Evaluation 101 for Human Rights Organizations: How do we know if we are making a difference?

April 20, 2017: Insights into how change comes about and how to measure it

A project of the AAAS Science and Human Rights Coalition

Evaluation 101 for Human Rights Organizations

How do we know if we are making a Difference?

Today’s Topic: Insights into how Change comes about and How to Measure it.

A Project of the Science and Human Rights Coalition
American Association for the Advancement of Science

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I am Oliver Moles, a social psychologist and moderator of this workshop. I am co-chair of the Coalition’s Working Group on Service to the Human Rights Community. My career with the federal government has been mainly in research and evaluation of education and poverty programs.
Evaluation 101: A Webinar and Workshop Series

Presenting foundational information on program evaluation for human rights organizations, emphasizing low cost approaches useful for small projects and limited budgets. Each will take place at 2pm EST.

- April 20 – Frameworks and measures of change
- May 15 – Study designs
- October 3 – Data collection and analysis, Part I
- November 2 – Data collection and analysis, Part II

Four Workshops

Webinars at 2-3:15 pm Eastern Time

Discussion on-site at AAAS Bldg. follows

Today April 20 -  Frameworks and Measures of Change

May 15 – Study Designs

Oct. 3 – Data Collection and Analysis

Nov 2 – Data Collection and Analysis with resource examples

This series of workshops will present fundamental information on essential aspects of program evaluation and resources for further study. We will emphasize low cost approaches useful for small projects and limited budgets.
Today’s workshop will give participants an understanding of:
- the diverse purposes of evaluation
- project theory frameworks
- measures of change

Presenters will speak for about 40 minutes with Q&A to follow. This webinar will run till 15 minutes after the hour – 1 ¼ hours in all.
Submit your questions into the Questions box at anytime throughout the webinar.

You may submit questions at any time via the question box in the GoToWebinar control panel.
Giovanni Dazzo is an evaluation specialist in the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor within the US Department of State. There he advises staff and grantees on program design and evaluation methods. Previously he worked with Freedom House’s global rapid response funds. Prior to moving to DC, Giovanni worked in Italy and Cambodia conducting applied research and evaluation on social protection, economic empowerment and human rights for various agencies and donors. He is also an adjunct lecturer at George Washington University’s Elliott School of International Affairs, teaching a graduate-level course on the evaluation of foreign assistance programs.

Carlisle Levine is President and CEO of BLE Solutions, LLC. She is an international development, peacebuilding and advocacy evaluator with many years of experience in international development and evaluation. Carlisle is a skilled facilitator and trainer with expertise in leading complex evaluations, building staff evaluation capacity, developing M&E systems, fostering collaborative learning processes within dispersed and diverse teams, and developing knowledge sharing systems. Prior to launching her own business, Carlisle worked for CARE, USA, Catholic Relief Services and USAID among others. Her work has taken her to Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa and Europe.
1. First, it’s helpful to define what we mean by evaluation. For this series of workshops, evaluation should not be considered synonymous with performance indicators. While quantifiable indicators are one way to monitor change, evaluation does not need to only revolve around their use as there are a number of methods that are useful in capturing change.

2. Additionally, it’s helpful to also define evaluation: In this case, I find it useful to use the definition often attributed to Professor Michael Scriven from Claremont’s Graduate University: evaluation is a process that determines the merit, worth or value of things. For human rights organizations, these things could be policy research or advocacy, training, and so on.

3. Last—one of the underlying topics that we’ll explore through these workshops is the ability to think evaluatively, or critically, about how your project or intervention is designed. In using evaluative thinking, organizations should:
   1. Encourage discussions among staff to explore the way they think their initiative will work.
   2. Question and value evidence—while we may have an idea of how change comes about, we should question where these ideas come from; and, we should provide examples of evidence to support the decisions we make when designing projects.
   3. Producing and using evaluation—this involves taking the time to plan for evaluation at the earliest stages of a project and reflecting on evaluation findings when designing initiatives.
What does all this mean for human rights organizations? It means being able to hold ourselves accountable just as we often try to hold duty-bearers accountable to rights-holders. But, it also requires us to constantly question whether what we are doing is useful and why we think it is, and to then learn from this systematic inquiry to improve the way we work.
While many organizations work in the field of human rights, approaches are varied and can include everything from (i) advocacy and policy change initiatives (which is what many may often associate with human rights work) to (ii) the documentation of rights abuses and violations. On the other hand and much like more traditional international development, some organizations may focus on service delivery—in the form of legal advice or legal representation, for example—or attempting to improve access to service delivery for certain populations. Additionally, education, training or ‘capacity building’ programs are often conducted. Education and training can also have many aims... trying to achieve everything from improving a community’s understanding of rights frameworks, how to conduct new approaches or tactics on advocacy campaigning, or how to bring together disparate communities through dialogue and peacebuilding activities.
In the last slide, we went over a few approaches, and this is often the first step that many organizations take—that is, they jump straight to solutions. On this slide, you’ll see two ways to answer the same question: What needs are you addressing?

