

Complexity and Evaluation in International Networks

14 December 2006

MDF's Seminar 'M&E on the Cutting Edge', Ede

Purpose: Shed some light on the special challenges of evaluating development programmes and specifically international networks of social change actors.

Intended result: After the presentation and discussion, you and I will have new insights on evaluation of international networks.

A **caveat** - Theory and practice of evaluating international networks, and of applying complexity science to evaluation, are in their infancies.

Three challenges and two questions

- Networks operate in highly unpredictable environments--complex, open and dynamic.
- They contrast to a large degree with the corporate, governmental or civil society organisations of their members.
- Network stakeholders tend to demand accountability and results from a conventional organisational perspective.
- To what extent can complexity science be useful in meeting these challenges?
- In any case, can networks be accountable and demonstrate results?

International networks defined

Groups of autonomous organisations (and perhaps individuals) in two or more countries or continents who share a purpose and voluntarily contribute knowledge, experience, staff time, finances and other resources to achieve common goals.

Functions of international networks

- Address global problems from local, national and regional contexts
- Manage knowledge for their members
- Promote dialogue, exchange and learning
- Shape the public agenda
- Convene organisations or people
- Facilitate advocacy, campaigns and other action by members
- Build movements
- Mobilise and rationalise the use of resources
- Strengthen international consciousness, commitment and solidarity

1. International networks operate
in highly unpredictable
environments--complex, open
and dynamic

Complex: Networks are composed of a large number of interdependent variables: amongst the members and in their societies. These massively entangled relationships affect the network's activities.

Open: The behaviour of the network actors is dependent on the diverse contexts in which they are embedded and where they act

Dynamic: The interplay of a large and diverse number of network actors strongly influenced by each other and their environment leads to constant and discontinuous change

Unpredictable: As a result, messy, multi-level and multi-directional causality drives interaction in a network.

In sum, the planning, monitoring and evaluation of the activities and results of a network operating on this complex, open, dynamic, unpredictable stage, require innovative approaches.

Democracy - Hierarchical management and command and control do not work with volunteer, autonomous network actors. Democratic management and participation are the keys to empowerment, ownership and concerted, common action in a network.

Diversity - With common values and a shared purpose, network actors have different visions and strategies on how to achieve change. The management challenge is to enable heterogeneous network actors to make creative and constructive contributions.

