

Hope for High Impact Aid: Real Challenges, Real Opportunities and Real Solutions

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In a 2004 interview with the late Everett Rogers, author of the book *Diffusion of Innovation*, Rogers lamented that in 1963, he and other members of a prominent research group expected to solve the remaining international development problems and end poverty within ten to fifteen years. (Rogers, 2004) Now, forty-five years hence, it is time for a “reality check.” While it is refreshing to be reminded of a time when it was acceptable to have such high hopes, in hindsight it appears that these early expectations were terribly naïve. Unfortunately the multinational effort to alleviate poverty over the last half-century has not succeeded (Goodman, 2006). But does this mean we should give up hope?

It is the intention of this article to show international development evaluators why, despite ongoing challenges and limited success thus far, there are several reasons for continued or renewed hope. It explains how evaluation can play a crucial role in alleviating poverty, not only by enhancing accountability and learning, but also by enabling wiser strategic planning and improved coordination. The article will recognize the many challenges involved in international development, explain why evaluators have such a heavy responsibility in this field, outline why there is a “window of opportunity” for evaluation to make a significant contribution in alleviating poverty, and explain what evaluators must do in order to meet their individual responsibilities, thus

helping to insure that the evaluation profession delivers this high-potential contribution.

It is important to recognize that global development and poverty reduction efforts are at a critical point at this stage in history. Humanity must now realize that further diffusion of last century’s technology and economic development methods across less developed areas of the globe is unsustainable. Although mere anticipation of future resource constraints is already hurting us as a result of dramatic price increases driven by speculative investors, we haven’t yet hit the limit on real fuel and food production capacity. Nonetheless, notwithstanding a successful new Earth-friendly “wave” of innovation able to overcome these looming resource limits while significantly enhancing sustainability and productive capacity, this limit will eventually be reached. If and when this happens, the potential for pro-poor economic growth and development may disappear. Thus, there is a significant likelihood that alleviation of poverty may be a now-or-never proposition.

Therefore, given the limited success thus far and that time may be running out, it is critical that the status quo be no longer acceptable to the international development community and that a major turn-around effort be undertaken wherever possible and in ways that are environmentally appropriate and sustainable. Otherwise, if and when more severely limiting macro-constraints do set in, the problems may never get solved. As a result of this dire

situation, we need to do all we can to ensure that the current generation of development efforts succeed. We need to use all available knowledge and resources as cost-effectively as possible to deliver high-impact aid. Given our severely limited success thus far, we have very little to gain and everything to lose by continuing with our old ways. We must aggressively seek, prove, and replicate new high-impact solutions while resolutely ending lackluster performance. It is imperative for evaluators and managers of international growth and development to step up now and deliver what it takes to make the next half-century of development effort much more successful and sustainable than the last.

Evaluation and Planning

Traditional evaluation reports and journal articles are good at communicating the current state of theory and practice in evaluation, but they appear to fall short in communicating an overall understanding of what must be done for the transdiscipline of evaluation to reach its potential for contributing to the progress of society. This article attempts to partly fill this void in the context of international development aid and reconstruction—a massive multidisciplinary, multinational, multisector endeavor in which evaluation has played a relatively prominent, yet still too limited, role. Pragmatic principles traditionally followed in the field of strategic planning must be made more explicit in the field of international development. This means every effort must be taken to implement ex-ante Poverty Impact Assessment and Results-based Management techniques from the highest levels on down within the development community. Having used similar techniques for the United Nations Industrial Development Organization in Vienna in the early 1980s and spending the bulk of the ensuing years in management systems consulting and integration services, I find the limited use of these techniques surprising and

disappointing. Guiding principles of strategic planning, such as the consideration of comparative costs and benefits of various design options vis-à-vis immediate and extended opportunities and threats in the environment, appear to be mysteriously missing from the extensive array of evaluation literature and reports I've been exposed to. This has been true in international development and other areas where evaluation is prominent. As a result, I have concluded that the use of such sound strategic principles is not the *modus operandi* within evaluation circles, and that the transdiscipline of evaluation needs to make a concerted effort to apply such strategic planning principles if it is to reach its potential for high impact.

On occasion there are signs that aid administrators are being asked to better address strategic issues in international development. Such is the case with the Paris Declarations that demand “local ownership,” “mutual accountability,” and “harmonization” in international development aid. These Paris Declarations address strategic critical success factors for international development assistance. They demand that the nations that receive development and reconstruction aid have ownership and that there is networkwide mutual accountability and harmonization between all parties involved in designing, implementing and evaluating development programs. Unfortunately though, evaluation has traditionally been viewed as something that is only done at the end of a program's lifecycle. Therefore, the opportunity to include evaluation as an integral part of planning or design has been repeatedly forgone. Obviously, if evaluation is involved in ex-ante assessment of design options for the express purpose of leading to the development of high-impact program theories, logic models and monitoring systems, it is much more likely that accountability and harmonization will result. Why is it not, then, a number one priority to see

that evaluation is involved as an integral part of every program from the beginning?

Example of High-Level Evaluation-Driven Strategic Planning

The extreme challenge of integrating aid and reconstruction efforts in both Iraq and Afghanistan demonstrates the dire need for evaluation to be more connected to strategic planning. Professional evaluation must take on this more strategically positioned role in order to be able to perform its critical function in guiding and coordinating both design and implementation of large reconstruction efforts. Regardless of whether one thinks the actions that led the United States into the Iraq and Afghanistan wars were wise to begin with, it is now the responsibility of the United States, in conjunction with global partners, to do all it can to finish effectively. This means doing everything possible to ensure effective reconstruction. Anything less than acceptable results from these efforts will obviously have negative strategic ramifications, yet the complex multinational and multisector reconstruction efforts are daunting. Even though the number of lives and amount of resources lost on these wars has been staggering and are irreplaceable, at least not all will have been lost if reconstruction efforts are able to succeed.

