

Apollo M. Nkwake

# Working with Assumptions in International Development Program Evaluation

With a Foreword by Michael Bamberger

 Springer

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*Dedicated to Maureen, Theodora, Gianna  
and Benita*

*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<sup>1</sup>*

Pearce 2000: 40 in Eade 2003: xi

*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 values—some of which can be based on stereotypes and misinformation<sup>2</sup>*

Rowland 2003: 4

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<sup>1</sup> Eade, D. (2003). *Development methods and approaches: critical reflections. A development in practice reader*. London: Oxfam GB.

<sup>2</sup> Rowlands, J. (2003). Beyond the comfort zone: some issues, questions, and challenges in thinking about development approaches and methods. In D. Eade (ed.), *Development methods and approaches: Critical reflections. A development in practice reader* (pp. 1–20). Oxfam GB, London.

# Foreword

All development programs and policies are based on a wide range of assumptions. These include: why (for example) combating teenage drug addiction is considered to be more important for this agency than, for example, the low level of writing skills among high-school graduates; what are the causes and consequences of the problem being addressed; what is the most effective way to attack the problem; what are the particular skills or resources that this agency can draw on; and, how will success be defined?

The evaluations of these development programs and policies are also based on a wide range of interlocking assumptions. The evaluators may have assumptions about: the real purpose of the 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). The evaluator's personal values and political orientation may also lead to assumptions about, for example, whether this is a worthwhile program, whether it is likely to have negative consequences for certain groups of women, ethnic minorities; or other vulnerable groups; and what are the real purposes of the agencies supporting the program. Additional sets of assumptions also relate to the evaluation methodology: what is the "best" or the appropriate methodology to be used; 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 methods/qualitative evaluation spectrum with all of the assumptions that these positions entail.

The agencies commissioning and using the evaluations also have their own assumptions about what is an evaluation, what can it 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 "Did the program work?", and "how much quantitative difference did it make to the lives of the intended beneficiaries?" While 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 program<sup>1</sup>)? Or, are evaluators really working for the funding agency (whatever they may say about being there to help you improve your program), and 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 have expected to find that all program documents and their corresponding evaluation designs would include a detailed statement of their underlying assumptions. One might also have expected that it would be standard practice for evaluators to discuss and clarify these assumptions before the evaluation began. Even more importantly, members of the evaluation team could be expected to discuss and reach 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 having had to review over 200 program evaluations during the past 14 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 not withstanding – 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. He also provides a framework for identifying and understanding the logic these multiple assumptions, and proposes guidelines for evaluating the assumptions and building them into the evaluation framework.

Nkwake 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 as being “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

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<sup>1</sup> An 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 very explicit!



evaluation. He also presents a number of different approaches to the evaluation of complex interventions, and the different assumptions on which each is based.

Part II 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 Seven addresses the question why are assumptions important. He 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 III presents a more in-depth discussion of the nature and importance of diagnostic, prescriptive, and transformational assumptions. While the Parts I and II have a broader theoretical orientation, Part III 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 IV 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 about 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.

The book can be read both as a reference text on program design and evaluation theory, or as a practical guide on the importance of assumptions, how to define and use them, and the problems that arise when assumptions are not understood or examined.

A full understanding of the role of assumptions becomes particularly important in the rapidly evolving field of mixed methods evaluation. When evaluators share a common discipline, many foundational assumptions are shared by all evaluators and 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 a 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, how hypotheses are developed (or even whether it is appropriate to formulate hypotheses), what kinds of evaluation designs are appropriate, what is considered as credible evidence, and what criteria should be used for assessing 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 methods design one or other discipline is dominant, and researchers from the other discipline are often brought in after the broad framework of the evaluation has already been defined and they are often asked to collect additional data to support the dominant design. When quantitatively oriented evaluators decide to incorporate a qualitative dimension, the reasons for doing this are very different than when a qualitatively oriented evaluation team decides to incorporate a quantitative dimension, and the structure of the resulting mixed methods design tends to be quite different in each case<sup>2</sup>. In fact, there are many evaluations of international development programs in which 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 cases such as this 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 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 where mixed methods evaluations are conducted with more generous budgets and less time constraints and where they are able to achieve a higher level of integration of the different approaches. However, even in the most favorable circumstances, the management of mixed methods evaluations requires a more proactive management style (Bamberger forthcoming)<sup>3</sup> in which additional time and resources are required to develop an integrated research team. Understanding the assumptions from which different members of a mixed methods evaluation team are starting is a challenging task, and one of the

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<sup>2</sup> See Bamberger, Rugh and Mabry (2012) *RealWorld Evaluation: Working under budget, time, data and political constraints*, Chap. 14, pp. 320–324. For an example of how a quantitative dominant and qualitative dominant evaluation of a rural health program might approach a mixed methods design.

<sup>3</sup> “Introduction to Mixed Methods in Impact Evaluation” (scheduled for publication in 2012 in the InterAction Guidelines on impact evaluation series. This discusses the special management challenges for NGOs, as well as other kinds of organizations, in effectively using mixed methods evaluation approaches.

areas where the final five chapters of the present publication can potentially make one of its most important contributions.

