementing agency. The program budget and schedule are also explicit agreements regarding use of resources within a specific period. The agency is accountable for achieving the goals and objectives on time within budget.

Generally stakeholders expect the implementing agency to use resources efficiently, and some stakeholder groups may expect compliance with certain values (e.g., involvement of community residents in planning and implementing activities). There may not be specific goals and objectives for these expectations but they are implicit agreements.

A program evaluation can focus on accountability for meeting explicit and implicit agreements. Usually there will be more emphasis on explicit agreements, but implicit agreements could be attended to as much or more than explicit agreements.

Accountability for meeting agreement is one dimension for describing the focus of an evaluation.

Evaluation for learning about a program.

As development practitioners have become aware of increasing complexity regarding factors that influence development outcomes there is an increasing tendency to view evaluation as a learning exercise as well as an accountability exercises. Myers (2011, p. 287) introduces the chapter, "Learning toward transformation" with this statement:

> "If change in complex social systems is unpredictable and beyond management by objectives, then keeping track of what is actually happening becomes very important. Unpredictability can be managed if one gets used to making frequent course adjustments. Thus monitoring, evaluating, and reflecting become more critical than the actual development plan itself. This chapter explores monitoring, evaluating, and reflecting as key tools for learning our way to a better future."

There are two major aspects of programs that should be evaluated from a learning perspective. The first aspect is the extent to which implementation was successful in achieving program goals and objectives. This involves exploring relationships between

implementation practice and the various levels of program results (outputs, outcomes, etc.).

The second aspect is the merit and worth of the underlying program theory or logic. Should the theory be revised in light of what was learned about the factors that influenced achievement of outputs and outcomes? Were there unintended positive or negative consequences that are outside the scope of the theory that should be included in the theory?

These sets of learning objectives are a second dimension for focusing a program evaluation.

The focus diagram

The focus diagram is a 2x2 matrix for the two dimensions of demonstrating accountability and documenting learning about the program. Figure 1 shows examples of evaluation questions in the different cells of the matrix.

