

# Evaluating Social Change Communication -Expert Group Meeting

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## Executive Summary

This report outlines the key questions, issues and approaches considered by the expert group meeting in Sussex. We explored challenges and promising methods for evaluating Social Change Communication (SCC) in the context of HIV and AIDS initiatives. The meeting brought together a small group of experts to explore fruitful lines of enquiry and existing methods and tools that have the potential to advance evaluation thinking and practice in this area. More specifically, the focus was to identify useful ways to approach evaluation of complex social change – given the need to address the ‘social drivers’ of HIV infection.

The meeting was designed to feed into the development of a Background paper, by further delineating issues and questions of importance, as well as sharing existing case studies and examples of innovative M and E practice. This paper will in turn support the work of the UNAIDS Technical Group on Social Change Communication in developing practical guidance on SCC and its evaluation for HIV/AIDS programmes, and strengthening thinking and practice in this area.

The meeting provided a welcome and rare opportunity to revisit critical issues and challenges central to the M&E of SCC and, therefore, to the Background paper currently underway. E.g. the challenges complex, real life scenarios pose for evaluation; tensions between small/ large scale; unique (context-specific)/ generalisable; issues of attribution and causation; constructive use of stories; indicators; meeting the needs of donors/ programme staff and intended beneficiaries; balancing multiple accountabilities, learning and programme improvement in evaluation processes.

Participants were a small group of international experts who are both practitioners with long-standing experience and leading thinkers in a variety of aspects of development evaluation, participation and development communication. Each participant led sessions on their areas of expertise, focused on the potential and relevance to the evaluation of SCC.

The degree of commitment and engagement was notable. Importantly for future stages of this work and research, those present as well as select other invitees who were unable to participate in this meeting but who are well placed to advise (including well known leaders in the field), are eager to be involved as appropriate. In this sense both the preparation and the meeting itself successfully nurtured interest in and commitment to unfolding developments.

## Participants<sup>1</sup>

- Danny Burns (Professor of Social & Organisational Learning, SOLAR, University of the West of England)
- Ailish Byrne (CFSC Consortium)
- Rick Davies (Founder and manager of [www.mande.co.uk](http://www.mande.co.uk) (M&E News), Independent M&E Consultant)
- Virginia Lacayo (Ohio University Department of Communication & Development Communication)
- Ricardo Ramirez (University of Guelph, Canada)
- Robin Vincent (Panos London)

Ailish Byrne of the CFSC Consortium facilitated the meeting, with support from Robin Vincent of Panos.

**Ailish Byrne** is a Social Development and Communication practitioner, with much experience and expertise in qualitative and participatory research and evaluation methodologies. Her academic background is in social anthropology, adult education and community health. Her PhD thesis explores the potential and challenges of participatory evaluation approaches and related organizational development issues. At the Consortium Ailish is actively involved researching and evaluating CFSC initiatives in diverse contexts, and with related capacity development. She has written substantially on related areas. She has a keen interest in developmental evaluation approaches that prioritise learning for key stakeholders. Ailish is a member of the Social Change Communication working group of UNAIDS.

**Robin Vincent** has much experience in health and HIV communication, as well as in the theory and practice of learning and evaluation approaches in development organizations. A doctor of social anthropology, recent theoretical interests include the communication dynamics of social

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<sup>1</sup> Extensive efforts were made to secure the participation of leading, high-calibre African M&E scholars and practitioners in this meeting. Unfortunately however, delays in finalizing the contract and the meeting dates, combined with existing commitments, meant that this was not realized. However future stages in the process present opportunities for wider participation.

movements, understanding social change with concepts from complex systems theory, and the role of emotion in culturally based communication. He has written various briefing papers for Panos London, articles on learning and partnerships and social movement communication, and a chapter on HIV and complexity in a recent book on HIV and vulnerability in the Caribbean. Robin is also a member of the Social Change Communication working group of UNAIDS.

**Rick Davies** is an independent M&E consultant. He has extensive and high-level experience with major bilaterals, governments and INGOs, including DFID, AED, ADB and AusAID, using a variety of M&E approaches in diverse development contexts. Rick is well known as the founder and coordinator of [mande.co.uk](http://mande.co.uk), the widely used website for development workers interested in and engaged with M&E. This keeps Rick updated on M&E developments internationally, as well as on the needs of donors and practitioners in development and communication contexts. Rick is also an authority on the Most Significant Change methodology and he co-authored the MSC Guide. Social Network Analysis is a major focus of Rick's at present.

