

# LEARNING AND EVALUATION FOR COMMUNITY-DRIVEN SYSTEMS CHANGE

In community-driven systems change, the purpose of learning and evaluation is not about monitoring, judging, or evaluating the value or effectiveness of a particular CBO or assessing the number of beneficiaries reached. For community-driven systems change, traditional log frames and logic models are less meaningful as are traditional indicators such as beneficiary numbers, indicators of cost-effectiveness, service delivery outputs, or other more basic indicators that assume a direct, casual, linear relationship between specific inputs and planned outcomes. While these may be very important and valuable for direct service interventions, they do not provide as much information and insight when it comes to community-driven processes for systemic change.

In community-driven systems change, learning and evaluation are about –

- Genuinely learning, reflecting, and adapting, within the security of a trust-based partnership;
- Assessing progress or impact for the purpose of understanding what’s working well and what we might do differently to strengthen the initiative, while appreciating that any lack of success doesn’t mean failure or wrongdoing (recognizing that systemic change takes time, can be nonlinear, and may not be immediately or easily measurable or tangible);
- What is useful to the CBO and to the community in their pursuit of systems change, for the CBO and community to be able to track its work and progress towards creating lasting change in systems and root causes, in ways that are meaningful and useful to the CBO and community.

What are the implications for funders seeking to develop learning agendas and evaluation frameworks for community-driven systems change?



# CO-CREATE SHARED LEARNING AGENDAS AND EVALUATION FRAMEWORKS

First and foremost, shared learning agendas and evaluation frameworks must be developed with CBOs and, to the extent possible, with their communities.

As CBOs and their communities are understanding the issues, analyzing root causes, prioritizing actions, and developing plans, they can be supported to think about, discuss, and come to agreement around –

- What do we want to or need to learn during this initiative? What are we curious about? What doesn't make sense? What might affect our progress and outcomes? What are we worried about? What are we hopeful about? How do these relate to questions that we can answer through asking questions, observing, and collecting other forms of data throughout this initiative?
- What are our shared philosophy, approach, and goals for evaluation and learning in this initiative?
- What does success look like for us? What does progress look like? How will we know if we are on the right track, in terms of the actions we wish to carry out, the immediate experience and response to those actions, the short-term outcomes, and the longer-term impacts?
- What strategies will we use as a collective, and what strategies will we use on our own, to track progress and evaluate success?

Where there is a need for a collective study such as a baseline study and/or endline evaluation across multiple partners, consultation, co-creation, collaborative implementation (data collection and analysis), and validation processes with CBOs will strengthen the relevance, ownership, and use of the data for and by CBO partners. Specifically –

- Participatory processes can be carried out to identify indicators that are meaningful and useful to CBOs and their communities, and these indicators can be consolidated for a collective study;
- Data collection tools can be developed with the input of CBO partners;
- Data collection tools should be simple and should only collect data for which there is already a clearly defined purpose and analysis plan;
- Data that are gathered should be meaningful to CBOs and communities, not just to the funder;
- Findings should be shared back rapidly with CBOs, stakeholders and communities, and should be validated, deepened, and refined with CBOs and communities before being finalized; and
- Final shareable reports should be shared back with CBOs, stakeholders and communities within 3-4 months of data collection, so that the information is current, relevant, and useable.

# SUPPORT COMMUNITY PROCESSES AND INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE AND PRACTICES

In community-driven systems change, the primary purpose of learning and data collection is to inform community understanding, action, and reflection. Communities are more empowered to gather and make sense of data when they have the time and support to engage effectively in learning and evaluation; and they are supported to identify/ develop/ adapt and use indigenous methods for learning, evaluation, and knowledge generation.

Some examples of indigenous methods for learning, evaluation, and knowledge generation include –

- Traditional, oral ways of transmitting knowledge – e.g., bonfire method in Botswana, narration of stories to convey traditional knowledge;
- Traditional ways of seeking and obtaining consent like being provided with a dancing rattle as a sign of welcome and consent to interact with community;
- Assessing changes in community norms by listening to conversations over coffee by a tree in Tanzania;
- Participatory analysis techniques such as prioritization and thematic organization that CBOs and communities engage in together;
- Existing methods that CBOs use to share information, plans, goals, and activities with their communities which communities then use to track progress;
- Communities using visual formats to display their long-term goals and pathways to reach there – which they then use to visually track their progress;
- And more.

It is important to work with CBOs and community leaders to explore the different ways in which they surface, generate, share, and reflect on information and knowledge in their community. These methods can then be aligned with the goals of learning, evaluation, and knowledge generation for the initiative.

## FOCUS ON PROCESSES AND INDICATORS THAT ARE RELEVANT TO COMMUNITY-DRIVEN SYSTEMS CHANGE

Learning and evaluation that supports the goals and processes of community-driven systems change is most concerned with community engagement and systemic change. CBOs may appreciate support as they and their communities think through and articulate –

- what success looks like to them in terms of systemic change;
- their understanding of how different factors affect the outcomes they are seeking to change;
- how they seek to change some of those influencing factors on a pathway towards their long-term goal;
- how they might observe expected and unexpected changes in influencing factors as well as outcomes;
- how they might track their progress along the way; and how they might evaluate their work;

Throughout all of this, CBOs will also be thinking about and working on engaging their communities and mobilizing community leadership and ownership on many of these processes.

It will also be important to work with CBOs to proactively plan for and budget adequate resources for participatory and effective learning and evaluation.

We recognize the time and ‘messiness’ involved in participatory approaches, as well as the complex, longer-term, and nonlinear nature of systems change. The focus of learning and evaluation is thus on processes such as community collaboration, relationship and trust building, the activity and effectiveness of local community structures, stakeholder engagement, participation in policy dialogues, conversations with leaders and influencers, creating community awareness and demand, effecting shifts in norms and practices, and so on – recognizing how much we still need to learn about the actual processes of social change in general and of community-driven systems change in particular, and appreciating that these processes often take time and nonlinear pathways before tangible outcomes might be seen.

*We hope these guidelines and questions have supported your thinking around learning and evaluation in the context of community-driven systems change. Please feel free to contact us at [learning@firelightfoundation.org](mailto:learning@firelightfoundation.org) to discuss further.*