Figure 1

Examples of evaluation questions in the four cells of the focus diagram

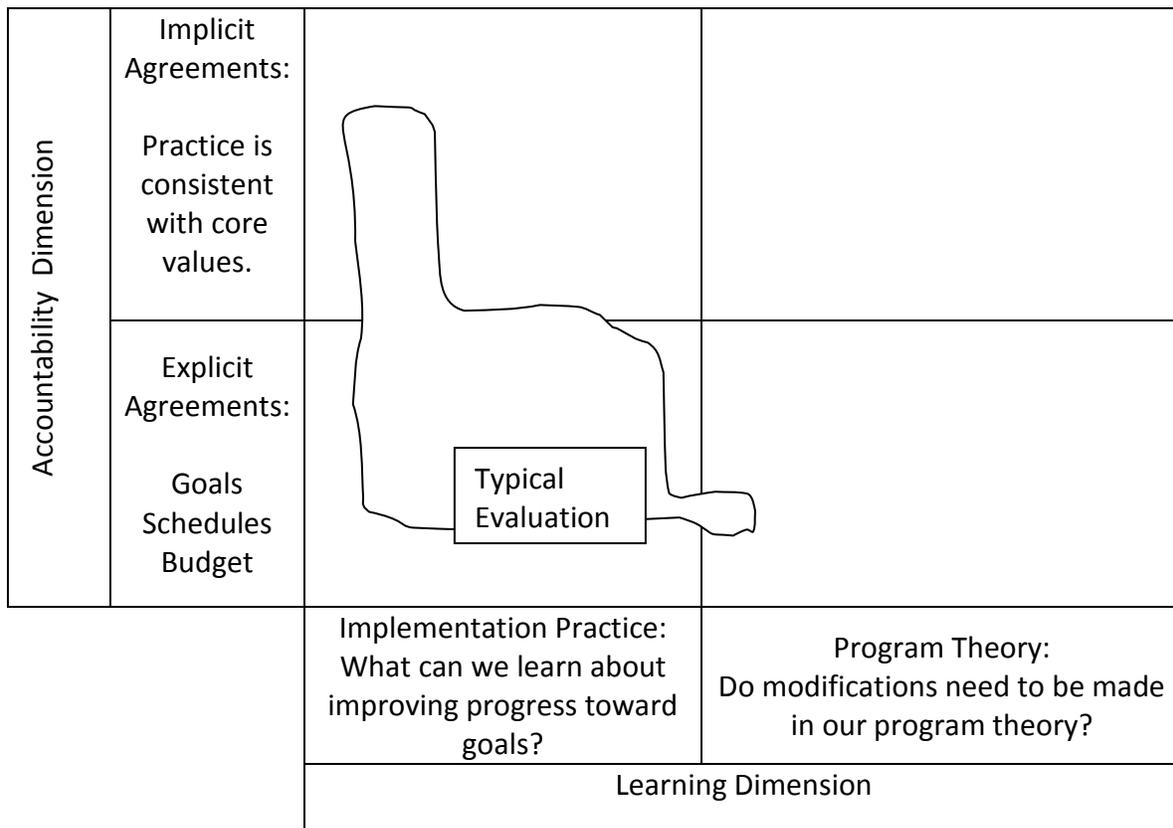| Accountability Dimension	Implicit Agreements: Practice is consistent with core values.	To what extent have community members been involved in planning, implementing and monitoring program activities? What effects are community participation and non-participation having on achieving the program goals?	Is our development policy realistic? If not, what are some viable alternatives?
	Explicit Agreements: Goals, Schedules, Budget.	To what extent has each objective been achieved on time within budget? Where progress is not satisfactory, what can be done to make it satisfactory?	Are there enough resources to achieve the objectives for sustainability? If not, are we promising something that we cannot deliver?
		Implementation Practice: Improve progress toward goals.	Program Theory: Revise theory based on evidence.