**Ricardo Ramirez** is an Adjunct Professor at the University of Guelph and an independent researcher and consultant in development communication, focused on aspects of planning, facilitation and evaluation. He has worked extensively on related issues with FAO and IFAD (Rome), IDRC (Canada) and various INGOs, for many years. He has co-edited two relevant books, written many chapters in books and published numerous relevant articles in peer review journals. He is actively involved with capacity development in related areas.

**Virginia Lacayo** played a leading role in the design and implementation of Puntos de Encuentro's (Nicaragua) communication strategy for social change for 12 years. She co-created and hosted Puntos' radio show for 4 years and was co-creator, Executive Producer and Director of the edutainment television series *Sexto Sentido*. She is currently pursuing her PhD on evaluating communication and social change initiatives from the perspective of complexity science and feminist epistemologies. Virginia presented Puntos' work as a detailed case study, both of SCC relating to HIV/AIDS, as well as of the challenges presented by evaluating such initiatives. She has presented Puntos' work at diverse fora and published related articles.

**Danny Burns** is Professor of Social and Organisational Learning at the University of the West of England, Bristol. He is a leading figure in Action Research and large system perspectives and evaluations, in the UK and elsewhere. He has managed and facilitated large scale action research initiatives, for many years, with complex community development and regeneration programmes that share much in common with SCC programmes. Participation, local governance and participatory learning are key aspects of Danny's work. He has written on systems concepts in evaluation and his book on Large System Action Research was published in the UK in 2007.

## The Brighton meeting

The meeting aimed to highlight the potential, value and relevance of "innovative" (i.e. non mainstream) approaches to M&E, within a Social Change Communication paradigm, with specific reference to HIV/AIDS programmes. We explored useful ways to strengthen the M and E of SCC and suggested elements of an expanded M and E framework that would complement models currently used in HIV prevention and communication. The emerging issues and suggestions are intended to inform future related activities, as outlined below. It is anticipated that the group will, with select other experts, continue to support these activities.

Related activities include: (i) The Background paper currently underway. (ii) A Bellagio-type meeting (likely to be held at Bellagio Conference Centre late in 2009) that will bring together leading players in UN agencies, bilateral agencies, leading INGOs and others, to consider how to fund and carry forward the proposed M&E framework and ideas, specifically in relation to SCC in the HIV/AIDS field. (iii) Piloting of the recommended M&E frameworks and processes in select countries. (iv) Securing high-level buy-in and longer-term/more informed commitment to the above (key aims of the Bellagio meeting).

## Rationale

HIV initiatives and their evaluation to date are overwhelmingly dominated by interventions that target individuals and their behaviour, with very few targeting social, policy or structural factors (Rugg et al 2004: 147, Coates et al 2008). There is growing concern to address the 'social drivers' of HIV, yet interventions and evaluation approaches able to address the complex, multi-leveled and multiple factors that impact on issues such as stigma and gender inequity, remain underdeveloped. Additional concern to better understand the dynamics of social change comes from the recognition that relative 'successes' in some country responses to HIV, such as Uganda and Brazil, have involved widespread public communication, community mobilisation and a combination of factors, well beyond the formal remit of development agencies. This highlights that lasting social change often results from multiple complex, interrelated and interacting factors and that social outcomes may be 'emergent', all of which raise critical questions about the adequacy of traditional linear evaluation approaches (Patton in Rugg et al, 2004: 168-9)

Communication for Social Change is recognized as a promising approach to address the social aspects of HIV and AIDS, as well as broader development issues. But to contribute more effectively to HIV and AIDS initiatives, its application needs strengthening. This includes aspects of practice, research, capacity development, resource production and evaluation. Evaluation approaches in HIV/AIDS work remain largely biased towards short-term project-focused attribution, while approaches that better address the complexity of social change and that prioritise "developmental", learning-oriented dimensions, rather than just "accountability" (in practice, upward accountability), remain urgently needed.