In many cases, when reviewing project proposals or ideas, the answer to the question on this slide is generally a solution rather than a full articulation of a problem or need. From the example on this slide, we can see (in the box on the left) that we’ve listed that the community needs training to learn about their rights. This, however, is a solution, not a community need. For many working in human rights or development organizations, this is an obvious answer because we generally want to jump to solutions. But, not knowing what a community actually needs can do more harm than good.

It’s important to first understand what may be lacking before we actually determine activities. For example, if community members aren’t aware of their basic rights as citizens—which is a problem we often encounter—then it should be stated that they may need an improved understanding of these basic rights. After determining this, we might come to understand that training may not be the most effective form of ensuring that community members understand their rights—the appropriate response could be a series of meetings with local authorities, distribution of materials, legal representation, or possibly conducting advocacy targeted directly at state actors.
As we saw on the first slide, human rights programming can mean many things (from training to advocacy to legal advice). It’s also often the case that organizations not only forget to question what they are trying to achieve, but how they’ll get there.

For this reason, many organizations may find it difficult to measure their projects or initiatives. Without defining the human rights issue to be addressed, the default reasoning becomes limited to focusing on how the organization is going to approach the problem itself.
On this next slide, we’ll provide an introduction to a few steps that can be used to construct a theory of change; and, in the next few slides, we’ll provide an example relevant for many human rights organizations.

As one helpful tip before we go through the steps:
It’s useful to construct a theory of change before finalizing a project idea or proposal narrative: Many funding agencies require logic models or logframes, but you’ll see that many of the steps here can be used before or during the development of those frameworks. Advocacy groups may want to explore theories of change or alternative approaches (such as systems map or rich pictures—which can provide additional space to plot out the system in which you’re operating). In any case, working through these types of frameworks can help human rights organizations and activists to think through how they assume their project will work, as well as any expected goals.

For additional guidance on theory of change development, we’ve included a link to a helpful resource developed by the Aspen Institute, called the Community Builder’s Approach to Theory of Change. This can be found on one of the last slides in this presentation.
1. Now, for theories of change—As a first step, it’s useful to think through our long-term goals (or, our highest priority). When planning, we can also refrain from using confusing terminology—such as saying that this result is an outcome or an impact for a few reasons: (i) outcomes and impacts can differ across projects, (ii) getting stuck on semantics isn’t helpful because staff will spend most of their time on getting the terms correct rather than planning their initiative, and (iii) as we’re going through our theory of change, our end goal and the resulting outcomes may change as we think through our plans.

2. The next step we generally take can be referred to backwards mapping. During this process, we need to question what needs to happen before our long-term goals can occur—this is like plotting a chain of events. Now, if we start with our long-term goal, we can then start asking, “What needs to happen before this goal occurs?” This should help us think through results or outcomes that need to happen before our goal occurs (we can call these preconditions). After we come up with an outcome, we should continue asking, “What needs to occur before this outcome?” And, we can do this repeatedly as we move through our theory of change, which—through this process—should start looking like a map (we can call this our change map).

3. Third, we’ll start coming up with the ways to document success at each stage of the map by asking ‘what evidence do we need to show that this outcome happened?’. If you’ve ever worked on a project proposal and constructed a monitoring and evaluation plan, you’ll have experience coming up with indicators. But, at this stage, we’re simply coming up with statements that would give us an indication that the outcome happened. As we ask these questions about documenting success and coming up with indicators, an important step in this process is to not limit ourselves by the indicators we think we can measure. We should push ourselves to come up with the best possible way to document success. These indicators also need to be appropriate for each point in time along our change map. After we’ve outlined indicators, we can start thinking about activities, strategies or initiatives that would get us to our outcomes and long-term goal. This step tends to be different from our usual process of coming up with a project idea or proposal because we’re basing our activities on the outcomes—or the levels of success—that we’ve listed in our theory of change. This can be a helpful way to ensure that we’re not simply designing measures that focus on what we’re doing, but rather on what we’d like to achieve.

