

# A Developmental Evaluation Primer

Jamie A.A. Gamble

The J.W. McConnell  
Family Foundation



## About the Foundation

Established in 1937 by philanthropist and entrepreneur John Wilson McConnell, The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation funds projects in Canada that foster citizen engagement, build resilient communities and have the potential for national scale or impact.

Our vision at The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation is a Canada where all people have the opportunity to develop their potential and contribute to the betterment of their communities and country.

Over the years, the ways to achieve this have evolved; what remains central to its purpose is the importance of community, how people contribute, and the Foundation's need to make choices in its granting decisions, to take risks, to learn and to be engaged with its grantees.

In the process of developing and supporting programs, the Foundation has come to appreciate better the importance of innovation, the exploring of new and effective ways of addressing intractable social problems, and the challenge of ensuring that these new approaches are sustained.

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# Foreword

A primer has historically meant a book of *first principles*. That characterization fits this primer quite nicely. The principles presented here emerged from highly interactive workshops with a group of developmental evaluators representing premier Canadian organizations.<sup>1</sup> Just as developmental evaluation (DE) is a dynamic, emergent process, those workshops, spanning two years, were highly dynamic and emergent. The principles and premises captured so well here by Jamie Gamble reflect the insights generated from the developmental process of experimenting with diverse applications of developmental evaluation in innovative organizations across Canada.

Synchronicity played a role, as often occurs in highly dynamic and emergent processes. As the developmental evaluation workshops were taking place, I was working with Frances Westley and Brenda Zimmerman on a book about the implications of complexity theory for social innovation. That book, *Getting to Maybe: How the World Is Changed*,<sup>2</sup> was launched at the final DE workshop in Toronto at the end of 2006. Sessions with my co-authors working on the book often preceded or followed DE workshops, each influencing and intricately connected with the other. Indeed, I would suggest that this *Developmental Evaluation Primer* and the *Getting to Maybe* book might well be thought of as a matched pair. *Getting to Maybe* provides the philosophical and theoretical context and background for developmental evaluation practice. This *Developmental Evaluation Primer* provides concrete guidance for implementing the ideas offered and explored in *Getting to Maybe*.

*Getting to Maybe* introduces the idea of developmental evaluation as an approach especially adapted to the emergent uncertainties of social innovations in complex environments, but doesn't say how to actually do it. Since publication of the book, I have been inundated with requests for more details and operational guidance. How does one really engage in developmental evaluation? How is it different from other traditional forms of evaluation? Under what circumstances is it appropriate to undertake developmental evaluation? What special skills are needed? What results from a developmental evaluation?

<sup>1</sup> See appendix B for a list of participating organizations.

<sup>2</sup> Published by Random House Canada.

My response to these questions has been, “Be patient. The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation is supporting publication of an excellent primer on developmental evaluation. It will answer all of your questions.” Well, maybe not *all*. That would not be consistent with developmental evaluation as an emergent, exploring, learning-oriented and adaptive process in which those involved discover answers to their own situationally specific questions. But this primer will tell you how to get started on and stay true to that developmental process.

And for those questions not answered here? The answers, as the poet says, are blowing in the wind. Listen to the wind. Listen. The wind in this case is the dynamic unfolding of your own innovation and inquiry, which is to say, the answers will emerge from the process and won't be known until you engage in and reflect on the process. Don't expect to have all of the answers to how to do this at the beginning, or even at the end. But developmental evaluation will help you be clear about where you started, what forks in the road you took and why, what you learned along the way, and where you ended up, at least for a moment in time, before the next gust of wind.

Michael Quinn Patton

Former President of the American Evaluation Association

Author, *Utilization-Focused Evaluation and Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods* (Sage, 1997 and 2002)

# Sponsors of the Developmental Evaluation Workshops

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### The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation

If there is one issue that bedevils grantees and grant-makers alike, it is evaluation. Once one leaves the domain of straightforward projects with clearly defined outcomes, one enters into a minefield. Mismatched expectations regarding anticipated results, inappropriate evaluation methodologies, a reluctance to share the risks inherent in trying new approaches...all these and more create frustration and, often, distrust.

The J. W. McConnell Family Foundation encourages innovative ways to address complex social problems. We have learned that the straitjacket of many conventional evaluation methods impedes the flexibility required for grantees to experiment, test, learn and, where necessary, revise their programs. This gave rise to the concept of developmental evaluation under the leadership of Dr. Michael Quinn Patton, using a workshop of social change practitioners with whom the Foundation has worked, with the strong support of DuPont Canada.

We welcome this primer prepared by Jamie Gamble and hope that it furthers the goal of encouraging innovative solutions to important social challenges.

Tim Brodhead  
President and CEO  
The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation

### DuPont Canada

Social Innovation is a strategic segment of Community Investing at DuPont. The mission of this strategic segment of DuPont giving is: "To foster innovation that will create leaps in productivity and impact in the social sector. We will do this by developing the capacities of leaders and leading-edge organizations; promoting social innovation; and developing and applying social innovation methodologies."

The McGill-DuPont initiative was key in advancing this mission. In 2002 McGill University and DuPont Canada partnered to explore the parameters of social innovation and to organize existing thinking into a form accessible to practitioners. It was through this initiative that DuPont was introduced to Dr. Michael Quinn Patton and the emerging methodology, developmental evaluation.

DuPont Canada proudly sponsored the series of developmental evaluation workshops that came to life with the support of The J.W. McConnell Foundation under the Sustaining Social Innovation (SSI) umbrella.

Lori Summers  
Community Investing Manager  
DuPont Canada

# 1

## Introduction to Developmental Evaluation

The intent of this document is to introduce the concept of developmental evaluation to potential users and to provide some tools to support its use.

The work to explore developmental evaluation was part of the SSI Initiative,<sup>3</sup> a two-year collaboration (2005–2006) between The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation, DuPont Canada, and the PLAN Institute for Caring Citizenship. Its purpose was to examine the capacity of social innovation to address intractable social problems in Canada. The three organizations saw developmental evaluation as a means to track the methods and procedures involved in social innovation, processes that are often difficult to evaluate. The practice of developmental evaluation was further refined in a series of developmental workshops.<sup>4</sup> Examples from the experiences of the workshop participants can be found throughout this text.

While this primer includes examples of developmental evaluation being applied in innovative projects, it is an embryonic discipline and new ideas about it are still emerging.

A special thanks to Michael Quinn Patton for his insight, guidance and contribution to this work and to the group of evaluators who were part of the developmental evaluation workshops. Their ideas and perspectives made a major contribution to this document.

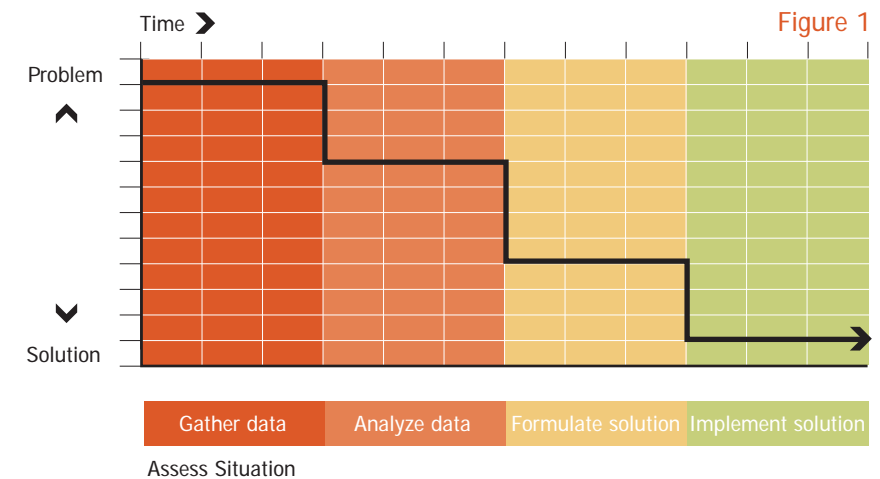
<sup>3</sup> For more information on SSI, please see The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation website, [www.mcconnellfoundation.ca](http://www.mcconnellfoundation.ca).

<sup>4</sup> See Appendix B for a list of the participating organizations.

# 1.1

## What is Developmental Evaluation?

**Developmental evaluation** supports the process of innovation within an organization and in its activities. Initiatives that are innovative are often in a state of continuous development and adaptation, and they frequently unfold in a changing and unpredictable environment. This intentional effort to innovate is a kind of organizational exploration. The destination is often a notion rather than a crisp image, and the path forward may be unclear. Much is in flux: the framing of the issue can change, how the problem is conceptualized evolves and various approaches are likely to be tested. Adaptations are largely driven by new learning and by changes in participants, partners and context.



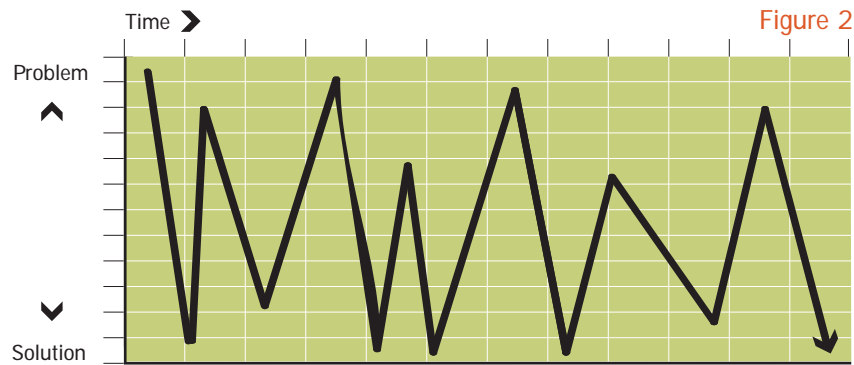
The dominant approach to solving problems is that of logic. There is a natural sequence of steps that moves us from problem to solution.<sup>5</sup> We move methodically from assessing the situation to gathering and analyzing data, formulating a solution and then implementing that solution (see Figure 1). This linear logical approach works very well when the problem is well understood;<sup>6</sup> there are clear boundaries and there is a limited set of possible solutions, of which there is likely one that is optimal. Current evaluation is generally built around supporting this kind of problem solving. Summative evaluations render judgments about the merit, worth and value of a standardized program. Formative evaluations help a program become an effective and dependable model.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Special thanks to Mark Cabaj for contributing to the thinking about different kinds of problems.