SCC prioritises addressing multiple, diverse contexts, multiple and diverse stakeholders and initiatives, in recognition that social life is inherently complex (the whole is greater than the sum

of the parts) and perpetually in flux. It recognizes the highly significant role of particular contextual factors, notwithstanding common principles applicable across contexts. Finding evaluation approaches suitable to assess action in such a complex and dynamic landscape remains a significant challenge. Much expertise and experience with “innovative”, “alternative” approaches to M&E across the development sector and wider afield remains largely untapped in the HIV/AIDS field. Yet it has much to offer a SCC paradigm.

A wide variety of organizations and stakeholders working at different levels need support now, conceptually and practically, to strengthen the evaluation of SCC and related initiatives. SCC needs greater visibility and legitimacy, as well as to be better understood and applied. Better documentation of innovations, promising approaches and ‘good process’ in SCC is needed, as well as clear guidance for those wanting to operationalise SCC evaluations in practical HIV programming.

## Key areas covered in the meeting; emerging issues and approaches

The Agenda covered the following key issues and approaches. A brief summary of the main points considered in relation to each is presented below.

- ☐ Evaluation – the bigger picture and deeper questions (AB)
- ☐ Utilization Focused Evaluation (RR)
- ☐ Evaluation in contexts of HIV/AIDS & SCC (RV)
- ☐ Theories of Change (AB & RV)
- ☐ Large system Action Research (DB)
- ☐ A detailed case study of SCC through a complexity lens (VL)
- ☐ Complexity theory (RV)
- ☐ Social Network Analysis (RD)
- ☐ Most Significant Change (RD)
- ☐ Outcome Mapping (RR)
- ☐ Reaching those we need to reach; diverse and complementary ways of “making the case”.

### 1. Evaluation – the bigger picture

Ailish framed the meeting, outlining some fundamental issues and their relevance to our task. Any evaluation framework or guide must go beyond particular methods and tools to consider the deeper, underlying questions that should inform these. These “bigger evaluation questions” remain critical. They include who (which stakeholders) the evaluation is ultimately for and why, the principles and core values of SCC and the implications of these for evaluation ethos and practice. E.g. what does “success” entail and who determines

success or otherwise? Based on what/whose values and criteria? To what extent do/should evaluation processes and findings inform ongoing programme development (or not) and to what extent do/should they nurture learning? We discussed key issues in relation to the meeting's aim and goals, outlining questions and challenges that would remain central.

We reaffirmed the need to focus on approaches and methods that will complement (rather than replace) those that dominate at present, while keeping “bigger picture” issues to the fore and avoiding becoming bogged down in stereotypes and narrower methods-oriented debates of limited value. Method and tool selection should depend on communication strategy, which depends on theory of change, which depends on ontology, epistemology and how you see the world. To be constructive we have to stay focused on the bigger picture and larger issues, which inform choice of method and approach.

We discussed the challenges presented by the notion of one overriding evaluation framework for SCC initiatives, and indeed whether or not this is desirable or even possible, given the fundamentals of complexity, emergence and diversity that characterise SCC processes. It was suggested instead that we consider desirable elements of a framework.

We reaffirmed the need to keep “lived realities” to the fore, to start where people are at, complement and build on existing practice. To keep any guidelines simple, clear and readily accessible to diverse audiences, as well as adaptable and responsive to diverse and evolving SCC contexts.

Ricardo usefully outlined the value and potential of a ‘Utilization Focused Evaluation’ approach and framework (MQ Patton) for those working in SCC. Its primary strength is ensuring that intended use and users of evaluations remain to the fore at all stages of an evaluation process.

## **2. Evaluation in contexts of HIV/AIDS**

Rob outlined the growing interest in social context and change, following a history of HIV work dominated by a focus on individual behavior change. The relatively new focus on ‘social drivers’ has demanded attention to the complex multileveled issues of gender inequity, stigma and discrimination and human rights deficits. Recent evaluations of mass media work and multi-component HIV communication strategies were briefly touched on. However, the challenge of moving beyond immediate behavior to the social factors driving HIV infection, and finding appropriate approaches and means with which to evaluate them, remains very real.