Perhaps infusing evaluative thinking about the significance and challenges involved in “winning the peace” and succeeding in reconstruction efforts would have made a difference in how the wars were originally carried out or even in the decision of whether the wars were in the strategic interests of United States to begin with. If the worth and significance of “winning the peace” were properly evaluated, then at least more emphasis would have been placed on these issues. If the critical yet daunting nature of achieving these aims, as well as our less-than-stellar history of success in aid and reconstruction, were considered in the assessment of opportunities

and risks of these wars, it is possible that the initiators may have done otherwise. As referenced above, we don’t have the best track record in planned economic development interventions, even in relatively peaceful locales. Nonetheless, our success or failure will, for better or for worse, determine the message that will be communicated to the entire world through the history books. Can the world depend on the United States, its allies, and the socioeconomic models they espouse to improve these types of dire situations?

Rather than expecting an easy victory, additional ex-ante evaluative thinking may have shed light on the likelihood that success in Afghanistan and Iraq would be costly and difficult. It may have also suggested that success or failure with these interventions would have a significant role in determining the fate of the United States in the new millennium. Pragmatic evaluation may have suggested that the upside potential of all-out war may very well not be worth the downside risk, and perhaps that “nation-building” efforts of this magnitude would distract attention and resources from other even more critical looming issues. The main line of thinking seemed to be that there was an immediate threat that required an immediate response and that the risks of intervention were minimal. It now appears that the threat was much less severe and that the challenges and risks of intervention were much more extreme than some realized. Perhaps we can consider it a lesson learned, but as will be discussed later, it is not a lesson learned unless real improvements result. Real improvement in this case would be that more effective evaluation on a more strategic level be done, especially prior to making critical “make or break” decisions.

The most important question that will soon be answered and the message that will be heard loud and clear around the world is not whether we win or lose the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Though this is obviously important, the most important question is, should the type of free

and democratic economic and political systems the United States espouses continue to be considered the most viable and preferable path to global prosperity? It appears that part of the answer to this most significant question has already been answered. Humanity around the world, including those inside the United States, now appears to be relatively certain that the violent and disruptive interventionist brand of freedom and democracy is not the answer to our world's problems. This suggests that we either need to find and support an alternative more effective and more humanitarian free and democratic approach, or even the fate of these great ideals will be at risk. This means our highest leaders need to take a new direction. They need to better evaluate our situation and quickly learn how to innovatively solve some huge global problems.

At this juncture in history, it is absolutely critical that the democracies of the world unite to demonstrate our systematic ability to work together in innovative and peaceful ways as a positive force for international development and reconstruction. If we don't succeed at this great commission, the extent to which our security, prosperity, and liberty is at risk has only just begun to be realized. So we should be less accepting of our leaders' wayward ways that put us at increasing risk of failure and catastrophic loss in terms of our economic and political leadership position in the world. We need to innovate on a new, more strategic level. This means we need to improve our ability as a society to do effective pro-forma or ex-ante evaluation of opportunities and threats, assess our strengths and weaknesses, and do all that is necessary, including sacrificing our customary creature comforts, to solve huge and mounting problems. So the great commission of today is not to "protect our way of life" indiscriminately, but to demonstrate and protect a way of life that is free yet fair, creative yet conscientious, and democratic yet collectively responsible. This is the American way of life that made this nation great, that way of life that I know and

love. We need to reassert this American way, remaining steadfast in these principles, while maintaining the flexibility to creatively modify or innovate plans and actions to fit changing realities. This more pragmatic and morally defensible way of life is not only worth demonstrating and protecting, but is also the way of life that rest of the world once admired about the United States and would once again be willing and able to help sustain.

Pragmatic innovation is about learning and improvement; developing and using policies, programs, processes, and products that add more value in comparison to other alternatives; and satisfying performance needs with greater and more efficient benefit/cost ratios. Innovation in general demands innovation in evaluation. Evaluation must play a continuously formative role and be based on the type of pragmatic values that are both morally and strategically defensible. Good innovation means being more considerate of how our actions impact diverse aspects of society on both individual and global scales. We must not only consider the beliefs, attitudes, and values of those positioned upstream that are used to owning the leadership role in development and reconstruction efforts. We must also consider the impact on downstream intermediaries and target beneficiaries and, where possible, get them involved in governance as well. We must realize that only by helping those in need to lead more productive and prosperous lives, will the positive impact of multiplier effects be felt. Helping the poor lead more productive lives not only helps them directly, but also enables them to more productively help others, thus creating a multiplicative effect. Only then will aid resources flow both to target beneficiaries and on through to indirect impactees in their local communities and beyond. For example, more productive farmers not only improve their own household income, but also add additional value to their community by improving food security in their community.

Iraq and Afghanistan are just two of many examples of why the fate of freedom and democracy now depend on improved effectiveness in international aid and reconstruction. Yet the secret is out. Succeeding in the world of international development is tough. Although various exceptional examples and glimmers of hope remain, most everyone now knows that, at least historically, failure has been the norm. Evaluators must recognize the current situation as a historic opportunity to assume independence, speak truth to power, demand support for high quality evaluation and see to it that the results are heard loud and clear—not only in upper echelons of decision-making power, but also out on the streets where real lives are actually touched.

By taking on such a stronger and more essential role, evaluation can meet its promise of inspiring real humanitarian progress. But evaluators will still be required to help deliver on demands for beneficiary ownership, mutual accountability, collective learning, and harmonized coordination. How will monitoring and evaluation (M&E) deliver on these heightened demands? This article will conclude with how evaluators might use new and improved M&E tools to appropriately meet these demands. The conclusion will also address whether there appears to be hope that existing and emerging evaluation models, tools, and methods can be combined with new policies—such as those reflected in the most recent Paris Declarations—to be enough to turn the tide toward greater success in international development.