<sup>6</sup> We might call this kind of problem simple or even technical.

<sup>7</sup> For more detail on summative and formative evaluations, see Sandra Mathison (ed.) (2005). *Encyclopedia of Evaluation*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.





The challenge for evaluators, and for problem solvers, is that not all problems are bounded, have optimal solutions, or occur within stable parameters. These kinds of problems – called complex, or ‘wicked’ – are difficult to define. This is the place where innovators often find themselves. When innovating within a complex system, it is difficult to understand the ramifications of changes. The dynamics of a complex system have a high degree of connectivity and interdependence. There are diverse elements whose interactions create unpredictable, emergent results.

Instead of the logical steps outlined in Figure 1, the experience of innovating often looks more like what is outlined in Figure 2 – rapidly moving back and forth between problem and solution. A solution may initially appear ideal, but does not get at what was intended, so the problem needs to be re-examined in light of what was learned in that experience. Or, a solution may be crafted that excludes a critical stakeholder and the definition needs to be re-worked so that they, and their contributions to the solution, can be included. This description tends to resonate with people’s experiences in innovative situations; it is familiar to those who have worked on stubborn social issues, like poverty, or anyone who has experienced the process of policy making.

The very techniques that enable evaluation excellence in more static situations – standardization of inputs, consistency of treatment, uniformity of outcomes and clarity of causal linkages – are unhelpful, even harmful, to situations where there is a lot of uncertainty and ‘moving goalposts’. Making a judgment of merit or worth

based on efficient goal attainment, replicability and clarity of causal links works for a well-defined technology or intervention. With dynamic and unpredictable phenomena, however, these same criteria can actually so narrowly define and structure the evaluative questions as to interfere with learning and adaptability. Innovation is often about breaking previous boundaries. Developmental evaluation is more suitable in such situations because it supports the process of innovation in ways that enable exploration and development.

	Situation <sup>8</sup>
Summative evaluation	At the end of a program or initiative when key decisions about its future are going to be made. When judging the model’s merit or worth for continuation, expansion, going to scale, or other major decisions.
Formative evaluation	When fine-tuning a model. When a future summative evaluation is expected and baseline data will likely be needed.
Developmental evaluation	When working in situations of high complexity. When working on early stage social innovations.

Innovation is commonly understood to be the introduction of something new and useful. For the purposes of developmental evaluation, it is important to make some distinctions. Developmental evaluation applies to an ongoing process of innovation in which both the path and the destination are evolving. It differs from making improvements along the way to a clearly defined goal. Where more traditional approaches to evaluation try to predict the outcomes of the innovation and focus measurement on those goals, developmental evaluation is intended to support innovation within a context of uncertainty. The ‘developmental’ in developmental evaluation is based on the innovation driving change. Social change innovation occurs when there is a change in practice, policies, programs or resource flows. Innovation is distinct from improvement in that it causes reorganization at a systems level and can occur at the level of an organization, a network or society at large.

<sup>8</sup> There may be summative moments during an emerging, complex project; for example, a group may get feedback that their understanding of an issue was not accurate and that, as a result, their particular strategies are not working, leading to a decision to test a different approach.

The Ontario Science Centre asked the question: “What if Canada could become a world leader in innovation?” From this question, an idea was born. What if a science centre could reconceptualize what it meant to be a visitor? What if visitors were participants whose experience would engage them directly in scientific experimentation and the gathering of data to take on problems with real world applications? What if, as in actual engineering and science, participants could guide their research activities without certainty as to results and with the leeway to apply innovative approaches?

These questions led to the development of the *Agents of Change* initiative, a creative experiment aimed at fostering the development of visitors’ thinking about innovation, risk, collaboration and creativity. What would it take to do this? How would the science centre need to think differently?

Developmental evaluation supported this process as the *Agents of Change* initiative moved forward within a tight timeframe. Planning, acting and adapting were simultaneous. As new elements were designed, they were immediately tested on the floor and, with rapid observation and feedback, modifications were made daily. At the same time, the developmental evaluation helped to support the team in shaping creative responses to the question, “What do we mean by ‘fostering innovation by visitors?’”

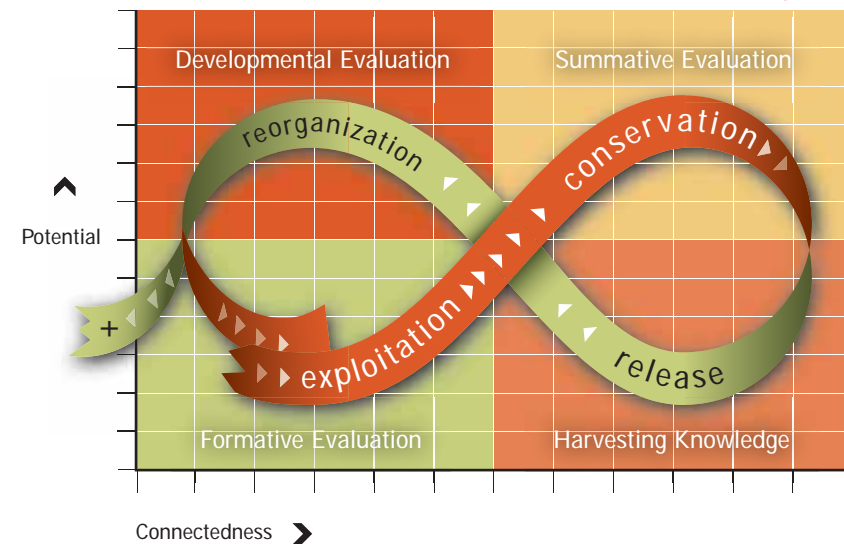
There are various reasons why an organization may be in an innovative state. It may be a newly formed or forming organization seeking to respond to a particular issue, or exploring a new idea that has not yet fully taken shape; or it may be that a changing context has rendered traditional approaches ineffective and there is a consequent need to explore alternatives. These examples suggest that innovation may be a particular phase in which an organization, or one of its initiatives, finds itself. The Panarchy Loop<sup>9</sup> (Figure 3) outlines four stages of development: exploitation, conservation, release and reorganization.

Each of the stages in the Panarchy Loop is a distinct phase with unique dynamics. Reorganization is an exploration phase which is characterized by trial and error and can appear chaotic and random. Only when ideas crystallize can a more orderly,

predictable exploitation phase begin. Exploitation – or an entrepreneurial phase – takes invention and turns it into action. As more is learned about the invention, efficiencies are discovered and the model moves into a mode of maturity, or conservation. In realizing the efficiencies, different kinds of capital – such as resources, knowledge, or processes – are committed. Because these efficiencies are bound to a specific context, such as a moment in time, or a particular environment, their appropriateness will eventually shift as things change. There is a need to release some capital so that it can be re-assembled in a way that is more appropriate to the new context. This release is often difficult for those involved as it means that trusted and familiar practices must be abandoned. At the same time, it provides fertile ground for innovation.

Figure 3 indicates that evaluation plays different purposes in each phase of the Panarchy Loop. Formative evaluation supports the exploitation stage, and summative evaluation the conservation phase, but developmental evaluation is needed to nurture exploration. In this phase, understanding is ongoing and emergent; and there is a need to interpret both direction and results. If ideas are not allowed to fully “gestate” in the exploration phase, it is difficult for something truly innovative to be born.

Figure 3



<sup>9</sup> The Panarchy Loop was conceived of by C.S. Holling. For more information, see his article “Understanding the Complexity of Economic, Ecological, and Social Systems.” *Ecosystems* Vol. 4, No. 5 (Aug., 2001). Frances Westley, Brenda Zimmerman and Michael O. Patton explore the Panarchy Loop in the context of social innovation in their book *Getting to Maybe* (2007): Random House Canada.

Evaluation is about critical thinking; development is about creative thinking. Often these two types of thinking are seen to be mutually exclusive, but developmental evaluation is about holding them in balance. What developmental evaluation does is combine the rigour of evaluation, being evidence-based and objective, with the role of organizational development coaching, which is change-oriented and relational.

To do this, the evaluator is positioned as a part of the team that is working to conceptualize, design and test new approaches. The evaluator's primary role is to bring evaluative thinking into the process of development and intentional change. The developmental evaluator is there to introduce reality testing into the process of innovation. Feedback is supported by data and is delivered in an interactive way that helps the innovator(s) to fine-tune what is going on, consider and adapt to uncertainties and inform decisions. Developmental evaluation facilitates assessments of where things are and reveals how things are unfolding; helps to discern which directions hold promise and which ought to be abandoned; and suggests what new experiments should be tried.

Developmental evaluation also takes into account changes to an organization – to its structure, governance, relationships – inasmuch as they constitute an important context within which innovation takes place. The evaluator may introduce strategic and integrating questions to clarify some of the ambiguity that accompanies organizational change.