Part III proposes strategies for identifying and understanding the different kinds of program assumptions on which evaluators base their approaches to evaluate design as well as the specific tools and techniques used during each stage of the evaluation. A useful distinction is made between *diagnostic* assumptions about the causes of the problem the program is addressing, prescriptive assumptions about the appropriate interventions or strategies to address the problem and achieve program objectives, and *transformational* assumption about how to reach broader, long-term goals. Chapters 8–10 describe and illustrate the different sets of assumptions (explicit and implicit) that evaluators can hold with respect to each of these three areas; and the classifications presented could provide a useful framework to use in team-building sessions to help each member understand the similarities and differences in the key assumptions of each team member. Once the different assumptions and perspectives have been brought out in the open, this can provide a starting point for either moving toward a common understanding and approach, or at the very least providing 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 methods evaluation team.

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 experiences as a program evaluator and many conversations with other evaluators interested in this topic.

In the last 14 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 not withstanding—and a great risk when they are not explicated. 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, in part, was intended to boost farmers' incomes by distributing an agricultural bulletin to them. 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 receive the bulletin? How certain were we that they would read the bulletin? If they read the bulletins, what would happen? How certain were we that they would acquire the knowledge disseminated in the bulletin? If they did, what would happen? How certain were we that they would act upon 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 them in assessing the viability of this particular program strategy.

Over time and from many such experiences, I have developed an interest in exploring ways in which the necessity of explicating program assumptions can be communicated to people who design, fund, implement, and evaluate development programs. This way, programs would function a lot better; stakeholders would learn a lot more from evaluations, and beneficiaries might truly be better off.

I have received much encouragement in writing this book from conversations I have had with several other evaluators interested in this topic, including Francesca

Declitch, Ari Outila, Madri JV Rensburg, Joel Hughey, Holta Trandafili, and Jane Chege among others. I'm grateful for their insights. Also, I'm grateful to Nathan Morrow, Jim Rugh, Michael Bamberger, Loretta Peschi, Elizabeth Perry, and Jean O'Neil for their useful comments in writing this book.

May 2012

Apollo M. Nkwake

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

**Abstract** The key discussions in this book are outlined. The first two parts of the book are more theoretical, intended to review the literature on program evaluation themes most closely related to assumptions. The last two parts of the book focus on more practical discussions on how to explicate and evaluate program assumptions.

### Challenges of a Growing Profession

I do not always find it easy to explain my job to people of other professions. It is not that I do not know or I do not want to say what I do. It is just that when I tell them whatever I tell them, they do not seem to get it. An immigration official asked what I did for a living as I was returning to the U.S. recently. “I evaluate development programs,” I responded. The official replied, “So your company builds roads in communities and your work is to check how well it has happened.” That is a bit off target, but a lot closer than many guesses I have heard over the years. My wife never has to explain what she does when she tells people that she is a pharmacist. But she once told me, “People ask me what you do and I do not know what to tell them”. She knows what I do. She just finds the same problem I find in explaining what “it” actually is.

I suspect that many evaluators have encountered this challenge. In January 2012, evaluator Nora Murphy asked the evaluation community to share its “elevator speeches.” It is a well-known exercise: sum up in a minute what you do to earn your living. More than 30 evaluators responded; many agreed that they struggle with explaining evaluation. One evaluator distributed basic evaluation books to family and friends. It seemed to help; she now gets fewer questions about her work. Some other elevator speeches:

I work with people who are passionate about what they do to help assess three things: Did we do the right things? Did we do things right? What could we do better?

I work with people who collect the data that informs the decisions that make the world a better place.

...The profession of an evaluator is thus revealing various expectations, collecting multi-dimensional evidences, and then compare and contrast the similarity and differences for the intended uses.

That final example may represent part of the communications gap. Even my wife might have to think twice to get the point of that statement.

While the views in this discussion cannot be generalized, they do show that responding evaluators are passionate about their work and see their jobs as important. It should be frustrating indeed for such passionate professions to find that people around them may not know so much about their discipline. Fortunately, most evaluators keep moving forward and doing good jobs. And it should not seem that their profession is a recent one.

Evaluation is not a young discipline. Evaluation practice can be traced as far back as the late 1940s and early 1950s, mostly within such U.S.-based organizations as the World Bank, United Nations, and U.S. Agency for International Development. In the early days, the focus was more on appraisal than evaluation (Cracknel 1988 in Segone 2006, p. 9). By 1986 (Scriven 1986), the discipline was speedily expanding and creating new frontiers. In 2005, Vestiman wrote of evaluation as a discipline in its adulthood.

Among the major catalysts for growth of the evaluation profession is the increased interest in and the demand for development effectiveness (Hughes and Hutchings 2011; Segone 2006). The demand for documented and preferably positive results of development activities has increased markedly over the past 30 years. These programs must demonstrate that they are not only well-intended but effective in advancing the economic, health, welfare, and/or social conditions of the recipient population.

The increasing importance of demonstrated effectiveness is documented in the Paris Declaration for Development Effectiveness, hosted by the French government on 2 March 2005 and signed by more than one hundred donor and developing countries. Parties resolved to reform aid to increase its effectiveness in combating global poverty. One of its principles, “Managing for Results”, focuses on the obligation of both donor and recipient countries to ensure that resource management and program decision-making will focus on whether these produce the expected results. Donors agreed to support fully developing countries’ efforts to implement performance assessment frameworks to help track progress toward key development goals (OECD 2005). This is just one example of how development actors are concerned not just about effectiveness but measurement and documentation of that effectiveness.

Measuring the level and nature of effectiveness is increasingly understood as an essential part of being effective in both current and future efforts. It is little wonder