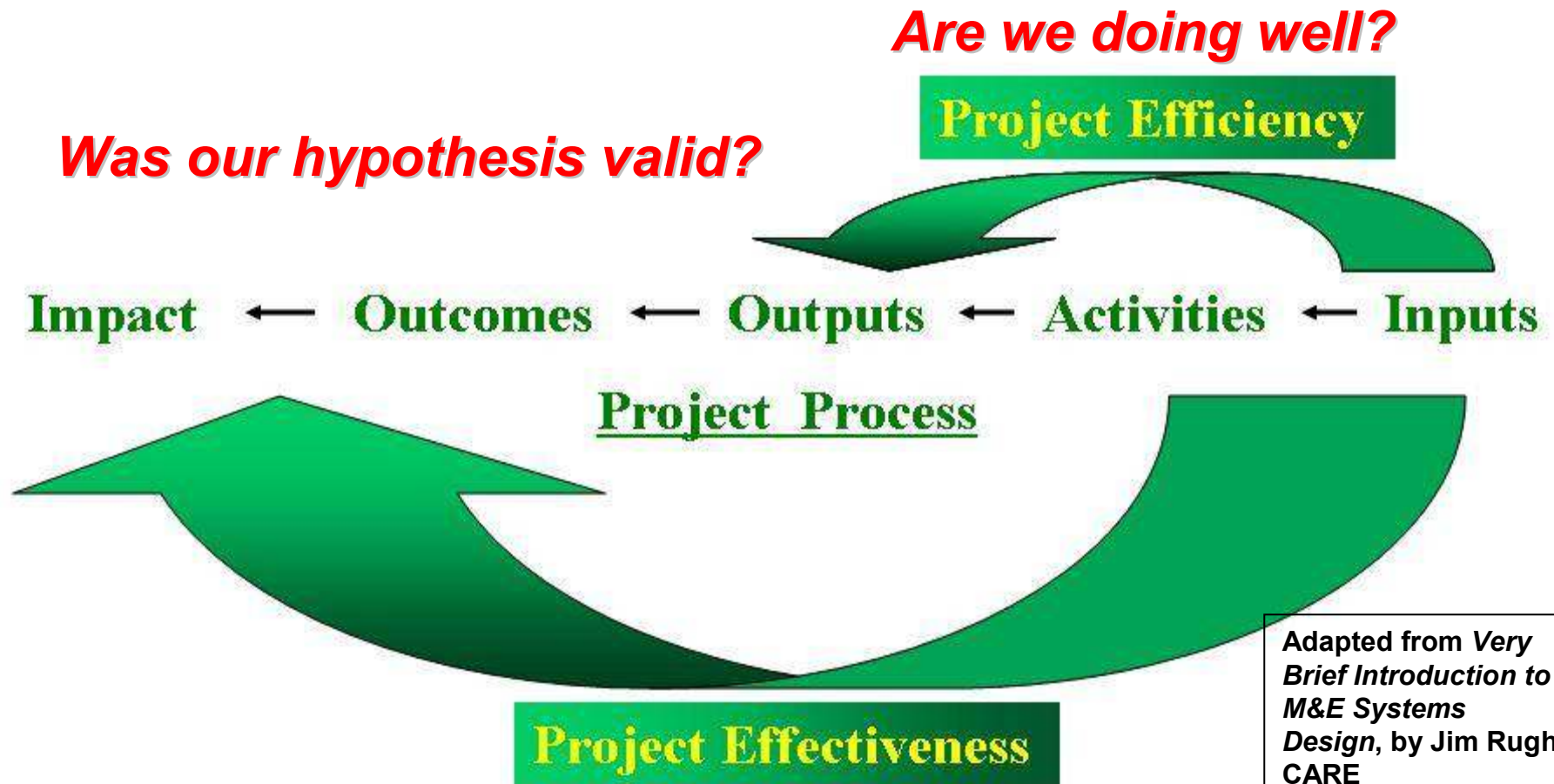
Participation – is of paramount importance given their voluntary nature:

- ❑ *Members set the agenda in vibrant networks*
- ❑ *Effective networks are deliberately non-hierarchical to promote ownership, participation and creativity at all levels*
- ❑ *Members have a variety of motivations and different levels of commitment*
- ❑ *Network membership is fluid*

- Suzanne Taschereau and Joe Bolger, *Networks and Capacity*,
ECDPM, September 2006

3. Network stakeholders tend to demand accountability and results from a conventional organisational perspective.

Stakeholders' demands



Did we do the right thing in a worthwhile way?



Thanks to Michael Quinn Patton

- Networks are “non-linear, dynamic social change agents” Interventions are based more on values than on hypotheses and take place in complex situations without predetermined, predictable, or controllable results.
- Cause and effect in networks’ activities and results is rarely known and frequently not knowable, and when it is knowable, then usually it is in retrospect.
- A network’s horizon is long-term when opportunities and risks proliferate and uncertainty increases.

4. To what extent can complexity science be useful in meeting these challenges?

“I think the next century will be the century of complexity.”

- Stephen Hawking, January 2000

Organisations are “complex adaptive systems” when they are

- Made up of a great number of connections between a wide variety of internal and external elements and agents.
- Are responsive to internal and external changes, learn and co-evolve with them.