Developmental evaluation may also consider the dynamics of collaboration itself. Complex problems tend to require the integration of diverse perspectives from different parts of a system. Various stakeholders may understand the problem differently and enter into an initiative with diverse reference points. Within this diversity, there is still a need to develop and execute strategies. DE helps collaborators to recognize and work through differences in perception that might otherwise fragment the work and hamper ongoing developments.

Developmental evaluation makes use of methods familiar to evaluation: surveys, interviews and observations, among others. There are also some tools from complexity science that hold promise for informing developmental evaluation. This paper explores

some of these methods – the “how” of developmental evaluation – and takes a deeper look at the question of when developmental evaluation is appropriate and who can fill the role of a developmental evaluator.

Ultimately developmental evaluation is about rigorous inquiry for development. It is being intentional about using data in a meaningful way to inform innovation in progress. The product or result of a successful developmental evaluation process is informed changes in what is being evaluated.

Given the innovation and complexity orientation, developmental evaluation is best suited for organizations in which:

- innovation is identified as a core value;
- there is an iterative loop of option generation, testing and selection;
- board and staff are in agreement about innovation and willing to take risks;
- there is a high degree of uncertainty about the path forward;
- there are resources available for ongoing exploration; and
- the organization has a culture suited to exploration and enquiry.

The table below describes three key features of a developmental evaluation :

### 1. Framing the issue

Social innovators are mobilized by a powerful sense that something needs to change. They may have a new perspective or approach to a historically stubborn issue, or may see, in a new way, the intersection between multiple issues. As innovators work on these issues, their understanding moves from a vague understanding to increased clarity. New learning may cause a shift in thinking which prompts another cycle of uncertainty and clarification. Developmental evaluation supports innovators in the conceptualization and articulation of the problem, by helping to frame the issue and its dynamics.

### 2. Testing quick iterations

Many people who develop and deliver social programs naturally experiment.<sup>10</sup> New ways of doing something are tried, often based on feedback loops and perspective about changing needs and demands, which can lead to improvements. Developmental evaluation brings a measure of rigour to the learning generated from these experiments. As new programs roll out, leaders intuitively make observations and refinements. These lessons are usually part of what is our natural private learning processes. Developmental evaluation is intended to make visible the intuitive and the tacit. Applying developmental evaluation means being more systematic about subjecting relevant data and observations to interpretation and judgment.

### 3. Tracking the trajectory of the innovation

A standard characteristic of problem solving is that once the problem solver experiences the “eureka moment,” the path to the solution seems obvious. When innovators look at projects retrospectively, the description of going from beginning to end appears seamless and direct. Key insights about how something was successfully accomplished are often inaccessible, which doesn't help the next person trying to solve a similar problem, or the original innovator in trying to apply the learning process in other situations. Developmental evaluation records the roads not taken, unintended consequences, incremental adjustments, tensions and sudden opportunities. The tracking reveals what it takes to create something new, which serves two purposes: 1) it makes the decisionmaking along this path more transparent and 2) it generates valuable data useful for dissemination. Such documentation also supports accountability while allowing for a high degree of flexibility.

<sup>10</sup> The ability to experiment will vary from situation to situation. Some situations allow for rapid and low cost reconfiguration, where others require a larger investment involving significant sunk costs. The cost of something not working out is also a factor.

# 1.2

## Myths about Developmental Evaluation

### Myth #1: Developmental evaluation replaces other evaluations

Developmental evaluation is not appropriate to all situations. It is not superior, or inferior, to formative and summative evaluation. Rather, DE is an addition to the current set of evaluation approaches. Deciding when to do various evaluations – summative, formative or developmental – should be a purposeful decision.

Developmental evaluation may suggest when it is appropriate for other more classical evaluation models. **Saltwater Network** used developmental evaluation to support ongoing evolutions to its programs. At the end of a major funding cycle, a more summative mode of evaluation was applied in order to make assessments about Saltwater's performance over a three-year period.

### Myth #2: Developmental evaluation is about soft methods

Developmental evaluation is as rigorous as any evaluative process. Like all good evaluations, it is evidence-based.<sup>11</sup> **Amnesty International Canada** is using developmental evaluation as a means of clarifying the way the organization thinks about, and takes action on, activism. Amnesty is introducing a more rigorous line of questioning to the concept of activism in seeking a deeper understanding about the kind of impact the organization has in this area.

### Myth #3: Developmental evaluation is about collecting stories

Story collecting may be used, but this also occurs with several other data collection processes. Developmental evaluation may involve qualitative or quantitative methods, or both. **Vibrant Communities** used community indicators for making site comparisons. **Amnesty International** used surveys to learn more about the perceptions and impacts of activism. **Oxfam Canada** collected stories about different challenges and how those were overcome.

<sup>11</sup> In the common-sense meaning of the phrase, that is, to bring evidence to bear in decisionmaking (as opposed to what is sometimes meant by evidence-based: that only randomized control trials count as evidence).

### Myth #4: Developmental evaluation is process evaluation

The ultimate focus is results. Process is attended to, but developments that move something towards outcomes is the ultimate objective. Outcome information is not counter to developmental evaluation; in fact it very much informs it. Using a developmental evaluation approach invigorates interest in generating data on outcomes and in working through reasoned processes to gather and interpret it. In the **L'Abri en Ville** example, developmental evaluation was used to understand the dynamics between partners in the dissemination of a program model. Data on outcomes informed adaptations to the dissemination process.

Montréal-based L'Abri en Ville provides secure and comfortable homes within a caring community for persons suffering from mental illness. The organization helps residents to integrate into society and lessen their chances of re-hospitalization. Its strength is rooted in faith communities, which provide a pool of volunteers. L'Abri used developmental evaluation to track how it disseminated its process to several partners. "Each new site demands an adaptation of our model and each group grapples with unique challenges... we have learned that these variations demand flexibility and creativity in the groups' practices while staying grounded in the core values of the [L'Abri] model....There doesn't seem to be a way to speed up the learning process. It is a maturing process of trial, then re-trial when the results are not as hoped for. New sites are inspired by the example of success – the spirit and the competences are transferred through sharing and seeing L'Abri en Ville in action."<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> This case is from Katharine Pearson's paper *Accelerating our Impact: Philanthropy, Innovation and Social Change*. (2007) Montréal: The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation.

### Myth #5: Developmental evaluation downplays accountability

The accountability of developmental evaluation rests in its ability to support development. If nothing is developed, it has failed. Learning what does and doesn't work is a type of development. Deeper questions may be a developmental result, but something must be developed. **The Nature Conservancy of Canada** applied a developmental evaluation lens to its process of disseminating the Conservation Volunteers program from Ontario to Alberta. This provided a way to share what was happening with their funder while maintaining a high degree of flexibility and experimentation in how that process unfolded.

### Myth #6: Developmental evaluation is the same as participatory evaluation

Participatory evaluation is about a distinction in *approach*, where developmental evaluation is about a distinction in *purpose*. Participatory approaches can be used to inform summative, formative and developmental evaluations. Developmental evaluation is particularly oriented to supporting early stage innovations in complex environments. A participatory approach makes a lot of sense in developmental evaluation because of the need for high trust and quick feedback.

# 1.3

## Assessing Conditions for DE

The first step in a developmental evaluation process is determining scope. What is it that those leading the initiative are hoping to do? What do they think developmental evaluation might contribute to the work? Evaluations consume resources and so it is important to make informed decisions. If we can understand the circumstances and conditions in which the evaluation activity will take place, then we are better positioned to make assessments about what resources are required, who needs to be involved and how to approach the evaluation.

Any development process, particularly when there is a high degree of innovation, is dynamic. It is helpful to anticipate how the scope of a developmental evaluation process will evolve and plan to periodically revisit it. Evaluators, funders and organizational leaders will make assessments about what is needed from the evaluation. As boundaries are pushed in an exploratory process, the scope may change. There may be surprises to be understood or a shift in emphasis and focus to be supported.

The following questions may help organizations to think through the appropriateness and approach of a developmental evaluation:

### What is the level of internal critical thinking?

Does the organization currently make use of reflective practice and critical thinking? If it does, does this inform decision-making? Developmental evaluation brings evidence to the process of innovation-reflection-evolution-innovation. If this is already imbedded in the practice of the organization, then it may be appropriate to draw upon internal resources for developmental evaluation. If the organization is interested in developing these capacities internally, then there can be an element of coaching and capacity building to an external evaluator's role.

### What are the decision-making models – both perceived and real?

When and where do decisions get made? Exactly who is the decision-making “team”? At this phase of scoping out the developmental evaluation, it is helpful to think about who needs to be at the table at various points. Developmental evaluation can assist by mapping out the organization's decision-making system. By providing a typology

of when and where decisions get made (both formally and informally), the process can be made more intentional and transparent.

### Is there buy-in for developmental evaluation?

It is vital that the evaluation be closely connected to the key decision makers and change agents. Evaluators need to walk a fine line between maintaining important relationships and fulfilling the “speaking truth to power” element of the role. The positioning of the evaluator as a member of the team is a key difference between developmental evaluation and traditional evaluation, where the evaluator is generally independent of decision makers.

Without organizational commitment, DE's value is limited. Buy-in is crucial because developmental evaluation requires that leadership and change agents be accessible to test assumptions, gain perspective and articulate shifts in thinking. Without commitment, the learning produced in the evaluation will not inform decision-making. When organizations are committed to developmental evaluation, they are more likely to be intentional about managing the tension between the creative and the critical.

