

Apollo M. Nkwake

Working with Assumptions in International Development Program Evaluation

With a Foreword by Michael Bamberger

Second Edition

 Springer

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Apollo M. Nkwake
Questions LLC
Maryland, MD, USA

ISBN 978-3-030-33003-3 ISBN 978-3-030-33004-0 (eBook)
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-33004-0>

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“Making assumptions explicit is one way of identifying differences, clarifying choices, and ultimately fostering debate and cooperation among people who are committed in some way to building a better world.”

—Jenny Pearce, “Development, NGOs, and Civil Society: The Debate and Its Future,” 2000

“Approaches to development, and the methods that flow from them, are profoundly shaped by assumptions that are made about people Assumptions are also made about processes, such as how change happens or how learning takes place. Assumptions are made about what can and cannot be done. All of these shape the nature of the approach and the choice of methods. Where do these assumptions come from? Some are based on experience or sound research and evidence from elsewhere. Others are based on beliefs and value—some of which can be based on stereotypes and misinformation.”

—Jo Rowlands, “Beyond the Comfort Zone: Some Issues, Questions, and Challenges in Thinking about Development Approaches and Methods,” 2003

“We live our lives according to the assumptions we make about ourselves and our world. To cope better, we need to surface those assumptions and to challenge them. New assumptions then become springboards to effective change.”

—Richard O. Mason and Ian I. Mitroff, “Challenging Strategic Planning Assumptions. Theory, Cases and Techniques,” 1981

*Dedicated to Maureen, Theodora, Gianna,
and Benita*

Foreword

All development programs and policies are based on a wide range of assumptions. For example, one program for inner city youth may be based on the assumption that combating teenage drug addiction will be a more effective way to reduce urban poverty than improving the poor writing skills of high school graduates, while another program in a similar community might assume that providing youth with religious guidance is a key element in combatting urban poverty. It is quite common to find that the guiding principles of both programs are based on unspoken assumptions. It is not uncommon for program organizers to become offended when an evaluator tries to identify these basic assumptions as they may feel that their personal values are being called into question.

The evaluations of development programs and policies are also based on a wide range of interlocking assumptions. Evaluators may make assumptions about the real purpose of a program (which may be different from what is stated in the documents given to the evaluator), what the program is likely to achieve and what problems are likely to arise, the real motivation for commissioning the evaluation, and how the results will be used (and perhaps misused). An evaluator's personal values and political orientation may also lead to assumptions about, for example, whether the program is worthwhile; whether it is likely to have negative consequences for certain groups of women, ethnic minorities, or other vulnerable groups; and what the real purposes of the agencies supporting the program are. Additional sets of assumptions also relate to the evaluation methodology: what is the "best" or appropriate methodology to use? What are the appropriate output, outcome, and (perhaps) impact indicators to measure? Do we need to base the evaluation on a program theory? Does it make sense to think about causality? Evaluators also align themselves on the quantitative/mixed-method/qualitative evaluation spectrum, with all of the assumptions that these positions entail.

The agencies commissioning and using evaluations also have their own assumptions about what an evaluation is, what it can achieve, why it is being commissioned, and how it will be used. Some might assume that evaluators should be skilled scientists who can provide precise statistical answers to questions such as whether the program worked and how much quantitative difference it made to the lives of the

intended beneficiaries. Others might assume that evaluators should be management consultants who can provide useful guidance on how to improve program performance. Clients may also have assumptions about the role of evaluators. Is evaluation a service that you can shop for until you find an evaluator who will provide the answer you are looking for (and who will not criticize your program¹)? Are evaluators really working for the funding agency (whatever they may say about being there to help you improve your program)? Are they willing to ask questions and provide information of interest to the implementing agencies and national policymakers?

Given the wide, and often crucial, sets of assumptions that underlie all development programs and their evaluations, one might expect that all program documents and their corresponding evaluation designs would include a detailed statement of their underlying assumptions. One might also expect that it would be standard practice for evaluators to discuss and clarify these assumptions before the evaluation begins. Even more important, one might expect members of an evaluation team to discuss and reach an agreement on the key assumptions underlying the proposed evaluation hypotheses and research designs. However, as Apollo Nkwake reminds us, most of these assumptions are not made explicit, and in many cases, the agencies supporting programs, the managers and staff of implementing agencies, and the evaluators are often not even aware of some of these key assumptions. Based on a review of over 200 program evaluations during the past 20 years, he tells us that "... nothing has stunned me like the pertinence of assumptions to evaluation viability. What a resource and a risk assumptions can be! I have found them a great resource when they are explicated—their validity notwithstanding—and a great risk when they are not explicated."