4. The last step on this slide is often the most difficult when thinking through a theory of change because it requires us to question whether what we planned will actually work—we’re essentially breaking our system here. During this step, we need to ask ourselves, “Does this theory actually make sense?”. This step is an important one, since we’re taking the time to ask ourselves about what we are assuming works in our plan, or what we’ve taken for granted?

Source: Aspen Institute (n.d.) The Community Builder’s Approach to Theory of
Change: A Practical Guide to Theory Development.
So, how can we actually determine whether change comes about from our initiatives?

A theory of change is not only useful in holding ourselves accountable to the communities we are trying to help, but it can also provide us with a map to evaluate against. We can use it to better understand whether the initiative we designed was relevant or appropriate to the communities we are working with.

Now, why can theories of change be useful? Well, they help us think critically, or evaluatively, about how we assume change will come about. In many cases, we’re not absolutely sure if or how a human rights initiatives will produce any change. So, it’s important to note that a theory of change expresses how you think your project will work, or how you think the world works. Since we can’t control everything in any given location, there needs to be an understanding that program design is based on your theory; or, theories that you may have learned from evaluations, studies or experience.

Our goals can also be very broad—on this slide, we’d like to address the problem of community X not fully knowing their basic rights. In working with them, we’d like to see that community members are able to fully realize their basic rights as citizens. Through this example, we’ve started constructing a simple theory—that is, “If community X understands their basic rights as citizens... then, they will fully experience...
these basic rights.”

While it’s simple to state this end result, we all know this is far more complex to achieve. In order to truly capture whether this change could come about, it’s necessary to work backwards and identify the changes we absolutely need to see before we get to our end goal.
In this simplified example of building out a theory of change, we can see how the backward mapping process works.

From the last slide, we articulated our long-term goal. In order to truly understand, we need to start asking ourselves, “What needs to happen before our long-term goal is produced?”

With this visual, we’ve started this backwards mapping process, and we can see that we’ve outlined a precondition to our original logic. We may believe that for community X to fully experience their basic rights, community members would first need to know these rights. This would then help them in having the required information to advocate and demand for these rights. Additionally, we may then start to see our broader assumptions in our logic here. We can see that we are assuming that knowledge will lead to action (or, as stated, for community members to advocate for their rights). We then seem to assume that community action will lead to a reaction (this could be in the form of policy change or implementation).
We then need to start outlining the underlying points in our broader assumptions.

At this point, it’s necessary to ask if all of this seems realistic—because we need to understand if this theory of change could lead to the long-term goal that we want or if it could potentially do harm.

In this example, there are a number of underlying assumptions if we believe that knowledge will lead community members to advocate. As mentioned, human rights projects will often focus on education or training. Then, when thinking through measures of success, many organizations will rely on indicators noting that community members will have improved knowledge. However, in this case, we’re assuming that our training or education initiatives will provide sufficient knowledge of their rights or sufficient knowledge to advocate. While it’s helpful to improve someone’s understanding, they generally won’t act—or, they may not act responsibly or effectively—unless they have a sufficient understanding of a topic—whether that topic is their human rights or advocacy tactics. On the other hand, we also need to think about what occurs after communities advocate. Will this actually lead to a reaction? Do state actors actually have an incentive to act? Are there systems in place for state actors to act and provide the benefits needed by communities? Additionally, we need to understand what will happen if a
community advocates, and whether this could lead to any negative outcomes. In some cases, organizations can plot out different paths in their theory—outlining both positive and negative consequences (this can help when coming up with a risk analysis or contingency plan).

From this simple example, you can see how this process of questioning, or testing, assumptions works. This type of questioning is a useful skill to have, and can be used to test the quality of our logic or theory. These questions can be detailed, as we made them for our example, but in any case, we should be able to understand a few points:

• Does the theory of change illustrate our story of how change happens, and how this leads to our long-term goal?
• Is this intervention enough to reach our goal? And, do we have the resources to achieve this strategy? These are important questions to ground our ideas in reality, as we’re all constrained by budgets.
• And last, how can we measure whether we achieved outcomes along the way?

This process details the first steps in thinking evaluatively, and can help us to understand whether we’ve plotted a strategy that is appropriate and achievable. While it may be uncomfortable to question whether our initial plans actually hold up, it’s important to remember that it’s much more uncomfortable to implement a project that does more harm than good.
In the initial slides, we talked about thinking evaluatively. But, we also need to think about using human rights-based thinking in evaluation. If we conduct human rights work, then we should design and evaluate using the same principles used in our programming.

Human-rights based program approaches value inclusion, dialogue and reciprocity—and this can easily be transferred to our evaluative thinking processes.

• As human rights organizations, we should value inclusion, voice and reciprocity. We can ensure that these topics are covered by working alongside communities, by involving leaders and community members in our planning process.