### Is this innovation local or happening across distance?

Innovations in social change take place at different levels. Some are focused on a community while others happen on a national scale. There are initiatives that involve networks and collaborations and others that focus on specific-program or single-purpose organizations. When the evaluator can be physically present at various events, it allows for trustbuilding and observation of things that might be unanticipated or overlooked. Shared understanding and momentum more easily emerge from face-to-face and small-group meetings than from document exchanges and phone calls. DE surfaces questions about assumptions and directions and then supports consideration of the responses and their potential impact on the initiative or organization. In some instances, being physically present at all the places where decisions are made would be impossible. Judgments need to be made about which events are critical for the evaluator and which are not.

## DE Tool #1: Assessment tool for checking the innovation conditions

The following is a set of questions that organizations can ask themselves to see if they are in an appropriate space to apply developmental evaluation.

Question	Rationale
What is driving the innovation?	Developmental evaluation is particularly appropriate if an organization expects to develop and modify a program over the long term because of constantly shifting needs and/or contexts. It is helpful to discern between innovation taking place within an organization and the adoption of an external innovation, which may not need a developmental evaluation.
Are the proposed changes and innovations aimed at deep and sustained change?	Developmental evaluation is aimed at innovations that are driving towards transformational changes. Organizations often fine-tune their programs, and having an evaluative lens on those changes can be helpful; however the intensity of developmental evaluation may not be warranted in every instance.
Do we have a collaborative relationship with another organization in which there is innovative potential in combining our respective talents?	Developmental evaluation may help different organizations work together through the effort to innovate. In this situation, the developmental evaluator can help the organizations through some of the inevitable tensions of collaborating and can provide a measure of transparency about the experiment.
Under what conditions does the organization currently innovate? Is innovation part of the culture of the organization?	If this is already part of the culture, then the developmental evaluation role may be one that people within the team already play. If there is not a culture of innovation but there is a commitment to build one, then developmental evaluation may be helpful in stimulating that.
What are some core elements of what we do that we don't want to change?	There may be elements of an initiative that are known to work, or for another reason are expected to stay the same. Evaluation requires resources, and if things will not change, these resources are better directed elsewhere. If something is not going to be adapted but there is interest in finding out if it works or not, a summative evaluation is appropriate.
Is it clear for whom the evaluation is intended?	This is a vital question for any evaluation, developmental or otherwise. For an organization to make good use of developmental evaluation, it is important to have key decision makers interested in and open to using evaluative feedback to shape future actions. If the only user of the evaluation is external to the innovating team (such as a funder), then developmental evaluation is probably not the appropriate approach.

# 2

## Applying Developmental Evaluation

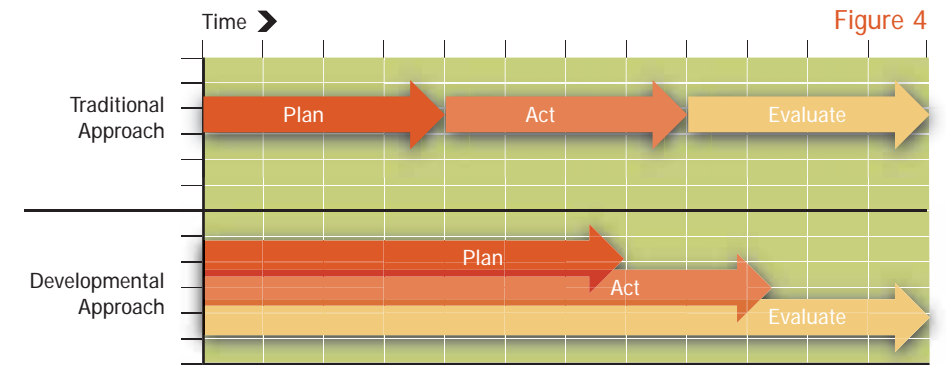


There is a broad array of methods developmental evaluators can deploy including interviews, focus groups, surveys, e-mail questions and observation, as well as group analysis and interpretation. These methods are common to any evaluation process; the difference in DE is that evaluation accompanies the development process so that questioning and learning happen simultaneously with action. DE creates a space to challenge and question in a way that does not stifle creativity, including creating the conditions for attention to the evaluation process. The common assumption is that evaluation is a mechanical process and once it is in place, everyone can ignore it and “get on with the work.” Developmental evaluation requires that people understand that the evaluation process is in fact part of the work.

### Accompaniment

As a team member, the developmental evaluator contributes to the core group of innovators, moving through a range of roles such as observer, questioner and facilitator. As observer, the evaluator is watching both content and process. What is being tried? What is being decided? How is it being done? How is it being decided? The primary purpose of making observations is to generate useful feedback for the team; for example, by asking: “We seem to have changed direction, are we OK with that?”, “There are implicit goals that we haven’t yet stated but that are shaping our actions – should we clarify those?”, “There are assumptions that underlie what we are talking about – let’s frame them as assumptions so we can better check for their validity as we move forward.” As facilitator, the evaluator may help move a conversation forward. There are times when a group has sufficiently explored a set of ideas but cannot seem to move forward. By framing and synthesizing these ideas for the group, the evaluator can help the group to make sense of its deliberations, fine-tune and move on. In the same way, the evaluator as facilitator supports the group as it interprets data so that it can feed directly into the development process.

In some cases, the evaluator is present in meetings that are not evaluation-focused but instead are specific to project tasks or strategy discussions already taking place. Here, the evaluator may probe to clarify intent and purpose, or may capture information for use at another time. The evaluator need not be present at every meeting. Debriefing with those who did attend may be useful for clarification and surfacing discrepancies in interpretation.



### Collecting data

Developmental evaluators are attuned to two streams of data. First, there is information that assists in validating certain decisions, approaches or assumptions. Each decision has implications. “We decided” has implicit values and assumptions. In other circumstances, data may inform the evolving understanding of particular situations. Data collection provides a rigorous means of complementing the innovation process, enabling it to become iterative and (hopefully) strengthening reflective capacity, stimulating creativity or informing intentional changes to the innovation in question.

The second stream of data for DE documents the innovation process. In innovation, both means and ends can be emergent. The tracking provided through developmental evaluation helps provide accountability; by documenting the “forks in the road,” the implications of each decision are considered and a more robust memory of the initiative’s creation results. In contrast, a series of cumulative decisions can establish a new direction for something without any specific decision being made about an overall change in direction.

Evaluators need to make decisions about when and how to collect, manage and make sense of data. There can be multiple types of information from multiple sources. The first place to look is where information is naturally available. Capturing existing data is

less resource-intensive than generating new data. Often, DE information can originate from non-traditional sources such as e-mail exchanges or the process of shaping an agenda. Sometimes, the absence of something is important to note. To the extent possible, developmental evaluation attempts to build data collection into the organization's processes. It may be helpful for participants to maintain and share blogs or reflective journals.

## Framing and reporting

Data is only useful if it can be made sense of in ways that inform action. In a developmental evaluation, the distillation of data into knowledge is part of the evaluation. A developmental evaluator meshes intuition with hard data. Evaluation research is a search for certainty: finding the boundaries of something so that it can be understood and monitored. A shared interpretive framework is as important as the degree of accuracy.

One of the core activities of the developmental evaluator is helping the organization to work with the data. The evaluator may see patterns that prompt a different way of organizing the data, generating new perspectives and insights for the team.<sup>13</sup> Shared interpretation of evaluative findings is important. It leads to joint ownership of the results and a more informed understanding of what is happening.

There is a distinction between the notes of a developmental evaluator and the more traditional minutes of a meeting. The developmental notes may identify:

- process observations;
- points of tension;
- implicit decisions;
- assumptions made; or
- emerging themes and patterns.

In a *Harvard Business Review* article by Sutcliffe and Weber entitled “The High Cost of Accurate Knowledge” (2003), the authors examine the predominant belief in business that managers need accurate and abundant information to carry out their roles. They also examine the contrary perspective that, since today's complex information often isn't precise anyway, it's not worth spending a lot on data gathering and evaluation. They compared different approaches to using data with variations in performance and concluded that it's not the accuracy and abundance of information that influences top executive effectiveness the most; it's how that information is interpreted. After all, they conclude, the role of senior managers isn't just to make decisions; it's to set direction and motivate others in the face of ambiguities and conflicting demands. Top executives must interpret information and communicate those interpretations – they must manage meaning as much as they must manage information. Interpretation in teams works best through an interactive process whereby various perspectives on selected data are examined openly in the light of evaluation logic: Do the interpretations really follow from the data? What does the data say? And what is missing because of inevitable data inadequacies and real-world uncertainties?

One organization has used reflective meeting and process reports to generate insight about emerging issues. When a conflict or issue emerges, someone plays the developmental evaluator role and writes a brief reflection. The group then convenes to do a shared interpretation and analysis. As a result, people with different perspectives on the issue feel better understood. There is also beneficial feedback to the author or evaluator, who gains further insight into process dynamics.

## Strategy

Developmental evaluation closely hinges on the process of strategy development and execution. Evaluation is sometimes implicit in strategy conversations; for example, “taking stock” suggests defining a baseline, and “identifying key areas for growth” suggests framing the aspirations and targets of a group against its baseline.

<sup>13</sup> Part of the framing can help the organization test whether its mission aligns with its activity. Project effectiveness depends significantly on organizational effectiveness; thus the connection between goals and organization's mission is important. Is there alignment of the parts? Is everyone going in the same direction with regards to resources and award systems?

In a DE process, pushing the organization to sufficient clarity about process provides a means for comparing against its baseline. “*So, here’s where we are now. Where do we expect to be in a year? Or two years? If we had this same session in a year or two, what would we hope to see then?*” The organization becomes clearer about its goals, the process by which they are reached and the structures needed to support them, while allowing for the dynamism and flexibility of a developmental process.