Working with Assumptions in International Development Program Evaluation offers a timely review of the complex layers of interlinked theoretical, operational, and methodological assumptions on which both development programs and their evaluations are based. Nkwake also provides a framework for identifying and understanding the logic behind these multiple assumptions, and proposes guidelines for evaluating the assumptions and building them into the evaluation framework.

The book argues that given the multiple contextual factors that influence how programs are designed and implemented and the complex processes of behavioral change that even seemingly "simple" projects can stimulate, most development interventions should be considered "complex." Consequently, the first four chapters are devoted to a discussion of the attributes, design, and evaluation issues involved in complex development interventions. These chapters lay the groundwork for the later sections of the book by identifying the many layers of frequently implicit assumptions that are built into complex interventions and their evaluation. They also present a number of different approaches to the evaluation of complex interventions and the different assumptions on which each is based.

¹An evaluation colleague working in Russia reported that several clients were annoyed to find that evaluation reports they had commissioned criticized their organizations. "I am not paying you money to criticize my organization," was a frequent complaint from clients who had different assumptions about the nature of evaluation and the role of the evaluator. At least they made their assumptions explicit!

Part Two examines evaluation theory and assumptions. A distinction is made among social science theory, evaluation theory, evaluator's theory, and program theory, each of which contains critical but frequently implicit assumptions. Ten types of assumptions are identified and classified into three broad categories: paradigmatic, prescriptive, and causal. Each category of assumptions has different implications for a full understanding of the foundations on which an evaluation is based. Chapter 7 addresses the question of why assumptions are important. Nkwake generalizes from Bonoma's (1978) assertion that "the power of an experiment is only as strong as the clarity of the basic assumptions which underlie it" and argues that the same applies to development evaluation research.

Part Three presents a more in-depth discussion of the nature and importance of diagnostic, prescriptive, and transformational assumptions. While Parts One and Two have a broader theoretical orientation, Part Three has a more operational focus and contains many examples of how the different assumptions actually affect the design, implementation, and interpretation of evaluations. The concluding Part Four discusses how to evaluate assumptions and to identify and explicate the assumptions. Nkwake reminds us that this can be a sensitive and challenging task as stakeholders may resent being questioned about values in which they firmly believe or assumptions that they may feel are self-evident. Michael Patton has observed that stakeholders may also resent being put in the position of schoolchildren who have to try to guess what the evaluator or workshop facilitator has already decided are the "correct" assumptions. Workshops for uncovering the theory of change or stages of a logic model are often seen as frustrating and perhaps even a waste of time.

This book can be read both as a reference text on program design and evaluation theory and a practical guide on the importance of assumptions, their definition and use, and the problems that arise when they are not understood or examined. It also makes a timely contribution to the growing interest in complexity-responsive evaluation, offering a new perspective on some of the ongoing complexity debates.

A full understanding of the role of assumptions becomes particularly important in the rapidly evolving field of mixed-method evaluation. When evaluators share a common discipline, they share many foundational assumptions that perhaps do not need to be spelled out. For example, quantitative researchers may agree on the basic assumptions underlying the use of regression analysis (e.g., assumptions about the characteristics of sample distributions and the statistical power of the test), and researchers who regularly use focus groups may share assumptions about how and when it is appropriate to use focus groups. However, anyone who reads academic journals is aware of the frequent complaints that critics, frequently from within the same discipline, have made wrong assumptions about the research purpose, design, or analysis. But it can be argued that there is a shared understanding of the foundational assumptions of their discipline, and while they often disagree on how to interpret or apply these assumptions, there is broad agreement on the nature of the disagreement.

However, when evaluators are drawn from different disciplines, there may be fundamental, but frequently unstated, differences concerning assumptions about

the nature of evidence, the way hypotheses are developed (or even whether it is appropriate to formulate hypotheses), the appropriate kinds of evaluation designs, what is considered as credible evidence, and the criteria that should be used to assess the validity of findings and conclusions. In the real world of development evaluation, the risk of misunderstanding is increased by the fact that there is often little or no time for the whole team to meet together to develop a common understanding of assumptions and methodology.