Real Challenges

What is making it so difficult to achieve more widespread success in international development aid? This question can be answered at least in part by looking at what is needed to perform adequately in this complex field. Is there something about the nature of international development aid that makes

success particularly daunting? It is well known that there are, in fact, many challenges involved in international development aid that are not always present in other socioeconomic activities (Mansuri & Rao, 2004). Some of the critical success factors of international development that make aid particularly challenging include these:

- Reduction in poverty and/or creation of economic development for those who are most needy or have the highest potential for socioeconomic improvement
- Augmentation of market mechanisms with evaluation so as to insure that resources are apportioned appropriately
- Empowerment of beneficiaries to become more self-sufficient in recognizing and developing their own opportunities
- Adherence to ethical standards, e.g. transparent participation of all stakeholders in the process, that bolster viability and sustainability
- Understanding of differing viewpoints, languages, capabilities, needs, and agendas of multiple governments, public and private donors, beneficiaries and other participants
- Communication, negotiation, and cooperation through many intermediaries, including foreign governments and other partners in different cultures and languages
- Synthesis of diverse stakeholder perspectives so as to reconcile differences and inspire voluntary cooperation by all involved
- Satisfying equitable distribution of resources, offerings, incentives, and other means while simultaneously channeling and motivating a most cost-effective positive impact
- Handling the complex logistics of managing projects spread throughout

extended networks across multiple regions of the world

- Coordination of increasingly complex partnership networks prevalent in international aid, development, and reconstruction
- Encouragement of transparent or open communication of plans and results when there is a tendency for each institution/agency to be secretive and proprietary
- Achievement of optimum balance in the distribution of resources and satisfaction of differing needs and agendas within and between various parts and levels of the greater system or global economy

All these requirements for success make it understandable why we have not achieved the eradication of poverty in the ten- to fifteen-year timeframe that Rogers (2004) had anticipated. Consider the last requirement alone. To

successfully move towards optimum distribution of resources in a global economy involves self-organization of a complex system incorporating multiple individual participants at multiple organizational, sector, and national levels. Ideally, a global innovation system could be designed that would marshal all the force international development efforts could muster. This global innovation system would use evaluation to guide decision making and effect results in such a way that total impact on the distribution of costs and benefits of innovation were better managed. More should be done to ensure that all significant change initiatives are as informed as possible in anticipating both positive and negative effects of potential changes and that this information is used to manage these efforts to optimize benefits and their fair distribution throughout society. See the following exhibit (Figure 1) to get an idea of the complexity of this undertaking:

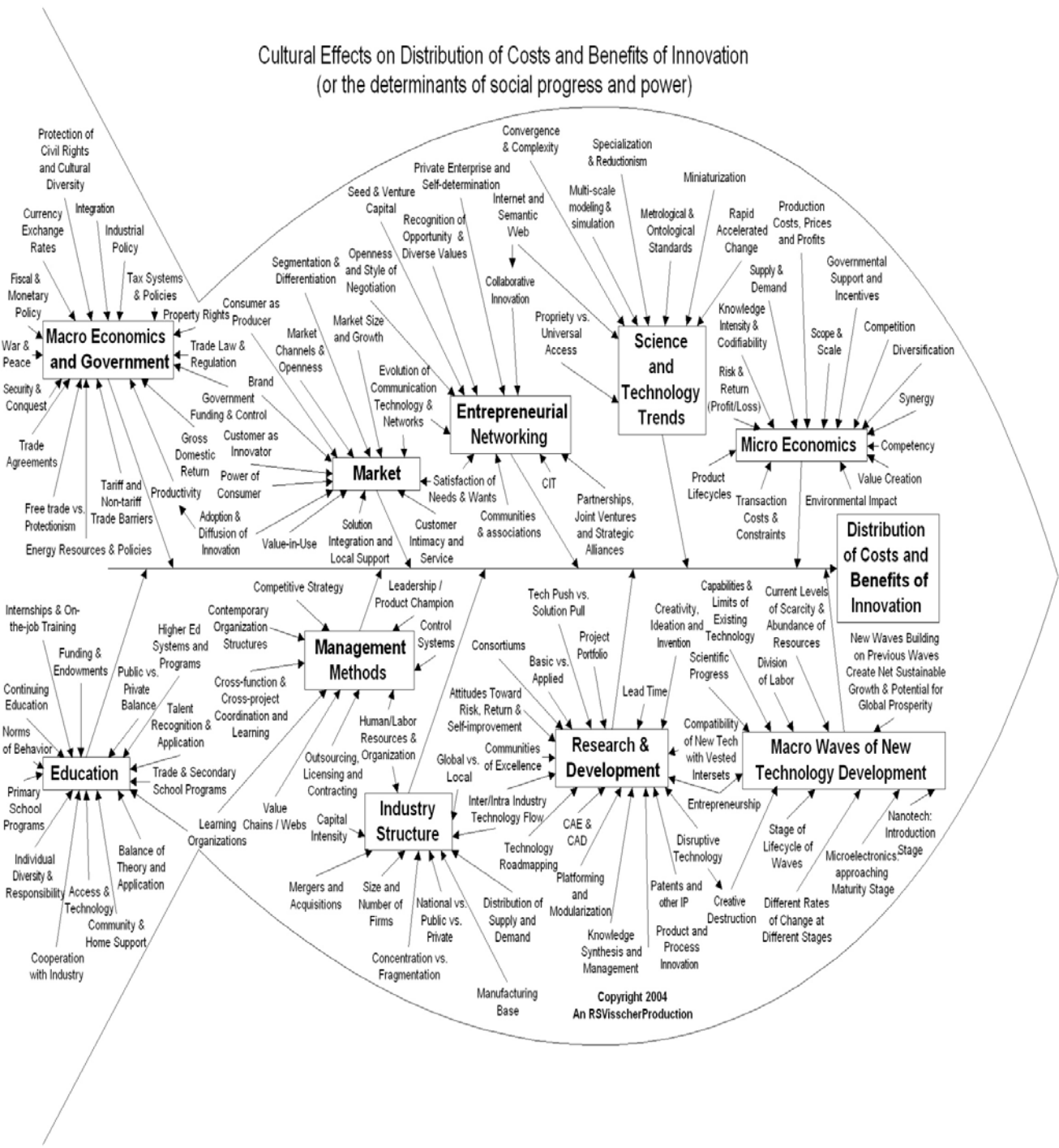


Figure 1. Cultural effects on costs and benefits of innovation

With all of this complexity and these challenging requirements for success in international development aid and reconstruction, one can't help but wonder how any aid project ever works, let alone a whole program, policy, or greater effort. These complex requirements make success difficult no matter how the international development assistance community is organized. These challenges add much volatility, uncertainty, and ambiguity to planning efforts while also making it unrealistic to expect free-market mechanisms to operate efficiently. Too complex to be totally planned and too disjointed, immature, and/or broken to be self-sustaining, international development assistance needs new approaches to evaluation and management that allow the fluid integration of networkwide planning and entrepreneurial networking across traditional boundaries. Only then will international development assistance have a chance of success in the face of these tremendous challenges.