A challenge to goal-setting within innovation is that it is sometimes difficult to know precisely what you want to achieve. In the process of doing things, you sometimes find out what you want by experiencing what you do not want. This is a valuable form of developmental feedback. DE can monitor expectations and surface what people do not want. When expectations begin to appear, implied criteria may shape judgments about what is emerging. The role of the developmental evaluator is to point these out to the group and confirm whether the group is ready to render judgment or open to further experimentation.

- What evidence would indicate that the process is working? Or not working?
- What are the organization’s real-time feedback mechanisms for tracking changes/growth?
- What could go wrong and how would we know? And when things go right, how do we know that? Why were we successful? How can we learn from our success?
- Given where we are (baseline) and where we want to go, what are the foreseeable decision points and timelines at which we determine how we’re doing? What information will we want at those decision points to make any needed adjustments?

One of the classic tensions in developing strategy is between “nuts and bolts” decisions and overall strategic direction. Some of this may have to do with learning styles: highly concrete, sequential thinkers are most comfortable with the nuts and bolts, while more abstract thinkers are comfortable with broader strategic concepts. Developmental evaluation can help to bridge the two approaches.

## Indicators

Conceptualizing and generating a shared sense of what a group values and expects can provide useful insight into the work at hand. It should also generate indicators that are more useful to the evaluation. In the developmental sense, indicators arise from deliberately observing certain things – group discussions about project purpose, for example – and making connections between these other things happening around the process. It is often useful to scan the environment to discern whether things are taking place on which we may have had an influence. It may be helpful to distinguish between leading indicators – those that signal movement in an intended direction – and lagging indicators, which refers to the ripple effects of what is taking place.

One highly complex and dynamic community development initiative sought the services of a program evaluation group. The evaluators applied traditional program evaluation techniques to shape the process. There was a heavy emphasis on getting full clarity on desired outcomes (through the use of logic models), and a comprehensive set of research activities was established to generate data on these outcomes. The process quickly became very cumbersome. The problem was that desired outcomes were still taking shape as diverse stakeholders joined the project. Overall progress was stalling and collaborators were frustrated by the evaluator’s demands.

The initiative shifted the approach of the evaluation to have different stakeholders articulate how they saw change happening in the community with the understanding that these theories would constantly be in flux. Evaluation now supported the framing and reframing of their approaches and improved planning capacity. There was an acknowledgment that the nature of how people were approaching the effort was evolving. On the ground, much was being “made up” as people went along. This initiative became an early experimenter with the notion of developmental evaluation and has since made several contributions to learning about DE.

# 2.1

## Who is the Developmental Evaluator?

There are different ways to fill the role of developmental evaluator: as an external consultant, a trusted peer or an internal team member assigned to the role. Each has advantages and disadvantages. It is also important to consider the degree to which the evaluator understands the domain in which the organization works, his or her familiarity with the organization's culture and, if internal, whether he or she also has functional or decision-making responsibilities in implementing a project. It may be appropriate to configure the developmental evaluation to use different combinations of the above and to expect that the way in which a developmental evaluator role is filled can evolve over time.

### Credibility

To whom is it important to be credible? Developmental evaluators need to work closely with key people who are involved with the innovative initiative. Having their trust is essential. At the same time, the developmental evaluator's proximity to action may reduce credibility in the eyes of some funders or other stakeholders. Evaluators must balance being both sufficiently close and independent. Experience and expertise in evaluation methods can enhance credibility, but it is vitally important to have evaluators who are flexible and not overly attached to specific evaluation approaches.

### Domain expertise and content knowledge

Knowledge of the subject matter is an advantage in the developmental evaluation process. It can also enhance credibility with internal and external stakeholders. Having a current understanding of the field enables a deeper level of inquiry and can assist the evaluator in framing the discussion more appropriately.

The Old Brewery Mission is a shelter for homeless men and women in Montréal. When the new executive director wanted to gain a better understanding of what kinds of changes were required internally, he sought the help of a colleague who had run a similar shelter in Trois-Rivières. Michel Simard was already known as an innovator in delivering services for the homeless. He agreed to help the Old Brewery Mission and proposed to experience the shelter, by talking to the

residents and making observations. He stayed in the shelter for two days a week for nine weeks, introducing himself as a resident writer mandated to give advice on possible improvements. After his stay, he provided a lengthy report that included many challenging recommendations. These recommendations carried weight because 1) he has credibility in the field, 2) he had the trust and confidence of both front-line staff and management, 3) he had no particular vested interest in the outcomes, and 4) the recommendations were based on solid data. Simard was not officially described as a developmental evaluator, but in effect he fulfilled some elements of a DE role.

### Internal vs. external

The advantage to filling the developmental evaluator role with someone external such as a consultant is that this person may bring fresh and candid perspectives. An external evaluator brings focus both to the work and to the evaluation, which can act as a catalyst to the development process. The challenge of the external role is one of resources. Developmental evaluation can be a time-intensive process, which can have cost implications for the organization. Innovation may not be bound to a specific time frame, which means that the duration of relationship with a developmental evaluator may be unpredictable.

Some organizations have successfully experimented with having an internal developmental evaluator. A full-time staff person who plays the DE role may have better access and therefore be more likely to capture important lessons as they emerge. The primary risk is that the developmental evaluator role becomes secondary to other responsibilities.

If the DE role is played by someone with leadership responsibilities, there is a direct link to decision-making. However, the general experience is that innovative leaders are so focused on development that trying to play the DE role is a distraction. If organizational issues are impacting the development initiative, then the perspective of someone external is an advantage.

Vibrant Communities has used developmental evaluation with communities pursuing multiyear, collaborative, comprehensive poverty-reduction initiatives. The primary fit of developmental evaluation and Vibrant Communities arises from the complexity of the initiative: multiple stakeholders trying to address interconnected root causes of poverty in a constantly changing environment. New players are frequently coming on board and the strategies for change are constantly in flux as new learning emerges and operating environments (e.g., political) change.

In the Vibrant Communities model, partner communities – called Trail Builders – are asked to develop a working definition of poverty, a framework that describes the main drivers and leverage points that a local collaboration wishes to organize around and the different roles needed to move the community change work forward. Local groups establish more customized processes to gather specific information suited to their individual community's evaluation needs.

As the initiatives evolve, specific aspects of the local work may be best handled with more traditional formative and summative assessments. At a broader level, the initiative's leadership has found DE useful in supporting continuous innovation and in generating knowledge about this approach to community building.

# 2.2

## Skills of the Developmental Evaluator

Multiple skills are needed to be effective as a developmental evaluator. Developmental evaluators are often generalists – able to assess what is needed and draw upon an array of skills and competencies. Particularly useful are skills in synthesis, listening and asking difficult questions in a non-judgmental way. The developmental evaluator is a “critical friend” who can challenge assumptions while drawing upon best practices and research, as well as understanding the implications of intervention from a social and political perspective. While it is important that any evaluator have good methodological skills, it is key for a developmental evaluator to have strong conceptual and pattern recognition abilities as well as skills in both process facilitation and communication. Because developmental evaluation can be closely linked to other developmental processes, it is also helpful for an evaluator to have some familiarity with organizational change and strategy.

When The J.W. McConnell Foundation decided to fund the national school-based environmental program Green Street for a second five-year phase in 2004, it created an opportunity to reflect on how the program should be managed going forward. Areas identified for urgent attention included the nature of the (sometimes strained) relationships among the diverse program partners and the mechanisms for decision-making. The issues were complex; there was at times a range of contradictory perspectives, and it was difficult for participants in the process to have all of the information they needed to adequately assess the situation. Fortunately, Green Street had the assistance of a skilful evaluator who had been accompanying the program for several years. Trained in developmental evaluation, she documented the decision-making process from the perspective of multiple partners. In doing so, she identified a significant governance challenge and brought this information back to the group so that it could determine different options for Green Street’s future management. The evaluation process led to major changes in how the program is being run in the second phase. If Green Street had not had the assistance of a trusted developmental evaluator to advise through this stage of its evolution, it is quite possible that the partners would have reached an impasse and a popular and innovative program would have been discontinued.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> This case is from Katharine Pearson’s paper *Accelerating our Impact: Philanthropy, Innovation and Social Change*. (2007) Montréal: The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation.

## Truth to power

A developmental evaluator needs to be able to give both positive and negative feedback in ways that can be heard and acted upon. For example, if little or nothing is going on, or if people aren't following through on commitments, the evaluator must be willing to say so. While an evaluator may facilitate the search for a solution, or may even offer a solution, his/her primary responsibility is to call attention to the developing situation through empirical feedback based on data, observations, experience and judgment.

In times of courts and kings, the jester whispered into the ears of power, using humour to provide a useful, if sensitive, critique. The jester – or court fool – could tell the “dangerous truth,” thereby providing a valuable critical perspective. Humour enabled these messages to be delivered in a way that was less threatening. Developmental evaluators exercise a similar “fool’s license” through ongoing, partnering relationships with organizations engaged in innovative initiatives.

Developmental evaluators must invest in building relationships at the beginning of a process. DE is a much more embedded process than a traditional external evaluation. As a result, negotiating with people about expectations, roles and process is even more important. In some cases, raising contentious issues may be vital, but entails risk taking. While such an intervention has short-term implications for a given project, the evaluator may see issues that, if left unaddressed, would have implications for the long-term health of the initiative. The evaluator is uniquely positioned to raise these issues. If core staff did so, it might jeopardize relationships necessary to implement the project.

It is helpful for a team seeking evaluative feedback to clearly designate/assign that as a specific role within their group. Because questioning and challenging is an accepted part of the developmental evaluation “job description”, this grants a certain freedom to articulate observations in a way that is less likely to be seen as personal.