The situation is further complicated by the fact that in most mixed-method designs, one discipline or another is dominant, and researchers from the other discipline are often brought in after the broad framework of the evaluation has already been defined and are asked to collect additional data to support the dominant design. When quantitatively oriented evaluators decide to incorporate a qualitative dimension, their reasons for doing this are very different than those of a qualitatively oriented evaluation team that decides to incorporate a quantitative dimension, and the structure of the resulting mixed-method design tends to be quite different in each case.² In fact, in many evaluations of international development programs, the quantitative and qualitative researchers rarely meet. While the quantitative researchers are designing their sample surveys, the qualitative researchers are sent off to conduct case studies—often with only fairly general guidelines on how the cases are to be selected and what questions are to be asked. In such cases, there is little opportunity to discuss the assumptions on which the two teams base their evaluations. Even when there is closer cooperation, it is often the case that one team is expected to adapt to the research paradigm defined by the dominant discipline, and there may be little opportunity for or interest in developing a shared understanding.

This is of course only one scenario, although it is unfortunately quite common in the field of international development evaluation. And there are many examples of mixed-method evaluations that are conducted with more generous budgets and fewer time constraints and that are able to achieve a higher level of integration of the different approaches. However, even in the most favorable circumstances, the management of mixed-method evaluations requires a more proactive management style³ in which additional time and resources are required to develop an integrated research team. Understanding the assumptions from which different members of a mixed-method evaluation team start is a challenging task, and one of the areas where the final five chapters of Nkwake's work can make one of its most important contributions.

²See Bamberger, Bamberger and Mabry (2019) *RealWorld evaluation: Working under budget, time, data and political constraints*, chapter 14, for an example of how a quantitative dominant and a qualitative dominant evaluation of a rural health program might both approach a mixed methods design.

³Bamberger, M. (2012). *Introduction to mixed methods in impact evaluation*. Impact Evaluation Notes No. 3. the InterAction Guidelines on impact evaluation series. Washington, DC: InterAction and New York: The Rockefeller Foundation. Retrieved from <https://www.interaction.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Mixed-Methods-in-Impact-Evaluation-English.pdf>. This paper discusses the special management challenges for non-governmental organizations (NGOs), as well as other kinds of organizations, in effectively using mixed methods evaluation approaches.

Part Three proposes strategies for identifying and understanding the different kinds of program assumptions on which evaluators base their approaches to evaluation design, as well as the specific tools and techniques used during each stage of an evaluation. Nkwake makes a useful distinction between *diagnostic* assumptions about the causes of the problem that a program is addressing, *prescriptive* assumptions about the appropriate interventions or strategies to address the problem and achieve program objectives, and *transformational* assumptions about how to reach broader, long-term goals. Chapters 8, 9, and 10 describe and illustrate the different sets of assumptions (explicit and implicit) that evaluators can make in each of these three areas. The classifications could provide a useful framework for team-building sessions to help team members understand their key assumptions of similarities and differences.

In the final chapter, Nkwake discusses findings of a survey on how evaluators work with assumptions in their day-to-day work. This case study highlights types of assumptions that are most commonly encountered and examines assumptions-examination tools that are most commonly used and ways to build evaluator capacity for assumption-aware evaluation practice. Bringing different assumptions and perspectives out into the open could provide either a starting point for moving toward a common understanding and approach or, at the very least, a much clearer understanding of the differences. The systematic approach presented in these chapters will provide a helpful framework for evaluators and evaluation managers to unpack the different kinds of assumptions and to understand the differences in how they are used by members of the mixed-method evaluation team.

Portland, OR, USA

Michael Bamberger

Preface

Writing a book on assumptions in development program evaluation has been my interest for a long time. My inspiration comes from my experience as a program evaluator and many conversations with other evaluators interested in this topic.

For the past 20 years, I have been involved (partially or fully) with and reviewed more than 200 program evaluations and assessments. Yet nothing has stunned me like the pertinence of assumptions to evaluation viability. What a resource and a risk assumptions can be! I have found them a great resource when they are explicated—their validity notwithstanding—and a great risk when they are not. One of my most vivid experiences was in 2009, when I traveled to rural Mozambique to review a community development program. I learned from my discussions with stakeholders that the program intended, in part, to boost farmers' incomes by distributing an agricultural bulletin. I thought about this for a while ... distributing an agricultural bulletin to boost farmers' incomes? The discussion rolled on with several questions. What would happen when the farmers received the bulletins? How certain were we that they would read them? If they read the bulletins, what would happen? How certain were we that they would acquire the knowledge disseminated in the bulletins? If they did, what would happen? How certain were we that they would act on it? Why would or wouldn't they?