• There are also a number of participatory methods that can be used to structure theory of change meetings, such as card sorting which helps us prioritize outcomes or measures of success. But, it’s important to ask ourselves about the time commitments behind participatory approaches, and whether we’re actually involving all those that need to be at the table. We also need to understand that these approaches are not an end unto themselves. We simply shouldn’t leave a community after conducting a participatory theory of change exercise and then not communicate our plans until they’re finalized or until we start implementing a project or initiative.

• Additionally, we don’t necessarily need to learn new methods. We can integrate methods that activists and human rights organizations are already comfortable with. Many community-based organizations use community mapping to understand
relationships, which can highlight important advocacy targets or other individuals and communities that should be involved in peacebuilding activities.

- This approach can also be used to plot and prioritize issues and possible outcomes. The use of this concept can be easily transferred to constructing a theory of change in a participatory manner, whether it’s with project staff or project participants.

- And last, we all use sticky notes and flip charts in our work (sometimes a little too much). If so, then we should think about using brainwriting techniques as opposed to brainstorming, as this goes along with our human rights thinking of valuing inclusion and voice, especially for those that may not feel comfortable speaking out during brainstorming activities. Through brainwriting, we want to provide sufficient time for staff or community members to write, list or draw their thoughts. This ensures that we’re including different voices and inhibiting groupthink.

And with that, I’ll pass it on to Carlisle, who will speak more about measures of change.
Now that we’ve talked about creating theories of change, evaluative thinking, and human-rights based thinking in evaluation, we now need to think about how we’re going to assess our progress advancing toward our sought-after change.

As we know, measuring the progress of a human rights initiative is quite challenging. Some of the measurement challenges faced in a human rights context also exist for development contexts, while others are unique.

A first set of challenges relates to how change comes about and determining how a project influenced that change.

Change results from complex, evolving processes. Maybe in a human rights project, we can reasonably predict an activity’s immediate results: training results in knowledge and/or skills gained; research results in awareness raised. But what those people whose knowledge, skills, and/or awareness were increased will then do with what they gained, and how what they do will affect a human rights context is beyond the project’s control. This is also true in most development settings, but for human rights interventions (and often also for peace building and advocacy interventions), there are added complexities.

First, change sometimes takes time and persistence. A desired outcome may be achieved long after a project has ended. So, what do we conclude from the end-of-project evaluation? That the project was not successful? Or that the project was not successful
yet? And how do we know it is on the right path?

Second, in some cases, a desired outcome may never be achieved, such as the freeing of a political prisoner. But does that mean, therefore, that the campaign was a waste of time? Or should the campaign look to other measures of success?

Third, myriad actors and factors may influence how a situation evolves and what results are achieved in which moments. It is for that reason that, in human rights contexts, we talk about contribution, not attribution. Attribution asks whether project X caused result Y. Since, in a human rights context, there are many causes affecting a result, we ask instead, in what particular ways did a project contribute to it, also recognizing the contributions that others made?

Fourth, some of the actors and factors might be working toward the same result that the project is trying to achieve, while others might be working toward similar results, and still others might be trying to achieve the opposite result. This means that maintaining the status quo or achieving a less negative outcome than one that others were working toward could both be viewed as successes.

This also means that change is far from a linear process. Therefore, it is important to continuously check not only if a project is making progress according to its theory of change, but also whether the theory of change is still relevant, and if not, what adjustments need to be made in order to continue moving toward a desired outcome. In emergent settings like this, evidence of good context monitoring and responsiveness to changes in context are also evidence of success.
Another set of challenges relates to how to define meaningful measures.

First, what is measurable is not necessarily what is meaningful. For example, many projects will measure “# of trainings held.” But what does this tell us? We don’t know how relevant, substantive, and/or appropriately delivered the trainings were. We don’t know what the participants gained from the trainings.

Or, if a project aims to influence policy, then it might measure “# of meetings held with policy makers.” But what if influencing the policy really only relies on meeting with a few policy makers, and only a few meetings with them were required to influence them to work toward the desired policy change? Then, the project with the indicator “# of meetings held with policy makers” could fall short on the target for that measure, although it was advancing toward its desired objective. Or, since we tend to treasure what we measure, the project could get sidetracked having as many meetings as possible, rather than focusing on the few strategic meetings that were necessary to advance toward the desired policy change.

Additionally, as I noted and as I am sure you have experienced, changes in context can necessitate changes in strategy, which can then mean that previously relevant indicators are no longer relevant. Regularly monitoring for this and adjusting accordingly is essential.