## Process facilitation

Traditional evaluation gives little attention to the process side. As developmental evaluation is more team-oriented, the evaluator must have an ability to facilitate team interactions and to effectively insert questions, observations and synthesis into meetings. The evaluator has to make judgments about when to play a more proactive role in facilitating and when to let others (internal or external) animate a process.

There are two important elements of the developmental evaluator’s work: process and content. A group that is working through an innovation will usually have higher process needs. When task trumps process, as can often happen with pressures of time and schedule, the long-term effectiveness of moving towards desired objectives is short-circuited. Developmental evaluators can remind people when important process needs are being circumvented or, conversely, overdone. Another major intervention point is helping people to follow up on processes. By providing a reminder of what was decided, leaders are supported in following up with their commitments. By serving as a follow-up to intended actions, the developmental evaluator brings a level of accountability to a group. Actions may be abandoned along the way but within the frame of a developmental evaluation process, such decisions are intentional.

## Pattern recognition

In an increasingly complex and interconnected world, expertise is defined less by having answers and more by the ability to recognize situations and patterns. Great chess players have mastered more than techniques; they can look at the board and recognize familiar layouts and recall how those patterns have previously played out. A developmental evaluator needs strong perceptual skills and must be able to identify and name what’s going on. Framing the stage of development this way can free practitioners from the sense that they are “getting nowhere,” or that they simply need to define a problem and act on it.<sup>15</sup> This ability to support the conceptual work underpins the very notion of development: “*What does it mean to go to the next level? What is the ‘it’ being developed? How is this situation or result unique? What are its*

<sup>15</sup> For a poetic and insightful set of such patterns, see Frances Westley, Brenda Zimmerman and Michael Quinn Patton. (2006) *Getting to Maybe: How the World is Changed*. Toronto: Random House.

*defining characteristics?*” The developmental role is highly synthetic – it involves being able to extract common themes and learnings from an array of information sources in a way that does not oversimplify important nuances and differences.

### Listening and communicating

Acute listening is vital. A developmental evaluator must read between the lines. This makes it possible to ask the pointed questions that expose implicit assumptions. A developmental evaluator watches what people are doing and listens to what they are saying. It is also important to know when to speak up and when to let an issue take its natural course within a group’s discussion. It is important to have not only technical competencies in evaluation across a variety of methods, but also flexibility in applying them. Knowledge acquires dynamic interplay within an organizational context and, therefore, the capacity to connect people to research, as collectors, generators and interpreters of information, is key to innovation.

### Tolerance for ambiguity

Not only must the developmental evaluator be personally comfortable with ambiguity, part of the role is to help others to deal with uncertainty. Ambiguities can drive people crazy. The developmental evaluator helps people deal with uncertainty and take action without prematurely clarifying or reducing it.

## DE Tool #2: Checklist for assessing who might be an appropriate developmental evaluator

Question	Rationale
Does the evaluator have enough time available to commit to the DE role?	Developmental evaluation, like any evaluation, requires being systematic and thorough.
Is the evaluator in a position to speak candidly? If the individual is internal to the organization and raises contentious issues, will that affect other things he or she is working on? How effectively can he or she interact with the team as an outsider?	Interpersonal communication tends to present different challenges for internal and external evaluators.
Will the evaluator be able to get enough perspective on the innovation?	Changes may be incremental, subtle and continuous. To the innovator, these changes may be invisible. The paradox is that developmental evaluators need to be both close enough and removed enough to see them.
How familiar is this evaluator with the issues and/or the domain area of the organization?	Familiarity can help an evaluator know where to look and can give his or her perspective credibility.
How critical is it that the evaluator understand the organization's culture?	Understanding the culture may help to interpret cues and to navigate the politics of an organization.
Does the evaluator share the values the innovation is built on?	If values are not shared, trust will erode and where there are differences, the innovators may not know whether they arise from different values or data interpretations.
Is the individual comfortable dealing with uncertainty and rapid change?	Clarity and specificity are hallmarks of classic evaluation. Developmental evaluators must be able to support others in moving forward even while things are unclear.



# 2.3

## DE Tools

This section includes several tools that may be useful in developmental evaluation. The first of these is *What? So what? Now what?* This is a common and useful framework for thinking about the implications of learning. Appreciative inquiry is a widely used change technique that seems to fit nicely with a DE mindset. Network mapping is a technique that has been advanced with new software and may prove useful for developmental evaluation in collaborations, or movement-level efforts. Other tools described here – revised and emergent modeling, simulations and rapid reconnaissance – are just beginning to be explored in the context of DE. Lastly, this section includes some reflections on the idea of visual language techniques based on the author’s personal experiences in trying to communicate and work on complex ideas with groups of social innovators. There are, of course, many more evaluation and organizational development tools that would also support DE.<sup>16</sup>

The tools listed here are intended as an introduction. Where available, each section suggests some related web-based resources.

### What? So what? Now what?

One of the basic frameworks for evaluation, aimed at simplifying what we do, is summarized by asking three questions: *What? So what? Now what?*<sup>17</sup> These simple questions help us to analyze multiple factors and to align diverse questions and actions towards common interests.

*What? What do we see? What does data tell us? What are the indicators of change or stability? What cues can we capture to see changing patterns as they emerge?*

*So what? So, what sense can we make of emerging data? What does it mean to us in this moment and in the future? What effect are current changes likely to have on us, our clients, our extended network and our field of inquiry and action?*

*Now what? What are our options? What are our resources? When and how can we act – individually or collectively – to optimize opportunities in this moment and the next?*

**Web resource:** Some useful complexity frameworks are explored at the Human Systems Dynamics Institute: [www.hsdsinstitute.org](http://www.hsdsinstitute.org).

<sup>16</sup> Outcome mapping, contribution analysis and most significant change are some additional techniques that fit well in a DE context.

<sup>17</sup> Glenda H. Eoyang, Executive Director of the Human Systems Dynamics Institute in Minnesota uses this framework in consulting with organizations from a complexity perspective.

## Network mapping

When an initiative involves multiple partners working in collaboration or when the development of a network is a goal of the project, network mapping can provide insight into the dynamics and health of these relationships. Tracking how ideas are shared and spread and where participants take joint actions can help support developmental processes. Mapping a network is a process of identifying connections between people and graphically displaying those connections. This can be done by hand, although increasingly powerful and accessible software is enabling a more comprehensive analysis of networks and their behaviour.

Being able to generate data about a network can inform the development of strategies. Mapping a network can reveal that certain individuals are particularly influential, as sources of expertise or as connectors. It can also outline the strengths or vulnerabilities of the system and can reveal how densely connected a network is or whether there are peripheral connections that could stimulate innovation. Analysis may suggest strategies for communicating and organizing within the network. Network mapping may also provide an indicator of how different strategies are unfolding. Monitoring a network over time can reveal how the network responds to various interventions.

**Web resource:** For an interesting perspective on weaving networks, see [www.networkweaving.com/blog](http://www.networkweaving.com/blog).

## Revised and emergent modeling

Logic models are a vital tool in formative and summative evaluations. They provide a framework that links the activities and strategies of a project with its goals and objectives. In a formative evaluation, they assist in specifying relationships between essential parts of a program. A summative evaluation tests and validates the causal links in the model. A theory of change takes the idea of logic modeling further by more explicitly articulating the fundamental assumptions about how change is believed to occur by working backwards from a desired future state.

A logic model, or a theory of change, can be a useful tool for developmental evaluation. In a developmental approach, one of the implications is that any model will have built-in assumptions and areas of uncertainty. DE requires that the model be updated periodically, given changing priorities and new understandings. In a developmental mode, we move from a logic model as a static instrument, to one that we expect to change and evolve over time. One technique is to build the model from scratch more than once over a period of time. While it may be more practical simply to update the original model, insights about how people's thinking is evolving may be revealed through a comparison of new and old models.

In a complex and innovative environment, it is helpful to think and work at a systems level. A logic model is implicitly linear and therefore has limitations for portraying complex phenomena or living systems. Diagrams hold greater capacity for documenting the relationships and can free up thinking that is bound by simplistic cause, and effect approaches.

For one large-scale national project, the theory of change approach has been a major vehicle for having conversations with the communities involved in the initiative. It has been a way for communities to report things that are happening on the ground and changes that are emerging. Communities generate a descriptive narrative about what is happening and then there is more thorough interaction to make sense of that story. This is done on an annual basis to express how things are evolving and changing.

Another challenge in complex situations is that it is difficult to separate the effects of an initiative from other things going on that are also having an impact. Where attributions are difficult to make, one approach in emergent modeling is to do a contribution analysis. Various perspectives are sampled to gather different perceptions about the degree of impact an effort has made on observed results. While not perfect, it can offer a general perspective about the influences that an effort is having in a given area.

In applying any kind of modeling or mapping exercise, we must remind ourselves that the map is just that – a representation. It is not the territory. It is an abstraction that simplifies and summarizes something – include and exclude are required. Maps can bring additional clarity and simultaneously, they may have blind spots or artificial borders.

### Simulations and rapid reconnaissance

In a complex environment, we ask questions about different change conditions. “What will happen if we change this? Or that?” Simulations are a more formal way of exploring these paths. Simulations can be done as a mental or team exercise or – for those with more technical capacity – with the aid of computers. The framing of a simulation helps people to set out expectations of what might unfold.