		Learning Dimension	

Focus for a typical program evaluation

The core of a typical program evaluation is analysis of progress toward explicit goals and objectives. Sometimes there is some examination of program theory along with examination of compliance with specific values.

This focus can be diagrammed as shown in Figures 2a and 2b. The free-form shape indicates where evaluation activities are concentrated. In Figure 2a they are concentrated in the explicit agreements::implementation practice quadrant. There may be some activities in the implicit agreements::implementation practice quadrant if at least some stakeholders have requested information about compliance with policy or values. Regarding program theory, if it has been explicitly described there may be some activities in the explicit agreements::program theory quadrant.
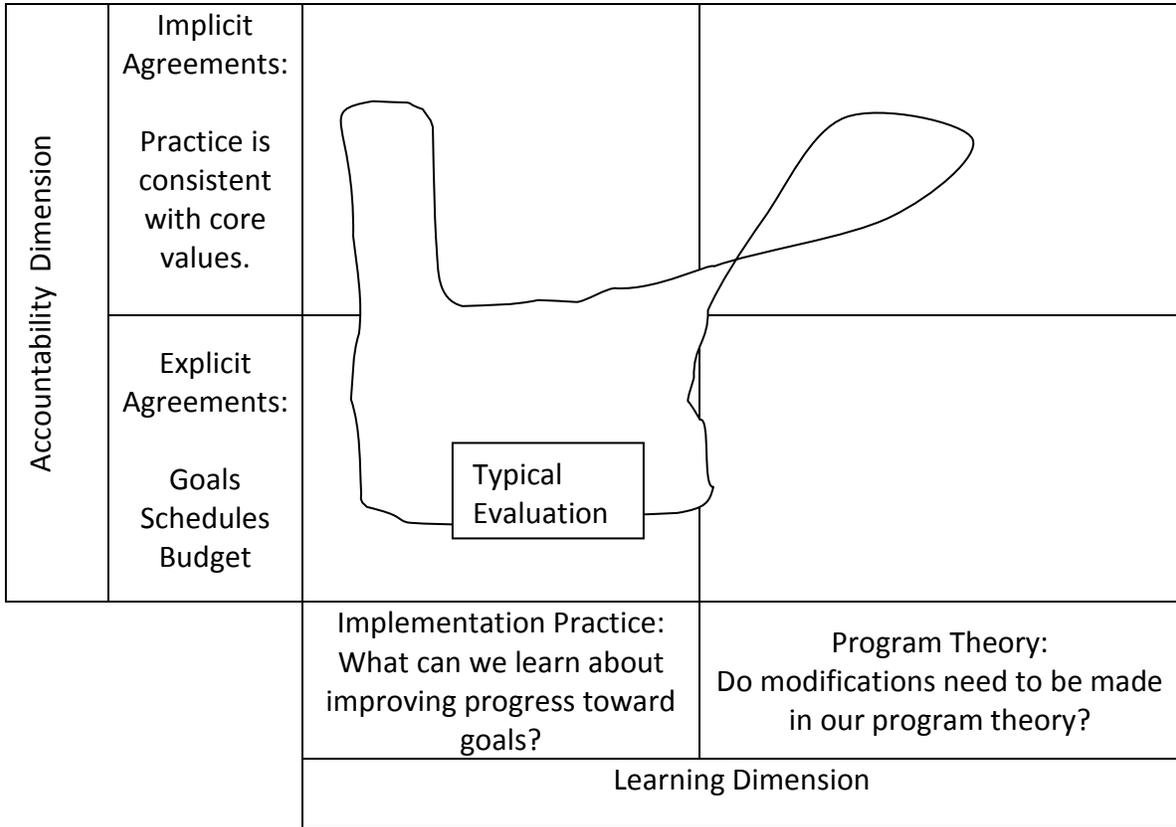
Figure 2a