In a nutshell, we need innovative models, mechanisms, and methods to support effective evaluation, management, and coordination of networkwide innovation. These are needed to bridge the gaps between planning and implementation, both within organizations and between organizations, both at each level of aggregation (or resolution) and between. We need systematic evaluation capable of facilitating and encouraging as much bottom-up participation of end beneficiaries as possible, e.g., like a free market where consumer voting with their dollars drives the system. Yet we also need systematic evaluation capable of facilitating proactive strategic planning and major resource allocation decision making that is mindful of the best interests of society in general, e.g., evaluation where consideration of the social value of satisfying unmet performance potentials of the neediest of society is the driving force. By guiding multidirectional decision making and resource flows with actionable information, new age evaluation will

serve its role in facilitating an enhanced system that works for the benefit of the whole as well as all the individual parts.

Extraordinary Demands on Evaluation in International Aid and Reconstruction

As a result of the above real challenges, a system of evaluation designed to adequately function within the complex and dynamic environment of international development aid must support particularly heavy demands. This is especially true if development programs are expected to innovate where and when appropriate. It is as if Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle of physics applies here, too. If evaluation does not more effectively identify and measure situations where both current problems and potential opportunities exist, then ineffective efforts will continue as they do and potential high-impact efforts will lack funding.

In general this inability to make good formative and summative decisions is the major problem that results from inadequate evaluation. Specifically, in terms of the extraordinary demands on evaluation in the field of international aid where the responsibility is to serve the critical requirements of the most needy, failure to make good decisions results in traumatic suffering and even death on a massive scale. Unfortunately, the persistence of poverty seems to suggest that, given the historic capabilities of international development aid efforts, the challenges have thus far proven to be too great to overcome (Goodman, 2006). As mentioned earlier, this inability to reach the goals of the development community reflects badly on those nations funding the global effort and suggests the possibility that the challenge may be too great, especially the longer it takes.

One overarching challenge is that success in pro-poor international development often must be achieved without the benefit of fluid functional market mechanisms. Involvement in

any grant-based or subsidized work normally lacks the market mechanisms for guiding appropriate resource allocation and other actions. Also, the standard “watchdogs” that might normally identify problems are usually nonfunctional in the international development arena. For example, there is often neither sufficient democratic processes, press coverage, regulatory oversight, nor peer review to hold those involved accountable.

Since market and other mechanisms often cannot be relied on to ensure satisfactory performance of those involved in international development assistance, effective provisioning of goods and services does not happen in a self-organizing or free-market kind of way. In situations where more developed or functional mechanisms exist, participants are guided and motivated by the potential for reward and punishment, e.g., profit and loss. Since these mechanisms are not normally present in international development aid, the public relies heavily on evaluation to guide decision making. Sure, there has been a relatively successful movement to stimulate market mechanisms in international development, e.g., micro finance and other “social entrepreneur” types of mechanisms, but only so much is possible when there is not a functional market and/or actionable information to guide resource allocation decisions at the various points in international development aid value chains. Value chains, in this context, are defined as the complex channels through which resources, including information, flow up and downstream to the various actors and impactees in international aid and reconstruction to assist in development and thus create value. In traditional aid efforts, the competition is not for individual, end-consumer dollars, as in most functional or free markets. Rather, the competition is for grant and other nonmarket funding at national and organizational levels.

The ultimate sources of aid funds, i.e. taxpayers or gift-givers in developed nations, are normally disconnected from the programs,

projects, and beneficiaries needing the funds. The taxpaying citizens of donor nations are usually so far removed from development work that it is difficult for them to be informed enough to hold aid administrators accountable. Those end beneficiaries targeted with aid efforts are usually not in a position to insist on high quality at a reasonable cost, as an end customer would be in a situation where the market and other mechanisms are more functional. The fact that end beneficiaries are usually receiving products and services for free or at highly subsidized prices makes it difficult for them to be demanding. As a result, the upstream donor agencies, as well as nations receiving aid and in-country agencies, all remain somewhat insulated from normal market scrutiny.

One way to improve this situation is to facilitate adequate participation from these extreme ends of the international development value chain. Plausible efforts should be made to create functional market and other mechanisms whereby donors behave like discerning investors and aid recipients like informed customers. Of course having donor agencies act as banks has been a mainstream traditional approach, but there remained limits to the extent this analogy. The question remains to be answered how far donors can be seen as investors and beneficiaries as customers. The recent example of Kiva, the micro-loan organization that uses the Web to connect individual micro-lenders from developed countries with individual entrepreneurial borrowers in developing countries, is an example of how this analogy can be extended and challenges overcome in new ways. Traditional bilateral and multilateral donor groups should consider new ideas and experiment with plausible ideas or innovative approaches to develop the market and other mechanisms that are lacking.

There are other issues beyond the lack of market and watchdog mechanisms that might limit motivation for improvement or curtail such innovation. Complexities traditionally

involved in international development aid not only make it possible for many things to go wrong but, also make it possible for there to be many ways to hide what goes wrong. Based on reviewing many program and project evaluation reports, it appears that failed projects often go unnoticed and continue to consume precious funding, e.g., see evaluations of water provision in Indonesian or Sordic land reclamation in India. It seems that the facts about results are often presented in inaccurate, possibly in even misleading and/or hidden, ways. It seems professional evaluators have historically, for various reasons, missed opportunities to set the record straight and contribute to either improvement or discontinuance of wayward efforts. Some experienced critics of international aid evaluation think this is caused by a tendency of evaluators to desire to appease their donor agency clients. The argument suggests that evaluators often will think that providing noncritical evaluations will make it more likely that they will be rehired, and as a result, there is a temptation to make evaluations less critical. It is true that evaluators often don't seem to be asking the tough questions that would shed light on the major problems going undetected. Whether this is intentional or due to some other systemic reason is an open question. Regardless of the cause, there is no denial that it has been common historically for donor organizations and evaluators to not insist on M&E processes and systems that demand high performance and support results based management practices. Whether for technical or other reasons, they don't even seem to give priority to providing the support necessary to make sure these systems are put in place. The reviewed cases showed that when funding was specifically provided for monitoring and other managerial control systems to be developed, these efforts were unsuccessful. At least from a metaevaluator's perspective, they rarely derived any real benefit from such efforts, for example in the form of better data.