One of the connotations of logic models is singularity: there is but one path forward. Highly innovative people tend to work simultaneously with multiple models and can effectively manage the inherent ambiguities. Simulations assume that there are multiple paths. Rapid reconnaissance is the process of testing to see what happens as a result of a particular approach or model. In a developmental environment, what did and did not work is often unclear. It may be more suitable to talk about what happened as a result of something and then to look for patterns.

There are times when simulations are more useful than planning and vice versa. What varies is the cost of iteration.<sup>18</sup> Reconfiguring something can be expensive (a building) or inexpensive (a piece of software). This is why auto companies first crash-test virtual cars instead of real ones. When the cost of iteration is low, we benefit more from trying something and learning from it rather than just thinking about it. When the cost, or consequence, of iteration is high, it becomes more important to get it right the first time.

<sup>18</sup> Rob Austin and Lee Devin explore this notion extensively in their book *Artful Making: What Managers Need to Know About How Artists Work*. (2003) Upper Saddle River, NJ: Financial Times Prentice Hall.

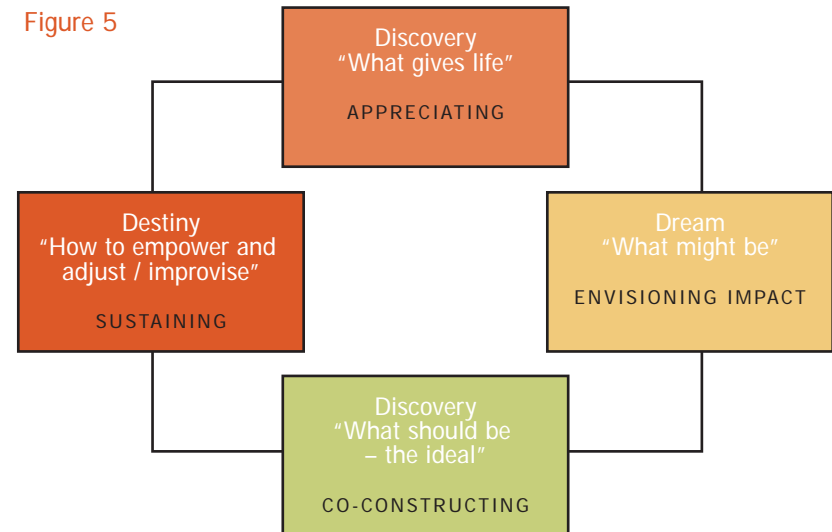
### Appreciative inquiry

Appreciative inquiry<sup>19</sup> is an organizational development technique that involves the art and practice of asking questions in ways that strengthen a system’s capacity to apprehend, anticipate and heighten its potential. Appreciative inquiry is a systematic search for what gives “life” to a system, such as an organization, when it is most effective and constructive.

The underlying premise of appreciative inquiry is that asking the question is not only a query, it is also an intervention. Appreciative inquiry focuses on positive attributes – what works rather than what does not. Case examples are collected and then examined to uncover key themes and patterns about what succeeds.

Appreciative inquiry tends to support trust-building in organizations because it acknowledges individual contribution and supports the overall effectiveness of the change effort.

**Web resource:** The Appreciative Inquiry Commons has extensive resources on Appreciative inquiry at [appreciativeinquiry.case.edu](http://appreciativeinquiry.case.edu).



<sup>19</sup> Appreciative inquiry was developed by David Cooperrider of Case Western Reserve University.

## Visual language

In developmental evaluation, the timeliness of reporting on data is critical. Visually representing models and findings through diagrams can help evaluators transmit information with economy and substance. Diagrams also convey a systems perspective that can support decision-making in complex situations. Diagrams allow multiple elements to be simultaneously displayed, giving innovators a means to access some of their tacit knowledge and tangibly express their operating metaphors. A visual representation provides a perspective that is more difficult to demonstrate in writing; it can show what the key elements are, their relative significance and how they interact.

To generate a visual diagram, the evaluator first must synthesize the information internally. It is important that the diagram fit the problem rather than trying to fit the problem into a diagram. There are numerous traditional and non-traditional visual models that can serve as a starting point, which are then evolved through a creative process. Often, thinking of appropriate metaphors can help stimulate thinking about how to represent something visually. Diagrams can be used as a reporting tool (as part of a document) or as a facilitative tool in group interaction.

**Web resource:** This website includes a reference table of different visual techniques presented in the same format as the periodic table of elements: [www.visual-literacy.org](http://www.visual-literacy.org).

# 2.4

## Issues and Challenges

## Power

Power is implicit in many of the dynamics within a development process. Whether perceived or real, power shapes interactions within collaborations, between funders and grantees, among stakeholders and within organizations. Evaluators (developmental or otherwise) need to be attuned to manifestations of power and consider their influence on data and interpretation. Factors such as funding entanglements or varying organizational size, momentum or resources can generate friction. In complex situations, small things can become big things. In the unfolding of an innovative initiative, it is impossible to anticipate every dynamic. The reality is that there are always power dimensions but we rarely know where the power interactions will emerge. One role for developmental evaluation, and for collaborations more generally, is to surface these tensions in a timely fashion so that they do not become destructive.

In any initiative, there are pressures for results. The way in which we approach projects has a familiar pattern: goal orientation, strategic planning, governance structures and reporting tools are all part of the most common approaches. We have learned that traditional planning tools can reduce the room for exploration and constrain the innovation process. While it is easy to have a high degree of *intellectual* buy-in around exploration, it is difficult for many organizations and leaders to fully trust the emergent nature of process. Because traditional structures are so embedded in our institutions, even the most effervescent and change-oriented organizations will find it a challenge to move in this new direction. The need for governance, advice, planning and project management is very real. What is essential is to figure out ways to integrate these elements so that they support the exploratory nature of innovation. DE proposes to monitor and support innovation, with a more appropriate balance between rigour and accountability on the one hand, and emergence on the other.

## Perceptions of credibility

Developmental evaluators have a much closer relationship to what is being evaluated than traditional evaluators. For this reason, there is some questioning about the legitimacy of developmental evaluation. The important thing to remember is that DE is a stage-specific approach. It is meant to apply data-based inputs in the exploration and evolution of innovation in a dynamic environment.

It may be appropriate for an organization to work with different evaluation approaches in parallel. It also may be appropriate to shift from developmental into other forms of evaluation as an initiative moves into different stages.

## Ambiguity and uncertainty

The lack of definitive answers that often surrounds emergent and dynamic development processes can be challenging. It is important not only that evaluators themselves be comfortable with this ambiguity, but that they help others to navigate in uncertain environments.

The developmental evaluator must consider carefully how to engage the group and to be clear with whom he or she is working. Through the developmental evaluation process, tensions may repeatedly surface about decisions previously made. When a decision is frequently revisited, it is a signal that it was not actually made or that there is no buy-in for an idea. By looking at the patterns that unfold in practice, the developmental evaluator can offer some valuable process feedback to the group.

## Volume of data

The massive amount of information generated in a developmental process can be overwhelming. Providing syntheses in a timely and digestible way can be a great benefit to social innovators. However, tracking processes can easily become cumbersome and unwieldy. Developmental evaluations tend to rely heavily on visuals, diagrams and stories in recounting and making sense of the unfolding innovations that they are tracking.

### Sustainability – building evaluation capacity

Developmental evaluation can be a long-term process and may not have the same concrete start and end points as a more traditional evaluation. This has resource implications for organizations and their funders. However developmental evaluations do more than generate findings, they can also develop an organization's capacity for evaluative thinking.

### Keeping a results focus

With the emphasis on process and the wide variability in approach and method, there is a risk in developmental evaluation of losing the results focus that is a critical element in the work. DE attends to process elements because it is understood that they are vital in achieving results; however, since the purpose is development, developmental evaluation must focus on the relationship between processes and outcomes, understanding the connections in deeper ways and developing effective approaches that produce innovative results appropriate to, and meaningful within, the emergent context.

# 2.5

## Future Potential: Directions for DE

Developmental evaluation is an emerging discipline and there is a practice building in Canada and elsewhere. What follows in this section are some thoughts about areas to explore further.

One of the challenges of an innovative and dynamic initiative is that it works outside of the normal boundaries of funder/grantee relationships. An increasing number of funders are interested in supporting early-stage innovations and developmental evaluation holds promise as a mechanism to bridge the flexibility requirements of innovators with the accountability requirements of sponsors. More specific experiments with applying this are needed.

We are only beginning to understanding the potential of applying evaluation within a complexity framework. There is opportunity to experiment further with the complexity literature and apply it to developmental evaluation, for example, how might the concept of fitness landscapes<sup>20</sup> support evaluation?

There is also work to be done in promoting a developmental perspective as a viable alternative to best practices and fidelity-based going-to-scale models. If the terrain is uncertain and dynamic, you don't get best practices because what happens is so often contextual and dependent upon certain people and/or situations.<sup>21</sup> Developmental evaluation has tremendous potential to support dissemination processes.

## About the Author

<sup>20</sup> Stuart Kauffman pioneered the use of fitness landscapes in understanding complex systems in his study of random Boolean networks. Fitness landscapes are a graphical representation of all the possible configurations of different elements within a complex system. A particular configuration may be more "fit" than another, which means it is more suited, or effective, for its particular environment.

<sup>21</sup> Michael Quinn Patton is adding a considerable amount of information about DE to his forthcoming 4th edition of *Utilization-Focused Evaluation*.



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## Appendix A: Comparing DE to Traditional Evaluation

<sup>22</sup> Imprint Inc. website: [www.imprintinc.ca](http://www.imprintinc.ca).