Evaluation focus diagram for a typical program evaluation

Accountability Dimension	Implicit Agreements: Practice is consistent with core values.	*Typical Evaluation* (free-form shape)	
	Explicit Agreements: Goals Schedules Budget		
		Implementation Practice: What can we learn about improving progress toward goals?	Program Theory: Do modifications need to be made in our program theory?
		Learning Dimension	

If program theory has not been described in the program documentation, then the focus diagram could look like Figure 2b. There is a concentration of activities in the implicit agreements::program theory quadrant to articulate the underlying program theory that is most consistent with the documented outcomes, outputs and unintended results.

Evaluation focus diagram for a typical program evaluation

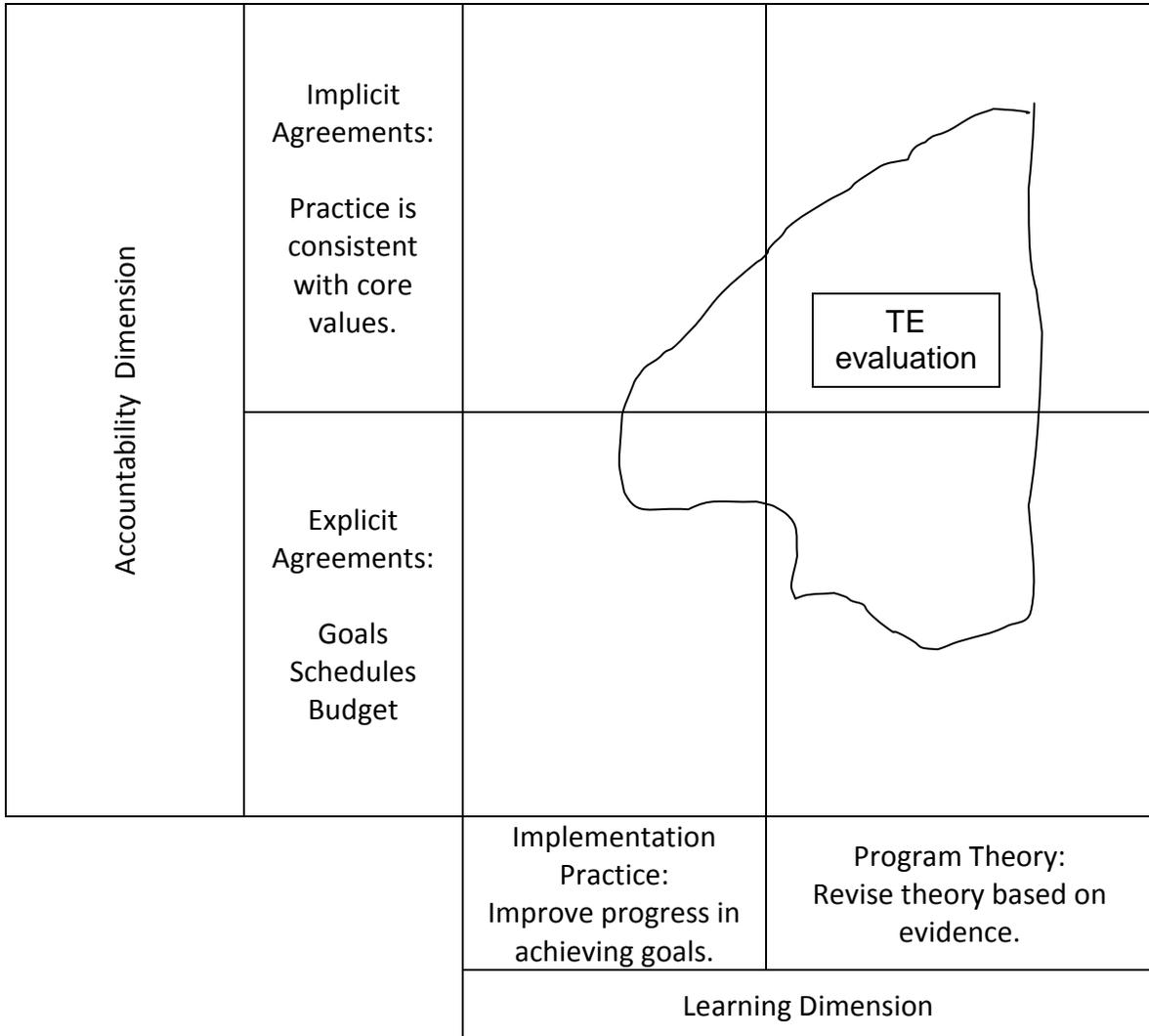|			
Accountability Dimension	**Implicit Agreements:** Practice is consistent with core values.		
	Explicit Agreements: Goals Schedules Budget	Typical Evaluation	
		Implementation Practice: What can we learn about improving progress toward goals?	**Program Theory:** Do modifications need to be made in our program theory?
		Learning Dimension	

Focus for a transformative evaluation

In transformative evaluation the focus is learning about transformation taking place in the individuals and social structures affected by the program. Figure 3 shows such a diagram. There will be some activities to demonstrate accountability, but much of the evaluation will be concentrated on testing the underlying assumptions about enabling transformation and possibly reformulating transformational development policy.

Figure 3

Evaluation focus diagram for transformative evaluation

Accountability Dimension	Implicit Agreements: Practice is consistent with core values.		TE evaluation
	Explicit Agreements: Goals Schedules Budget		
		Implementation Practice: Improve progress in achieving goals.	Program Theory: Revise theory based on evidence.
		Learning Dimension	

The focus diagram is helpful for exploring similarities and differences between two approaches to evaluation. Figure 4 shows the focus for a typical program evaluation compared with the focus for transformative evaluation.