Even when the data needed to estimate costs are available, for example in the reviewed Sordic lands case in India and primary schools efforts in Bangladesh, there was either an avoidance or inability to use the data available to do or present a clear cost/benefit, cost-effectiveness or other socioeconomic impact analysis. Reviews of historical evaluation reporting practices have shown that even evaluators that do some impact analysis, such as in the case of a water project in Indonesia, it appears that numbers have been either modified or presented in such a way that they do not take into account major costs that dramatically impact project viability or sustainability. Estimated costs, regardless of how rough or who is intended pay them, should normally be included in evaluations, and yet, for example, costs of ongoing maintenance to keep funded utility systems functional are often omitted. Also, even many evaluators that have the information available to do complete impact analyses, such as in the example of a feeder roads project in Nepal, do not do or include the recommended analyses in their reports. Evaluators often suggest that the necessary information is not available. Although this does often appear to be the case, it also often appears that this excuse is used even in cases where the necessary information to do rough, but nonetheless highly informative analyses is available (Clements, 2005).

Evaluators should try to live by the motto of John Maynard Keynes who said, "I'd rather be approximately correct than exactly wrong." Whether these errors or omissions are on purpose or the result of ignorance, such lack of professionalism should not be tolerated in international development evaluation. Unfortunately, it is still possible for problems with donor agencies, receiving governments, and other partners to go unnoticed by evaluators. Therefore, these problematic policies, programs, and projects continue. Although this less-than-optimum allocation of resources appears to be prevalent historically,

there also appears to be some improvements lately. Some experienced individuals have even accused banks of having a bias for larger programs that use more money, rather than smaller, more easily managed and evaluated projects. As long as less developed governments desperately need financing, the temptation to support unworthy programs will likely continue. Donor banks and receiving countries can spend more effort, particularly by involving evaluators more in the ex-ante strategic planning and proposal evaluation stages. This will help ensure that funds are expended on programs and projects that are more properly targeted and managed.

There fortunately is an increase in demand for more and better impact evaluation. It is encouraging to see that these demands are coming from all parts of the development community and there is a global initiative to encourage results based evaluation and management in international development. Unfortunately there is also currently not any good mechanism to make sure these improvements in aid evaluation get done across the globe in a consistent manner. On a related note, little independent meta-evaluation (evaluation of evaluation) is currently being done. As a result of this lack of a credible self-policing effort on the part of the evaluation profession and the fact that market-based and other watchdog mechanisms are also missing, there is a severe accountability and learning gap in the field of international development. Additionally, it would help tremendously to compare and learn from different projects in similar sectors if there was a meta-evaluation and meta-analysis initiative to share best practices, such as sector specific evaluation templates, and aggregate results in a consistent way. Evaluation must fill this gap if it is to fulfill its obligation to the global community. For this and other reasons it is recommended that an independent international development evaluators association or guild be established. This group would promote professional

evaluation standards as well as the use of sector specific and cross-sector integration frameworks for inter-project comparison and coordination. This group would be initiated and governed by qualified independent evaluators. These and other opportunities for improvement are discussed further in the next section.

Real Opportunity

There is much that can be done to improve monitoring and evaluation and its impact on strategic planning and other managerial functions. As a result, there is hope that this unfortunate current situation can be turned around. It has been suggested that we need to admit where we have failed, realize the challenges, and be realistic in our strategies and plans to overcome them, i.e., take into greater consideration the specific needs and capabilities of aid recipient countries (Goodman, 2006). The amount of information about poor performance of international aid is more prevalent lately, and this is an indication that evaluation information does reach the public, even when it is not good news. This will likely lead to increased scrutiny and demand for accountability on the part of the public. It is already occurring to a greater extent in countries like the Netherlands, where the government allocates more than one percent of the GDP—or, per capita, the largest rate in the world—to spending on foreign aid. It is healthy for such information to be made public through the press, so that pressure will be placed on the development community to improve. Then perhaps agencies and others involved in aid program administration will be forced to take evaluation more seriously and better learn from experience how to improve performance.

The reason the Paris Declarations of mutual accountability, country ownership, and harmonization make sense from a strategic point of view is that if these demands can be accomplished, many of the challenges identified above will be able to be resolved. But this will

only happen if needed M&E mechanisms are present. It is well known that activities that are measured tend to get done. By involving ex-ante evaluation in the planning stages and by using evaluation as a conduit of actionable information between monitoring and planning, evaluation has a real opportunity to make a significant difference in international development and poverty reduction. As a result of evaluators taking on the roles of connecting planning and monitoring functions, i.e., evaluation becoming involved in earlier phases of resource allocation and program design lifecycle, both within and between traditional organizational bounds, international development efforts will be more likely to be modified and improved when they need to be. This will then enable substantial gains from evaluation, gains that would result from redeployment or improved allocation of resources to more productive investments or undertakings.

Example of World Bank Training and Visit Program

An example of how some of these changes have taken place is the case of the World Bank's Training and Visit (T&V) agricultural extension program, specifically the programs projects in Kenya (World Bank, 2000). Although the results of the program turned out to be dismal, this experience actually provides hope that the necessary determination finally exists to change the way evaluation gets done with an increase emphasis on impact or results-based management. Unfortunately, it wasn't until after several hundred million dollars were invested in the T&V program over a period of fifteen years that mounting dissatisfaction finally prompted an impact evaluation. The administrators of the improved impact evaluation were from a newly reorganized and renamed group of internal independent evaluators at the Bank. This new internal group within the World Bank eventually did do a serious and relatively unbiased

evaluation of the T&V program's projects in Kenya (World Bank, 2000).