Program staff had good answers for these questions, but it was absolutely clear to me that this was the first time the questions were being discussed openly. It also turned out that most assumptions that had been made were not valid. Yet all it took to test them was simply to verbalize them. This proved extremely useful for me and for the program staff in assessing the viability of this particular program strategy.

Over time and from many such experiences, I developed an interest in exploring ways to communicate the necessity of explicating program assumptions to people who design, fund, implement, and evaluate development programs. This would help programs function better, stakeholders learn more from evaluations, and beneficiaries truly become better off.

I have received much encouragement in writing this book from conversations with other evaluators interested in this topic, including Francesca Declitch, Ari Outila, Madri JV Rensburg, Joel Hughey, Holta Trandafili, and Jane Chege, among others.

I am grateful for their insights. I am also grateful to Nathan Morrow, Jim Rugh, Michael Bamberger, Loretta Peschi, Elizabeth Perry, Jean O’Neil, and Wendy Hammond for their useful edits and comments.

Maryland, MD, USA
September 2019

Apollo M. Nkwake

Endorsements

“Rigor resides in rigorous thinking not methods. Building capacity for and engaging in rigorous evaluative thinking has become the clarion call of the past decade. Effective interventions, appropriate evaluation designs, credible data, and useful findings all flow from rigorous evaluative thinking. And how does one think evaluatively? It all begins with assumptions. Systematically articulating, examining, and testing assumptions is the foundation of evaluative thinking. Everything else in an intervention and evaluation is built on that foundation. This book, more than any other, explains how to build a strong foundation for effective interventions and useful evaluation by rigorously working with assumptions.”

—Michael Quinn Patton, Ph.D., Author of *Utilization-Focused Evaluation* and Coeditor of *Thought Work: Thinking, Action, and the Fate of the World, USA*.

“It is hard to find an area of work that is as important, yet as neglected, as understanding and shaping the assumptions made when designing and implementing development interventions and policies, or constructing ‘theories of change’. A key reason for the many disastrous efforts to address development challenges is the failure to consider underlying assumptions in an informed, systematic way. Apollo Nkwake’s pioneering work in this domain is therefore crucial, useful, and timely. This updated edition presents us with a new opportunity to delve into both the theoretical and practical aspects of paradigmatic, prescriptive, and causal assumptions. We need to learn and apply these insights with the deep attention they deserve.”

—Zenda Ofir, Ph.D., Independent Evaluator, Richard von Weizsäcker Fellow, Robert Bosch Academy, Berlin, Germany. Honorary Professor, School of Public Leadership, Stellenbosch University, South Africa.

“A fascinating and useful book that addresses systematically and in a practical way the use of assumptions in the design and evaluation of international development programs Apollo Nkwake expertly shows different categories of assumptions and guides the reader on how to combine the analysis of assumptions with a wide

variety of evaluation methods. This new edition updates the references, incorporates a complexity approach, and includes a case study on evaluation practice which can be used both as a baseline and as key input for the design of courses to improve evaluation practice.”

—Osvaldo Feinstein, Professor at the Master in Evaluation, Complutense University of Madrid, Spain.

“Working with Assumptions in International Development Program Evaluation is a step-by-step guide that allows for a holistic approach to comprehensive and effective program evaluation, keeping the vexing concept of assumptions in mind. What makes this book unique is the approach taken with unpacking the concept of assumptions within program evaluation. The approach presented provides the reader with a theoretical and applied basis that is often missing with other textbooks, for effective and applied program evaluation methodology.”

—Regardt Ferreira, Ph.D., Associate Professor and Director of the Disaster Resilience Leadership Academy, Tulane University, USA.

“It is hard to exaggerate the importance of assumptions in evaluation practice. Like Nkwake states, ‘the pertinence of assumptions to evaluation viability’ is stunning. This new second edition of Working with Assumptions in International Development Program Evaluation is absolutely the definitive text on this ubiquitous and essential topic. Updated with new illustrations, frameworks, and empirical case study data, this book is applicable and salient across the entire field of evaluation, not just in international development, and as such is a must-read for all students, practitioners, and scholars of evaluation.”