Second, measures must take into account risks and sensitivities. For example, a project team must ask itself if providing information related to a particular measure could
accidentally place anyone in danger, or if collecting data on a measure could accidentally cause someone to relive a trauma. Similarly, a project team must ask itself how likely a government would be to report honestly on a given measure.

As important as designing meaningful measures is interpreting them correctly. For example, “# of political prisoners held” sounds like a good measure, and potentially a measure of success, if that number is decreasing. But what if the number is decreasing because the political prisoners are being killed, rather than held? Correctly interpreting measures depends on understanding a local context, and communicating with the people directly affected by a project. This can be done through reaching out to individuals for their input, or by bringing them together to engage in joint analysis. In either case, ensuring that diverse views are represented will help increase the credibility of the conclusions reached.
There are a number of questions to keep in mind when you are designing your measures in order to create meaningful measures.

First, ask “Measures meaningful to whom?” That is, who decides what success will look like? Too often, donors and implementing organizations decide what success looks like. But what about those directly and indirectly affected by a project? Do they see success in the same way? And what will be evidence of progress? By consulting with those whose lives may be affected by a project, project designers may learn about possible measures that they would not have imagined on their own.

Second, once key stakeholders are defined and their perspectives incorporated, project designers can ask what stakeholders need to know, and how they will use the information produced. Project designers should aim to develop the minimum number of measures required to tell key stakeholders what they need to know. It is better to collect less information and focus more time on using that information to inform decision making.

Third, make sure you can feasibly collect data on the measures you select. Do you have the financial resources, time, expertise and access required to collect them? If not, you probably need to pick different measures. In some cases, projects that cannot measure something directly use proxy measures. A proxy measure is an indirect measure of a desired outcome that is strongly correlated to that outcome. For example, a project may not have access to information about arms deals between arms supplier
countries and countries in conflict. However, it may be able to access information about the origins of weapons and ammunition found in a conflict setting. While this information may be incomplete, it can provide valuable evidence of supplier involvement.

Finally, constantly monitor context to ensure that measures remain relevant, and make adjustments as needed.
Inevitably, a project will experience unintended outcomes. But, if a project team is focused on collecting data related to its already defined measures, how will it pick up on these? There are a number of ways to do so. Some include:

- Including in interview protocols an open-ended question along the lines of, “Did anything else happen – positive or negative – at least in part due to the project?”
  - If something emerges, gathering as much information as possible from the interviewee about it, and then asking others about it can help ensure the credibility of the finding.

- Using an inductive evaluation approach, such as the Most Significant Change approach, which asks the open-ended question, “Over the past (relevant time period), what changes – positive or negative – have occurred (and this can be qualified to say, “as a result of or at least partially as a result of a particular project)?”
  - This approach elicits information about outcomes that are not necessarily captured in a project’s theory of change.
  - As with the open-ended interview question I mentioned, ensuring the credibility of the finding requires getting as much information as possible from the interviewee and then triangulating this information with others.

- Developing trust-based relationships between project implementers and those directly or indirectly affected by a project, and maintaining open communication with them can also create an environment in which those directly or indirectly affected by a project are more likely to report on unintended outcomes.
For further assistance on designing and conducting project evaluations we recommend gaining the assistance of an evaluation expert at the beginning of the project rather than after it is under way. Much is lost in the design of evaluations, data collection, and critical coordination with project staff if the structure of evaluation is only added later.

One resource of such assistance is the On-Call Scientists program of the AAAS. It partners volunteer scientists and engineers with human rights organizations to provide technical expertise on such things as forensic analysis, study design, cost-benefit analysis and data management. Over 800 volunteers are located around the world. To request a volunteer or for more information please visit http://oncallscientists.aaas.org.

Another resource is Statistics without Borders. This is another group that can provide free help for planning and conducting an evaluation - on anything related to data, report writing, planning and conducting a survey, evaluation - the whole statistics-related field. Statistics Without Borders has well over 2,000 members and is an Outreach Group of the American Statistical Association. Contact them and they will assemble a team of statisticians to assist you. Their website is community.amstat.org/statisticswithoutborders/home. You can also email Gary Shapiro, Chair of the New Client Acquisition Committee, at g.shapiro4@live.com.
In addition, here are some references for further reading on today’s topics. Please visit www.aaas.org/evaluation101 for more information on all of these resources.
A hearty thanks to the presenters and my co-organizers for today’s webinar. We hope you will join us on Monday May 15 for the next webinar in this series titled Evaluation 101 for Human Rights Organizations. It will be on study designs. We will contact you soon with the details and how to register.