## **3. Theories of Change in Social Change Communication**

A Theory of Change is “an observational map to help practitioners... to read and thus navigate processes of social change” (D. Reeler, 2007). It is highly relevant to evaluation, as “a causal model linking programme inputs and activities to a chain of intended or observed outcomes – used to guide evaluation” (P. Rogers, 2008). A programme’s theory or theories of change should underlie its evaluation. However, as is increasingly recognized, the complexity, diversity and unpredictability of SCC processes and initiatives seriously

challenge the notion of one Theory of Change for SCC. For these reasons we returned to the issue of Theories of Change throughout the meeting. Key questions raised about Theories of Change in SCC contexts include: (i) Is it appropriate or feasible to seek to develop one overarching theory of change for SCC & HIV/AIDS programmes, which would include multiple and diverse programme- and project level (i.e. unique, context-specific) theories of change? Can you develop any overriding theory of change out of specific context? (ii) How to ensure that theories of change themselves remain dynamic, evolving and in flux? (iii) Whether fundamental characteristics of SCC initiatives stretch the concept of “Theory of Change” so far that its relevance and value is itself questionable. The above challenges suggest it might be more appropriate instead to start and work with the key characteristics of SCC, as the literature on Complex Adaptive Systems emphasizes. This was a recurrent theme and there is a need for further thinking on this area.

#### **4. Large system Action Research**

Danny shared rich examples from practice to highlight key issues and challenges faced when evaluating diverse, complex, multi-stakeholder initiatives and programmes, at scale. These are in many ways similar to SCC initiatives that we are all familiar with. Through stories from practice he emphasized the importance of: recognizing that all stakeholders (donors included) are actors and reflecting this in research methodology; maintaining a whole-system perspective; dealing with diverse and at times conflicting perspectives and needs; seeking and leaving room for the unexpected; flexible action research methodologies that focus on studying complex realities, rather than on aspects of prediction and control; using inquiry processes to stimulate dialogue and action; the notion of resonance – who else does it ring a bell with? Danny’s presentation highlighted the practical relevance and significance of the “big evaluation questions” that we had discussed earlier.

#### **5. Puntos de Encuentro – detailed SCC case study**

Virginia presented the story of Puntos, highlighting what it suggests about how social change happens and critical questions and issues it raises about evaluation. Puntos is a multi-media social change and feminist movement and organization, founded (unconsciously) on principles of complexity.

Virginia vividly brought to life the potential and strengths of a systems and complexity perspective, keeping us grounded in the challenges faced by those on the ground who seek to evaluate their practice in ways consistent with underlying programme fundamentals

Virginia’s work evaluating Puntos has highlighted the importance of the following: Starting from the system/reality itself; understanding the difference between simple, complicated and complex aspects of programmes; that change is both progressive and sudden, you need to capture both; the largely unpredictable (and uncontrollable) nature of social change processes; the importance of relationships; the importance of decentralisation and maximizing freedom (“with a few, simple rules, encourage people to get there in their own ways”) in recognition that each context is specific and there is no “one right way” to evaluate

such initiatives. Puntos' experiences with evaluation approaches have shown up the inadequacy and limitations of dominant evaluation paradigms and practice and, in contrast, the strengths of a complexity frame of reference. Like Danny's stories, this in-depth focus on Puntos' experience helped root us in reality. It grounded and crystallized key evaluation issues, questions and challenges that we revisited.

## **6. Complexity theory**

Building on issues raised by the Puntos case study, Rob introduced some applications of complexity theory which can provide useful pointers and avenues for making use of complex systems concepts. E.g. David Byrne's work on Qualitative comparative analysis (QCA), which uses social survey data for a society over time to track the overall 'phase space' of that society and link it to key 'control parameters' -- characteristics of that society -- such as degree of wealth inequality. Key social characteristics are examined, including their role in contributing to and limiting social outcomes. The QCA method can help to better understand the upstream 'social drivers' of HIV and inform national multi-sectoral planning. A second useful area of work is Complex Adaptive systems (CAS), which focuses on key evaluation principles that can usefully inform the design of evaluation frameworks capable of tracking overall systemic change and that facilitate responsive programming.

## **7. Social Network Analysis (SNA)**

Rick "spoke to" the paper on SNA that he had recently drafted for our Background paper on evaluating SCC. Through rich examples from practice, he highlighted that SNA is a representational technology, a means of re-presentation, which highlights relationships. It encompasses a shift from a *logical* framework (Log Frame and similar) to a *social* framework. E.g. connecting series of actors, within and without particular networks, rather than just series of events. And a shift from maps, which are complex, to models which are less complex. SNA is not that different to participatory mapping that many development workers are already familiar with (PRA, PLA and similar). Key questions in any SNA include: what actors you want to represent, what kinds of relationships, and questions of scale -- macro or micro. SNA has much potential to present complex realities and relationships in relatively accessible ways, to map networks and relationships horizontally as well as vertically, and to elevate the focus on relationships between diverse actors. We considered the potential and value of diverse SNA models from Rick's experience, for SCC initiatives. Rick appreciated the useful suggestions proposed to make his paper more meaningful and accessible to our intended audiences.