Based on a comparative metaevaluation of this impact evaluation vs. other evaluations sponsored by the World Bank, there appears to be improvement. Perhaps the reorganization of the role for coordinating evaluation into this new internal group with authority to transparently publish bad news such as the T&V studies is actually encouraging. As a result of this impact evaluation, it was found that no benefit had resulted from the project and all the invested time and money was wasted. It is now recognized that much wasted time and resources could have been saved if impact evaluation was done earlier. If corrections could have been made early on in the program lifecycle, hundreds of millions of dollars could have been saved. Perhaps the earning potential of 4.4 million farmers and food security of the whole nation of Kenya could have been improved. The willingness of the World Bank to admit such failure and be open about the need to resolve major problems provides hope and signifies a real opportunity for evaluators in the international development community. The community needs to learn from this and many other similar experiences. First of all, there was what might appear to be a logical plan or framework prior to embarking on the program, but due to unanticipated problems (such as those mentioned in the "Challenge" section of this article), the program was not implemented according to this plan. There were aspects of the plan that did not work out in practice. Unfortunately, as a result of evaluation not being involved at an earlier stage in planning and monitoring of beginning and interim process and outcome indicators, it is not known whether this failure was due to program design, feasibility, or management effectiveness, but in either case better M&E at earlier stages of the program lifecycle could have provided the guidance necessary to prevent this major fiasco.

Learning from the Past

By enabling improved measurement and recognition of performance, particularly in the case of extraordinary successes and failures, and by encouraging the use of this information as early in the lifecycle of development efforts as possible, evaluation can help programs learn from experience and improve as a result. This ability to facilitate learning from past experience, whether from one's own experience or that of others, can be the most efficient path to significant progress as long as recognized opportunities for improvement are put into practice. There are signs of greater openness to learning from the past among evaluators and their constituents, but it still appears to be too arduous to modify current practice and implement lessons learned. Whether developing entirely new solutions or adopting the successes of others, somehow lessons of the past need to be more readily incorporated into future action. This is known as the innovation process. On a larger scale it is known as the national innovation system. It is the ability to perform well at this innovation process or the ability to learn better than your competitors that is known to be the main source of sustainable comparative advantage in an increasingly competitive and ever-changing world. This innovation process has not been well performed within the international development community to date.

Looking again at the high-profile case example of the World Bank T&V Program in Kenya, a case can easily be made that although cancellation of a nonperforming project is better than doing nothing, it would have been much better if the program could have been improved as it was being developed, pilot-tested, and rolled-out. Involvement of decent ex-ante and concurrent formative evaluation in these earlier processes could provide real improvement and progress. The potential to better achieve accountability and improved practice in the field is real.

Some of the following recommendations were part of the original goals of the program design, some were lessons learned as a result of the evaluation, and others were only suggested as part of a metaevaluation done by this author. Unfortunately, none of them were achieved. Because of the lack of an effective monitoring system with interim indicators, program participants and administrators were not held accountable or provided with midterm guidance on areas that needed attention. Thus, corrective actions were not taken, and the goals were not achieved. By monitoring midterm progress based on interim indicators of performance in these areas and keeping track of exemplary solutions, many of these issues could probably have been solved, and the outcome and impact of the program could have been entirely different. Success factors included these:

- Retargeting resources to poorer areas or areas with the most potential for growth (a monitoring system should be implemented that identifies gaps between potential and actual performance in the field so that efforts can be targeted to meet real potential for value creation)
- Feedback mechanisms that enable training messages to be better customized to fit unique economic situation, geography, and technological needs, rather than "one package fit all"
- Organizational culture and structure should be developed that is less top-heavy, more responsive to farmer capabilities and needs from the bottom up.
- More up-front planning of resource allocation based on the beneficiary needs and capabilities, using the information gained from the monitoring system mentioned in the first point above as a basis for guiding project planning and budgeting of time and other resources (e.g., Should effort be

placed on penetrating certain areas and/or expansion of effort into new territories or opportunities?)

- Adaptation of service intensity based on rate of innovation and potential yield gains (e.g., Should focus be on achieving same field gains or leaner coverage of greater territory?)
- Encourage involvement of private sector, NGOs, and other partners.
- Coordinate efforts of donor, government, sector, and other institutions in the community.
- Empower beneficiary farmers by giving them a voice and creating functional new feedback links for problem/opportunity recognition and resolution
- Decentralize delivery and managerial control systems through local farmer cooperatives.

There is still much work to be done to determine how the above recommendations can be successfully implemented. Recommending action plans is one thing. Actually putting the plans into practice is another. More research should be done into what has been done to rectify the agricultural extension programs in Kenya since the old T&V program was canceled. In the past, without early involvement of evaluation and a monitoring system to check on progress, even recommended improvements recognized as necessary have often not been addressed. Potential changes based on lessons learned must be pilot-tested, improved, and rolled out elsewhere where appropriate. Every seasoned evaluator knows how disappointing it can be to see seemingly good ideas for improvement end in the idea stage.

There should be a concerted effort on the part of program headquarters to support field personnel in doing more to try new solutions and rewarding them when they succeed. Of course, these trials should take place in such a way that sufficient evidence of their impact is

provided; this should be a major role of extension field workers—, tracking environmental, treatment, and yield changes with farmers over time. A sufficient variety of different approaches need to be tried in the field on small scales. When small-scale trials appear to have positive effects, scale should gradually be increased, with interim indicators providing positive and negative feedback loops into the decision-making process that determines further penetration and/or spread of various treatments. An extension service capable of such continuous improvement will be most capable of responding to environmental changes. Such a learning organization is only possible with the effective M&E systems.

The most valuable form of learning is when such lessons learned are generalizable and applicable (or exportable) across other contexts, including different types of beneficiaries, project configurations, cultural settings, and times. With this in mind, it is important to keep track of these differences between trials, evaluating results of unique combinations, recognizing highly effective combinations, and communicating the results. This is what innovation is about—continuous improvement that considers a sufficiently diverse array of potential approaches. The transferability of an idea to other settings enhances its significance or potential impact, thus the potential for this should be evaluated whenever possible. This is the basis of one of the primary recommendations given in a 2007 presentation at the American Evaluation Association conference by this author and others in the International Development Interest Group at The Evaluation Center at Western Michigan University on the modification of the common evaluation criteria used in international development. It was recommended that the OECD DAC (the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Development Assistance Committee) criteria be modified to include exportability and/or generalizability for these reasons.

The community of international development evaluators needs to play a stronger role in helping development agencies, such as the World Bank, build on their improved accountability initiatives by doing its part in assisting in the learning and improvement process. This means evaluators need to insist on being present at the table in earlier stages, e.g., planning and design. Evaluators need to have a voice in seeing that past lessons resulting from past evaluations are appropriately applied in the early design stages of future projects. In order to facilitate this type of intelligent ex-ante evaluation and planning, evaluators need to ensure that there is a concerted effort placed on the systematic metaevaluation and meta-analysis of past evaluations and potential uses of results. Evaluators need to set in place an unbiased structure for facilitating movement toward trying a variety of promising treatments and propagating lessons learned so they materialize into improvement of development efforts and real progress.