—Thomas Archibald, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Virginia Tech, USA.

“Apollo Nkwake’s book, Working with Assumptions in International Program Development is a must read for any evaluator. All evaluators do work based upon assumptions, ranging from the theoretical and technical to the personal. Nkwake’s discussion of an important but often overlooked part of evaluation—how evaluators make and use assumptions in their work and how these influence the decisions that are made for program and initiative development—is particularly apropos. Nkwake provides examples and case studies for evaluators to think evaluatively about the kinds of assumptions we make in conducting evaluations and understand the consequences of assumptions in the work we do. If you’re an evaluator who values evaluative thinking and all that it entails, this book should be in your library; you will consult it often.”

—Katrina L. Bledsoe, Ph.D., Research Scientist, Education Development Center, Inc., Principal Consultant, Katrina Bledsoe Consulting, USA.

“Apollo Nkwake’s book was a classic as soon as it first came out, as it filled a gaping hole in the literature about evaluations related to analysis and interpretations. Too often evaluators get caught up in their data and forget the theory of

change and the critical assumptions and rationale being tested. As co-Chair of the M&E Working Group at the Society for International Development, Director for Evaluation at IBTCI, and co-chair of an American Evaluation Association working group, I strongly encourage would-be evaluators, whether working internationally or domestically, whatever their sector, to study from Apollo Nkwake, whose book on assumptions is vital for understanding how to explicate the many tacit program assumptions that lurk behind most program rationale. This book is a refreshing and welcome addition to our evaluation toolkit. It was and remains one of a kind.”

—Steven Hansch, International Business & Technical Consultants, Inc.,
Adjunct Faculty, George Washington University, Board member,
Partners for Development, USA.

“This book is the most comprehensive collection of project design and evaluation tools I’ve found. It explains each clearly as well as analytically, addressing their purpose, strengths, and weaknesses. And it takes on the larger picture of what’s it all about? Why should we care? And how do we enhance our evaluation thinking and practice so we can reach our intended purpose?—that is, once we have more explicitly articulated our intentions now that we have a better understanding of the important role of underlying assumptions. This book is interesting to those concerned with theory, useful as a guide to practitioners, and instructive for newcomers to development management and evaluation.”

—Jennifer Brinkerhoff, Ph.D., Associate Dean for Faculty Affairs and Special Initiatives, Professor of Public Administration and International Affairs, George Washington University.

“This thought-provoking book explains why assumptions are an essential condition within the theories and methodologies of evaluation and how assumptions influence the ways that evaluators approach their work. The book accomplishes this goal through an insightful analysis of theory and methodology, and an equally insightful treatment of the connections between the nature of different types of assumptions, and those theories and methodologies. The book is both conceptual and practical. It will enrich the ways that evaluators develop their models, devise their methodologies, interpret their data, and interact with their stakeholders.”

—Jonny Morell, Ph.D., President, 4.669... Evaluation and Planning,
Editor Emeritus, Evaluation and Program Planning.

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About the Author

Apollo M. Nkwake works as International Technical Advisor on Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) at Education Development Center. He previously served as an associate research professor for M&E at the George Washington University and at Tulane University. He has worked for international agencies across Africa, Asia and Latin America. He holds a PhD from the University of Cape Town and is a designated credentialed evaluator. Dr. Nkwake is a recipient of American Evaluation Association's 2017 Marcia Guttentag Promising New Evaluator Award. He has authored three books and several journal papers/book chapters and has guest edited several special journal volumes. He is the author of *Credibility, Validity, and Assumptions in Program Evaluation Methodology* (2015, Springer) and *Working with Assumptions in International Development Program Evaluation* (2013, Springer). He guest edited the special issue on *Working with Assumptions. Existing and Emerging Approaches for Improved Program Design, Monitoring and Evaluation*, for the Program Planning and Evaluation Journal, Volume 59 (December 2016).

Abbreviations and Acronyms

ABP	Assumption-based planning
AEA	American Evaluation Association
DQual	Dominantly qualitative perspective
DQuant	Dominantly quantitative perspective
EC	European Commission
LFA	Logical framework approach
PIPA	Participatory impact pathways analysis
RCT	Randomized control trial
RTCCI	Aspen Institute Roundtable on Comprehensive Community Initiatives
SL	Sustainable livelihoods
TOCA	Theory of change approach
ZOPP	<i>Zielorientierte Projektplanung</i> (goal-oriented project planning)