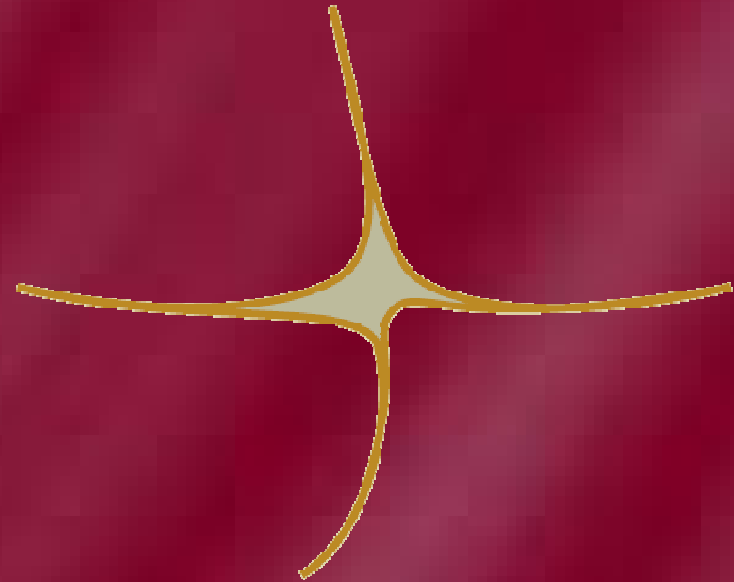
Characteristics of organisations as “complex adaptive systems”

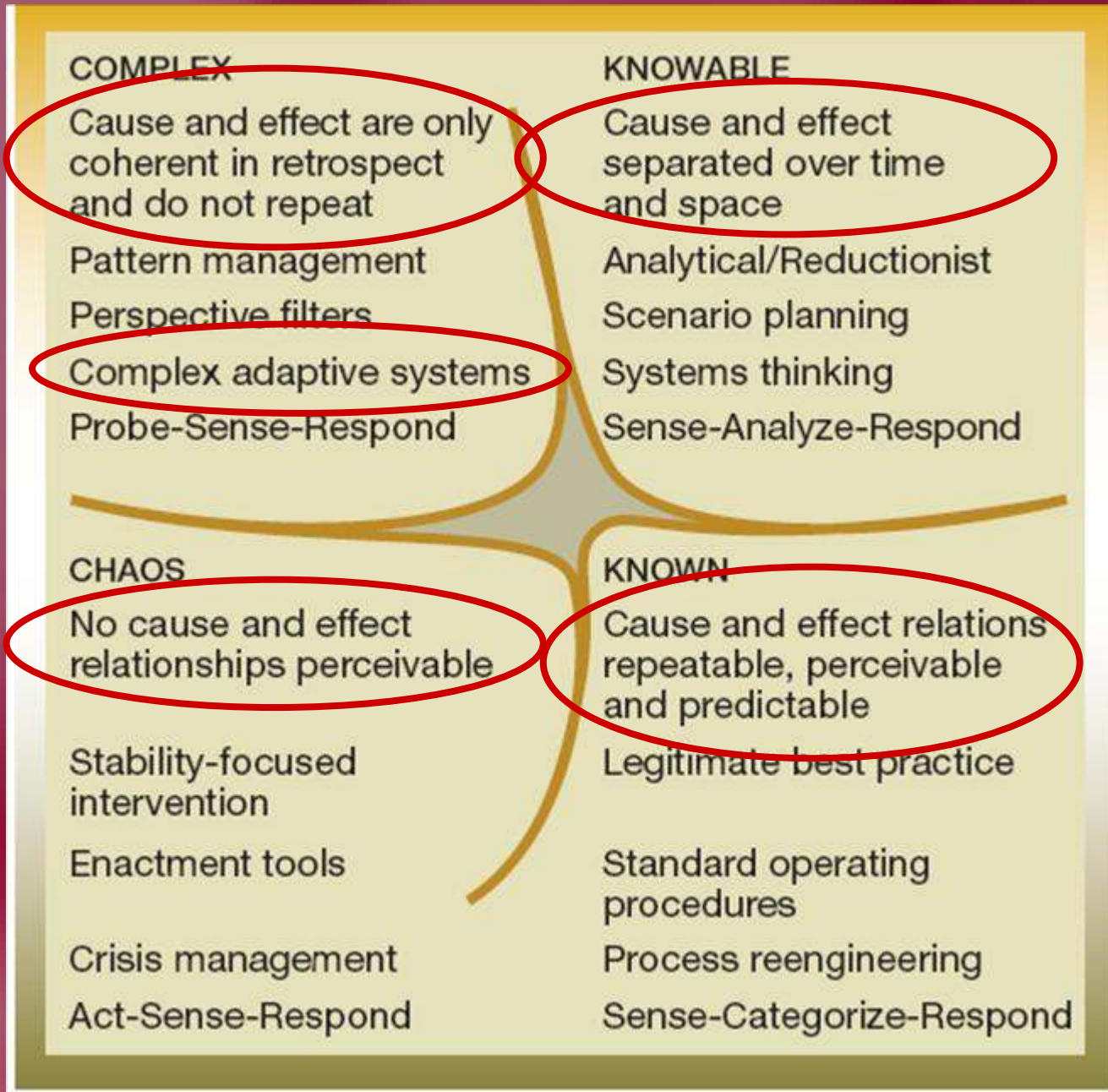
- Large numbers of independent agents who interact in interdependent and unpredictable ways.
- Diversity amongst the agents is necessary for adaptability and sustainability
- The relationships between the parts is more important than the parts themselves
- Power and control are distributed rather than centralised
- Outcomes emerge from a process of self-organisation and are thus unpredictable
- The relationship between outcomes and inputs is non-linear