The following table provides some general characterizations of a developmental approach to evaluation in comparison to traditional evaluations.<sup>23</sup>

Traditional evaluations	Developmental evaluations
Render definitive judgments of success or failure.	Provide feedback, generate learnings, support changes in direction.
Measure success against predetermined goals.	Develop new measures and monitoring mechanisms as goals emerge and evolve.
Position the evaluator outside to assure independence and objectivity.	Position evaluation as internal, team function integrated into action and ongoing interpretive processes.
Design the evaluation based on linear cause-and-effect logic models.	Design the evaluation to capture system dynamics, interdependencies, models and emergent interconnections.
Aim to produce generalizable findings across time and space.	Aim to produce context-specific understandings that inform ongoing innovation.
Accountability focused on and directed to external authorities, stakeholders and funders.	Accountability centered on the innovators' deep sense of fundamental values and commitment.
Accountability to control and locate responsibility.	Learning to respond to lack of control and stay in touch with what's unfolding and thereby respond strategically.
Evaluator determines the design based on the evaluator's perspective about what is important. The evaluator controls the evaluation.	Evaluator collaborates with those engaged in the change effort to design an evaluation process that matches philosophically with an organization's principles and objectives.
Evaluation results in opinion of success or failure, which creates anxiety in those evaluated.	Evaluation supports ongoing learning.

## Appendix B: Participating Organizations

<sup>23</sup> Westley, Zimmerman and Patton (2006).

The following organizations were participants in the original developmental evaluation training series sponsored by DuPont Canada and The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation.

### **Amnesty International Canada** [www.amnesty.ca](http://www.amnesty.ca)

Activism for human rights is how Amnesty International's human rights expertise is converted into a force for change. Without a broad base of individual, group and mass activism, Amnesty International would lose its unique identity among human rights organizations and be without its primary tool for change: the outrage of ordinary people. As an international movement, Amnesty International has recently broadened its mission and has also launched an ambitious six-year plan (with growth of activism explicitly required). Amnesty International Canada (English-speaking) has developed a strategy to expand the range of opportunities, the sorts of approaches and the number of activists in Canada. Developmental evaluation is bringing an ongoing evaluative and learning perspective to this process.

### **Green Street** [www.green-street.ca](http://www.green-street.ca)

Green Street is a national environmental and sustainability education initiative launched by The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation in 1999. It promotes a standard of excellence for programs provided by Canadian environmental organizations in the formal school system. Its mission is to engage students in environmental stewardship.

As Green Street entered its second phase of funding, it underwent some major strategic planning and governance changes, informed by developmental evaluation. Ongoing DE work is tracking student involvement at all levels of the program. Further work is anticipated as Green Street adopts its Québec counterpart's framework (The Brundtland Green School model) in the rest of Canada, in response to growing interest in environmental education and responsible citizenship.

### **JUMP (Junior Undiscovered Math Prodigies)** [www.jumpmath.org](http://www.jumpmath.org)

JUMP Math is both a philosophy and a set of materials and methods that aim to help students meet their potential and discover their love of mathematics. Founded in Toronto in 1998 by mathematician and playwright John Mighton, the approach is premised on the belief that every child can succeed at math. JUMP believes that all children in the regular school system can excel, even those diagnosed as having serious learning disabilities or who are failing at math. JUMP's developmental evaluation project focused on the dissemination of the partnership program. JUMP examined a number of case studies to determine the various strategies, strengths and weaknesses of their dissemination attempts.

### **L'Abri en Ville** [www.labrienville.org](http://www.labrienville.org)

L'Abri en Ville was founded in 1991 in Montréal to address the persistent societal problem of isolation caused by mental illness. It organizes long-term shared apartments for individuals suffering from mental illness, who are also supported by circles of friends. With the help of professional coordinators, a team of volunteers around each apartment offers practical help to residents and participates with them in social and cultural activities that rebuild links to the larger community.

The L'Abri en Ville community in Montréal has encouraged and supported other communities in using the L'Abri model. Developmental evaluation helped L'Abri to explore its emerging choices; for example, what experiments are being conducted and which are "succeeding"? What is being attempted, what abandoned and why? One of the persistent questions is this: when does the organization need to defend core aspects of its model and when can it negotiate these in response to the particular circumstances of interested communities?

## L'Arche Canada [www.larche.ca](http://www.larche.ca)

L'Arche is an international organization of faith-based communities creating homes and day programs for people who have developmental disabilities. As a service organization, L'Arche espouses a “community model” of living, rather than a medical or social service model of care. As a faith-based organization, L'Arche recognizes the spiritual and religious needs and aspirations of its members and respects those who have no spiritual or religious affiliation. At L'Arche, people with disabilities and those who assist them live together and are equally responsible for the life of their home and community.

L'Arche Canada is using developmental evaluation to monitor ongoing learning while implementing new initiatives aimed at responding to the changing Canadian context. DE enables them to continually adapt and modify their approaches.

## Planned Lifetime Advocacy Networks (PLAN) [www.plan.ca](http://www.plan.ca)

PLAN is a Vancouver-based charity created by and for families who have a relative with a disability. It has two primary goals: to ensure a safe and secure future for individuals with a disability and, in the process, to provide families and their loved ones with peace of mind. In pursuit of this goal PLAN is inspired by a simple but powerful vision: *the vision of a good life for all people with disabilities and their families.*

PLAN used developmental evaluation to track the organizational impact of their involvement in the Sustaining Social Innovation initiative with The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation and DuPont Canada. There were two main aspects: documenting the emerging learnings and impact of SSI on PLAN's methodology and simultaneously documenting the emerging learnings and impact of PLAN's methodology on the Sustaining Social Innovation initiative.

## Ontario Science Centre [www.ontariosciencecentre.ca](http://www.ontariosciencecentre.ca)

The Ontario Science Centre's *Agents of Change* initiative is a \$40-million transformational project. *Agents of Change* is aimed at encouraging the attitudes, skills and behaviours that lead to innovation, particularly in youth. Participants engage in experiences that are designed to be open-ended and self-directed and to inspire and encourage problem solving, risk taking, collaboration and creativity. The experiences are intended to nurture individuals' confidence that they can apply innovation to other challenges, contributing to a stronger culture of innovation in Canada. The *Agents of Change* initiative opened to the public in the spring of 2006. The approach and goals are unique to the world of science centres. The project is predicated on innovation and innovative skills, behaviours, and attitudes – not only for visitors, but also in the Centre's processes, products and staff. DE helped track the initiative's progress towards this goal.

## Oxfam Canada: Food Security Program in the Eastern Provinces of Cuba [www.oxfam.ca](http://www.oxfam.ca)

Oxfam is an international development organization that supports programs around the world but chose to apply developmental evaluation in a single region. The Eastern Provinces of Cuba have experienced a prolonged and severe drought, resulting in the closure of a sugar plantation and the need to shift from traditional agriculture practices to dry-land agriculture techniques. Oxfam introduced dry-land agricultural techniques to cooperatives that are reconverting the sugar plantation to vegetable crops, as well as new technology such as solar/wind power and drip irrigation. Developmental evaluation assisted in documenting this initiative so it can be shared within Cuba and throughout the Caribbean region as well as with donors.

## Saltwater Network [www.saltwaternetwork.org](http://www.saltwaternetwork.org)

Saltwater Network was created in 2001 by and for community organizations around the Gulf of Maine to support community-based management and conservation in the region. Saltwater Network is both a capacity-building and grantmaking *network*, and as such, the approach to evaluation addressed the work of the organization as well as the organizations that Saltwater supports. Saltwater Network used developmental evaluation to 1) assess how, as a principle-based organization, its actions align with and deliver on those principles, 2) better understand how the organization may contribute to the rapidly expanding movement of community-based resource management, and 3) understand what enables successful collaborations with its local partners (primarily community resource centres).

## United Way: Action for Neighbourhood Change [www.anccommunity.ca](http://www.anccommunity.ca)

*Action for Neighbourhood Change* was a pan-Canadian community engagement project aimed at distressed neighbourhoods, funded by the federal government and led by the United Way of Canada. Developmental evaluation was applied in one city, Halifax, with the intention of sharing learning among the United Ways participating in *Action for Neighbourhood Change*. United Way of Halifax Region's role was to help manage the project and facilitate community input to craft a neighbourhood vision and build long-term partnerships. Contributions to the neighbourhood included the identification of key issues, assistance with visioning and the sourcing of available funding to help achieve their vision. Funding partners included the National Homelessness Initiative, the Office of Learning Technologies, the National Secretariat, Canada's Drug Strategy and National Crime Prevention Strategy.

## Vibrant Communities [www.vibrantcommunities.ca](http://www.vibrantcommunities.ca)

Vibrant Communities is a national action-learning initiative including fifteen communities (and growing), plus and three national sponsors who are committed to exploring the extent to which local communities can reduce poverty through multi-sectoral and comprehensive efforts. The communities in the initiative are engaging business, government, low-income leaders and community groups in an effort to reduce poverty for 30,000 households in Canada by 2011. One of Vibrant Communities' goals is to learn about the potential and practical applications of a multi-sectoral, comprehensive approach to reducing poverty, including how to use evaluation most productively.

After much initial experimentation, the sponsors and communities involved in Vibrant Communities developed an approach to evaluation that largely reflects the characteristics of developmental evaluation. The approach encourages communities to clearly describe the theory of change underlying their work, capturing the theory in the form of a community story and having debates about the strength of that theory. It then encourages them to document outcomes on multiple dimensions as the work unfolds, to host annual participatory reflection sessions to determine "what has changed" and ultimately to decide as a group if it is appropriate to revise the theory of change to reflect new understandings or priorities. Vibrant Communities' sponsors are "mining" the different pathways and experiences of participating communities to identify and disseminate learnings to other communities, philanthropic organizations and policy makers.

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