Again, this suggests the importance of an independent guild or association of professional international development evaluators, one that is organized based on the principle of being independent of any nation, method, organization and/or culture. It should focus on the mission of facilitating flexible adaptation of the most appropriate evaluation methods and frameworks for each situation while still enabling harmonized metaevaluated and meta-analyzed results to be efficiently and effectively synthesized and reapplied earlier in the design process. This is possible given metamodels, tools, and methods that are now emerging. The author of this article has invented one such approach to making this possible, the technical details of which has been made public, yet are too voluminous to be covered in this article.

Those interested learning more about these developments should e-mail the author of this article at ronald.s.visscher@wmich.edu. Suffice it to say that, regardless of the specific approaches taken to accomplish the advanced

aims of this professional association, if these aims are accomplished and the evaluation profession is repositioned to play a more significant role in earlier stages of international development efforts, the results of our collective evaluation efforts will be dramatically improved.

Context-sensitive professional standards and benchmarks will be established that provide better guidance for how to go about evaluation that achieves sufficiently reliable and valid results, given cost constraints and other aspects of each given context. And the results will be more readily usable at the point where they can make the highest impact. By encouraging more appropriate and effective application of evaluation models, tools, and methods for particular contexts, the independent international development evaluators association will serve to strengthen the value of doing evaluation as well as the credibility of the collective voice of evaluators involved in international development. This will help marshal the resources and influence necessary to enable evaluators to engage in the sort of follow-up, lesson learning, and dissemination described above that is necessary for real progress in the eradication of poverty. In this way, increased continuity and coordination of global development effort can be achieved. There will be even more hope for inspiring whole-hearted participation of all the necessary constituents or stakeholders in the achievement of our common cause.

This advanced type of professional evaluators' guild or association would serve to promote more effective top-down, bottom-up, and horizontal cooperation among clusters of participants throughout international development value chains. For example, collaboration would be enhanced in the comparison of the cost-effectiveness of different means for specific ends. Regardless of sector or region of the world, by tracking the commonalities and differences between the settings and treatment effects of different

policies, programs, and projects in a harmonious way, complexity can be more readily considered and results more effectively applied in different situations. Also, as a result of these advancements in the evaluation profession, coordination of communitywide implementation, through sectorwide and other collaborative multipartner approaches, will be dramatically improved. By working more efficiently and effectively together, evaluators will better facilitate the type of coordinated effort among evaluators and constituents that will be necessary to better organize and harmonize international development efforts. In this way evaluators, both individually and collectively as a profession, can do their part in enabling real progress in international development. Evaluation will then be able to assert its role in helping facilitate the cooperation in planning new projects and programs that is necessary to ensure that lessons are actually learned and put into practice. Best practices in networkwide innovation will become commonplace.

So in summary, the following conditions have created a historic opportunity for aid evaluation to achieve success:

- Realization that the fate of freedom and democracy are dependent on success
- Improvements in results-based monitoring and recognition of success and failure
- Improved organizational learning and coordination processes based on embedded evaluation
- Better methods for adaptation of development efforts to unmet needs and potential
- New political and public determination for seeking change and real progress
- Increased call for involvement of evaluation at earlier stages of development efforts

- Explicit declaration of what is needed to achieve real improvement and progress

Given the above discussion of the challenges, it does make sense that local ownership; mutual accountability; and harmonization of evaluation, learning, and implementation processes are the opportunities for improvement. It boils down to the issue of using evaluation to nurture social capital. Overcoming the challenges and achieving the opportunities with real solutions that create sustainable development and eradicate poverty depends on having an adequately developed social platform for the healthy democratic processes necessary to ensure liberty and justice, honest dialogue, discourse, and inclusiveness (House & Howe, 1999). No matter how great the intentions and integrity of those involved in development, given the complexity, volatility, uncertainty and ambiguity of innovation and economic development systems, the capacity for informed and effective action is only as great as the capacity for evaluative communication. No matter how great the determination for progress—and in this case, no matter how great the potential for pro-poor growth—efforts will be limited by the extended community's networkwide ability to satisfy the requirements for recognizing, measuring, understanding, evaluating, and communicating innovative opportunities for improvement and creation of value.

Real Solutions

So how do we improve coordination across the international development assistance community, including taxpayers, and aid recipients? How do we bring donor groups, government agencies, local institutions, and aid recipients together? How do we enable better communication of opportunities for real development, value creation, and progress? How do we improve networkwide coordination

of implementation and actualization of these opportunities for creating real value?

Evaluation as the Conscience and Inspiration of Development

Evaluative information can be an important source for building vision and consensus and for inspiring commitment and action for a cause. For the sake of the needy and the long-term viability of international aid, new solutions must be found to improve availability and use of evaluative information. Better M&E tools are necessary for embedding evaluation capacity throughout value chains. Evaluation must hold parties involved in international development aid accountable for their behavior. Did everyone involved in the development project know what each participant was willing and able to do? Did they follow through on doing their parts? And was there timely interim feedback on how things were going, as well as ex-post evaluation to determine success and failure? Actionable evaluative information is the needed solution. Now more than ever, effective evaluation is needed to help participants better cooperate in making efforts successful.

In order for evaluation to be able to take on its role as the “conscience” of socioeconomic development, professional international development evaluators must

- assume independence
- “speak truth to power”
- marshal support for providing and using high quality evaluation throughout program lifecycles
- promote cost-effective use of evaluation resources, encouraging best design for context
 - use controls when the estimated cost-benefit appears to justify it
 - consider diversity, ethicality, complexity, reliability, validity, and generalizability

- create an independent international development evaluation association (IIDEA)
- harmonize structures to enhance mutual transparency and accountability so multi-organizational, sectoral, and national partnerships can coordinate collective efforts
 - share knowledge using common yet flexible information architectures
- promote cooperation, learning, and innovation among interdependent participants
 - aligning logic model and cost-effectiveness frameworks to provide guidance
 - inspire upfront agreement on resource allocations and evaluation criteria, enhancing cooperation by solving problems resulting from poor communication
- require local recipient responsibility for performance and ownership of results
 - create systems that motivate desirable behavior and account for actual contributions
 - provide incentives or rewards for satisfying needs and meeting development goals
- use new tools that are able to facilitate these and other needed improvements
 - cost effectively collect actionable data and enable shared creation and enhancement of ex-ante standard setting and impact assessments
 - target features and costs of development assistance to beneficiary potential for adding economic value and creating multiplier effects.