A practical application: the Cynefin framework

Developed by IBM's
Cynefin Centre for
organizational complexity,
Cardiff University, Wales.

*The Cynefin framework
addresses the “new
dynamics of strategy:
Sense-making in a
complex and complicated
world”*





COMPLEX Cause and effect are only coherent in retrospect and do not repeat

Network development
Leadership
Management
Campaigning
Fundraising

KNOWABLE Cause and effect separated over time and space

Global conference
Web site

No cause and effect relationships perceivable

Members in new country or geographical region

Meetings
Research
Newsletter Cause and effect relations repeatable, perceivable and predictable

CHAOS

KNOWN

5. Can networks be accountable and demonstrate results?

If you do not and cannot know what outputs will lead to what outcomes, then outcomes cannot be honestly predefined.

How can you hold a network accountable if it cannot demonstrate, and much less measure, its progress and achievement of impact?

International networks can be accountable and demonstrate results...if the evaluation:

- ✓ Meets international standards for utility, feasibility, propriety and accuracy
- ✓ Crafts a hybrid approach that is as participatory as the network's stakeholders want it to be
- ✓ Resolves dilemmas of a) means and ends and b) measuring and attributing impact

Dilemma of means and ends

"There is a tendency for networks to focus not on tangible impacts, but rather simply on the exercise of validating their own existence."

- Annelise Riles of Cornell University

- Networks are both a means and an end in themselves.
- The existence of a network is of special value because without it there would not be the interaction of its parts.

“Organic” or institutional outcomes

Verifiable **changes** in the patterns of behaviour, relationships, or actions of the **members of the network** and to which the network contributed.

Example from a human rights network: In the past year, two of the seven member organisations have set up centres for psychological rehabilitation for the families of human rights victims, as a result of the capacity building programme sponsored by the network.

Dilemma of measuring and attributing impact

Impact = long-term, major, sustainable changes in the structures and relations of power in society brought about by people, groups and organisations relating to each other and to their environment

Political outcomes are the verifiable changes (in patterns of behaviour, relationships, or actions) in other individuals, groups or organisations *that relate to the purpose the network*, and to which the network contributed.

Identifying political outcomes

- **Human rights network:** In 1998-2004, what were the verifiable changes (in patterns of behaviour, relationships, or actions) in Asian national governments, the UN Human Rights Commission or its members that *resolved cases of involuntary disappearances, prevent recurrence, and end impunity in Asia?*
- \What is the evidence of the network's contribution to the change?

In sum, network evaluation should take into account

- ❖ International networks operate in circumstances where cause and effect is unpredictable
- ❖ Networks are unique organisational forms
- ❖ Stakeholders' demands for accountability and results can be met
- ❖ Members' changes in themselves can be valuable and valid outcomes
- ❖ Changes in other social actors are a step towards impact
- ❖ Complexity theory can be useful

Thank you!

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For further information, please
see next slide

Annotated bibliography on complexity theory

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