## **8. The Most Significant Change approach and Outcome Mapping**

We considered the potential and value of these two well known and increasingly used evaluation approaches to SCC contexts, as well as the challenges they present. Both are advocated to complement (rather than replace) more traditional evaluations. Both hold enormous potential for the evaluation of SCC initiatives, in particular the extent to which



they are open to what unfolds, to the specifics of particular contexts and to elements of surprise and the unexpected. Both have strong learning components as they actively engage primary stakeholders in processes of reflection, critical analysis, prioritizing and presenting change.

Outcome Mapping is much focused on the significance of boundaries -- what is in and out and why -- and on what basis these decisions are made. These questions are highly significant to evaluation and the issue of boundaries was another recurrent theme of the meeting.

## **9. Making the case**

In summary, it is strongly recommended to use diverse, interactive, accessible and multi-media presentations, games, exercises and stories to demonstrate the value and validity of less known, more innovative approaches to evaluating social change communication.

This includes using stories to get across abstract and complex ideas relating to issues of complexity, systemic perspectives and so on (as in Gladwell's Tipping Point and other key writings). Compelling stories can help both to conceptualize and to challenge the mainstream, as we vividly experienced through the many stories shared, from diverse socio-cultural contexts.

## **Key recommendations to strengthen the evaluation of SCC**

The meeting covered a wide range of theoretical and practical issues, from theories of change and adequately understanding social change, to particular evaluation methods, the values that underpin them and the practical challenges of programming that addresses social complexity. A number of key issues that need to be addressed, and promising approaches that merit further development, emerged from the meeting.

Overall, evaluation approaches need to be consistent with the underlying values and principles of an initiative. E.g. if empowerment and capacity development are core principles, these must be evident in the evaluation approach. Complex, emergent programmes and process require complex and evolutionary evaluation designs.

Social complexity may demand evaluation based on a dynamic, moving theory of change, which is tracked as part of the ongoing evaluation. Rather than emphasis on prediction, such an approach emphasizes ongoing engagement with the social issues at hand, whereby the evaluation is itself an integral part of the social change process.

Any evaluation of SCC should be integral to the SCC process itself. It is vital that evaluation approaches, like SCC processes, see people as actors and agents of their own change.

An overall programming and evaluation framework needs to integrate work addressing social context and social factors, with current perspectives that predominantly focus on individual behavior and proximal social causes.

There is a need to better document existing innovations and novel approaches to evaluation in contexts of social change programming. Much is already happening that remains little known outside immediate circles. Thus valuable learning opportunities continue to be lost.

Some recommended practical steps:

1. Actively promote diversity of approaches and methods
2. Seek to proactively address imbalances, e.g. through seeding innovation, supporting capacity development in “alternative” M&E paradigms and practice, and offering incentives.
3. Provide seed funding for innovation and diversity, in recognition that no one approach fits all.
4. Build in mechanisms to capture the unexpected and unpredictable.
5. Reward risk-taking and innovation.
6. Fund champions who are in it for the long haul. Core, long-term funding is needed, beyond the lives of particular projects, as every case of excellence in communication demonstrates.
7. Ensure and facilitate mutually-supportive networks of Champions, including groups who are already talking to each other, so that pilots of innovation feel part of a bigger movement rather than scattered examples.

All participants felt that the Brighton meeting was well worth their time and participation, all commented on learning a lot and much energy was devoted to how best to make the case for a broader, more appropriate repertoire of evaluation approaches and methods. Numerous, rich examples from practice were shared throughout the meeting, as were key references and concrete ideas about progressing the work, all of which will feed into future stages in the process. The meeting yielded much substance, barely touched on here, which will be explored in depth in the Background paper currently being produced, as intended. It will also help to inform the overall shape of the paper, which is intended to actively feed into future stages of the work and research. The substance of the meeting will undoubtedly prove valuable as we roll the process out and take it further.

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*Thanks to Robin Vincent for commenting on an earlier draft of this report.*