Figure 4

Focus diagram for two different approaches to evaluation
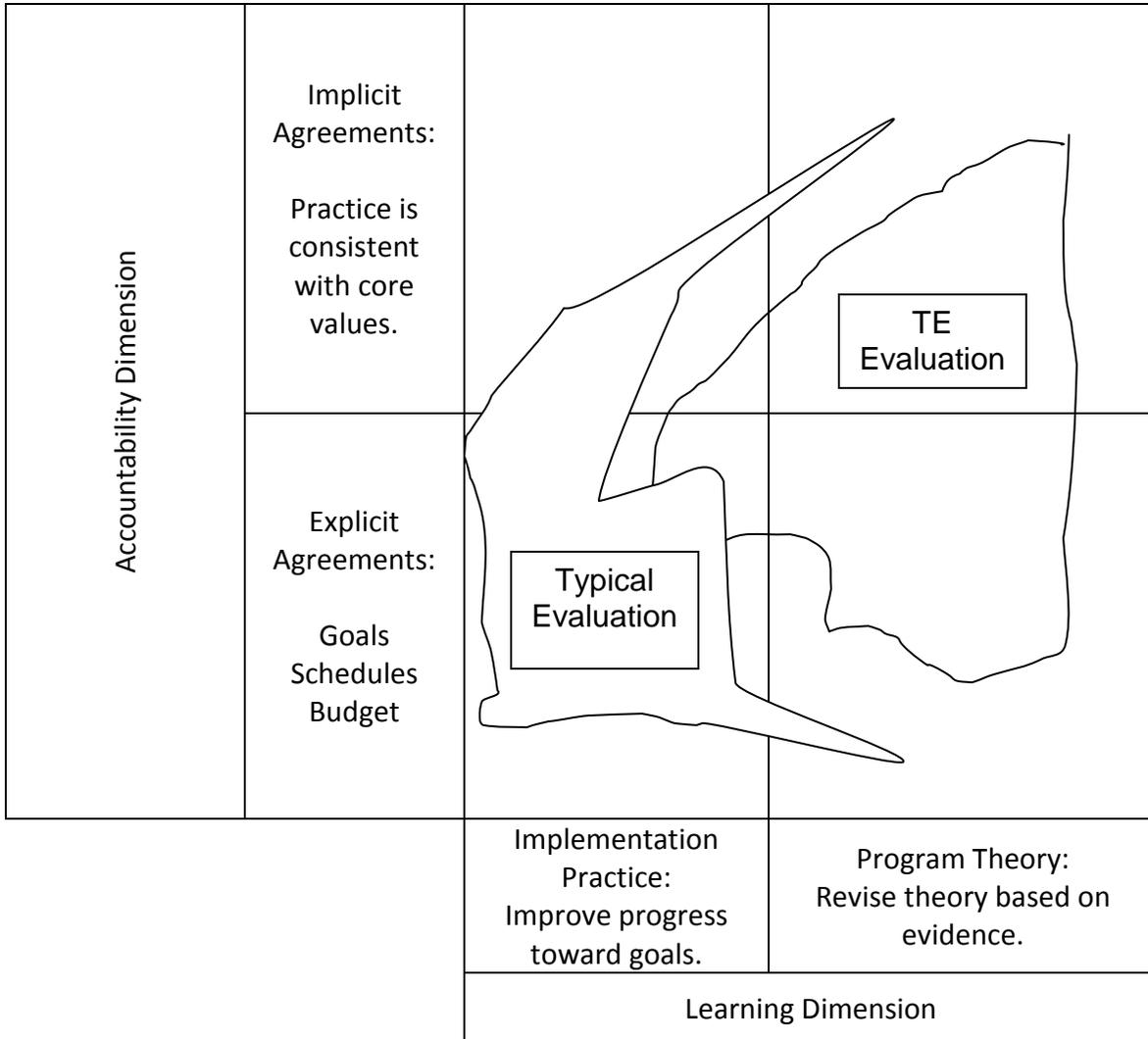
In this illustration each type of evaluation has activities in each of the four quadrants. The concentrations are quite different. Using a diagram like this can be helpful in negotiating a specific evaluation design with different stakeholder groups. The area within the free-form shape represents the total resources available for the evaluation. Manipulating the shape within the matrix gives an impression of what is feasible regarding distribution of evaluation activities for data collection and analysis in the four quadrants.

Reference

Myers, Bryant L. (2011 revised and expanded edition). *Walking with the poor: Principles and practices of transformational development*. Maryknoll, New York USA: Orbis Books.