In these ways, strategic planning, evaluation, and monitoring will be able to deliver on their

potential for setting and meeting increasingly heightened performance demands in eradicating poverty.

In general, there are two primary messages that all evaluators should work to communicate to all constituents of evaluation. The first message is that evaluation (in conjunction with the strategic planning and operational monitoring that makes effective evaluation possible) is not about placing individual blame, but about collective accountability, learning, coordination, and innovation. Evaluation is the means through which humanity can harmonize its efforts to achieve progress. The unobstructed flow of both good and bad news is essential in order to achieve increasingly positive results.

The second most critical message we as evaluators need to communicate is that evaluation must be involved earlier in policy, program, and project lifecycles, participating in the ex-ante proposal and design phases where our contributions have maximum impact. Sure we need ex-post summative evaluators that are willing to speak truth to power with the advantage of hindsight; but even more importantly, we need a new breed of ex-ante evaluators that are adept at bringing the models, tools, and methods of evaluation to the more strategic decision-making processes located in earlier stages. Only by being involved in early stages, taking baseline readings and producing frameworks for eventual process and impact evaluation and guidance, will pragmatic evaluators produce the knowledge and actionable information needed for real progress, the wisdom that can be brought to bear on decision-making processes across the value chains of international development efforts. Only then will individual evaluators and the collective profession of evaluators reach their potential for making a positive impact on solving our global predicaments. Evaluation has a major role to play in solving global problems, and in order to do so, individual evaluators need to be more proactive in seeing that they are

positioned to help guide planning and design at a more strategic level.

For this reason, it is welcome news that evaluation leadership, such as the new president of the American Evaluation Association, William Trochim, are encouraging greater emphasis on the role of evaluation in policy making.

Progress results from individual actions, but some individuals have more impact than others. Leaders by their very nature have an inordinate amount of influence on whether society progresses or not. At least in a democracy, regular folks have the freedom and responsibility to determine who these leaders are and to influence their actions. Whether leaders are of associations, governments, academic institutions, or industrial corporations, these individuals are setting the policies that support the programs that design the projects that determine the quality of everyday life. Leaders inspire informed action from the bottom up and make or break progress.

Everyone in a free and democratic society needs to know that it is human capacity for evaluation, by and through both the public at large and upper-level decision makers, that enables the proper functioning of “the conscience of freedom and democracy” (Visscher, 2007). By incorporating democratic values and processes, such as inclusion, discourse, and deliberation in evaluation, the evaluation profession nurtures ethical debate in society (House & Howe, 1999). By nurturing public debate from the top down, from the bottom up, and across traditionally divided boundaries, evaluation will dramatically strengthen the social capital of a society.

By taking our individual and collective responsibilities seriously, evaluators working in all socioeconomic sectors and localities can help the international development aid community as well as society in general to nurture a healthy attitude toward international development, one that is idealistic in terms of intentions, professional in terms of recognizing and

insisting on cost-effective results, and realistic in terms of budgeting and expectations. By positioning evaluation between planning or budgeting functions on the one hand and accounting or controller functions on the other, evaluation will be better connected with both of these and better able to play its role as the conduit of learning and the conscience of action. If evaluation can play a greater role in connecting together the planning and controlling aspects of human enterprise, the evaluation profession will not only maximize its positive impact on society but also find it easier to justify the cost of good evaluation. As a by-product of improving the positioning of evaluation, the higher level of use of evaluation results that will ensue will also greatly enhance and promote the impact of evaluation theory and practice.

As the conduit of information on the merit, worth, and significance of individual and collective humanitarian efforts, evaluation can promote understanding of the most effective roles each individual constituent can play in particular development efforts and thus also play an instrumental role in motivating cooperation and coordination of collaborative efforts. Individual donors and taxpayers in developed countries want to know they are supporting high-impact efforts. All participants involved in complex multinational development value chains must have the evaluative information they need to prioritize and motivate their individual actions that contribute to coordinated collective efforts.

Across extended networks, the evaluation function will better satisfy its responsibility for maintaining the complex feedback loop that keeps cyclical or iterative learning and improvement processes flowing for optimum performance. Starting at the proposal stage, representatives of each party expected to participate in a value chain, including intended beneficiaries, need to be transparently aware of relevant successes and failures of the past, as well as today's position in terms of unmet needs

that can be readily translated into goals and objectives for tomorrow. They need to have convenient access to the information needed to consider, negotiate, and consent to expected costs and intended benefits and to vet agreement on the equitable distribution of anticipatable positive and negative tradeoffs. In this way, ethical and wise collective decisions can be made on where to allocate resources going forward to motivate and produce optimum sustainable results. Ongoing involvement of each type of participant will enable improved prediction, monitoring, and evaluation of actual short-term outputs, interim outcomes, and longer-term impacts both ex-ante and as they transpire. The interim indicators of results that emerge from such actionable monitoring and evaluation systems will concurrently be reused in planning functions for concurrent informed assessment of performance and/or determination of necessary corrective action.

Such concurrent evaluation in support of continuous innovation is necessary to make optimum future plans or portfolio allocation decisions that promote real progress. As a management systems consultant for the last two decades with experience in many sectors of society, I can testify that one of the biggest problems with the systems we rely on today is that they do not facilitate the establishment of these complex collective learning loops that often seem to come so naturally in their more simple form in individual humans. Fixing the ability of organizations to really learn at the organizational level is the biggest opportunity available to the field of evaluation. In all sectors or disciplines of society—from government to education to health to social services to agriculture to industry—evaluation needs to help each important link or constituent in their respective and integrated value chains to participate in the evaluation process as they do their best to prioritize their contributions that lead to coordinated action. Only then will development aid result in collective progress

across society. And only by recognizing and adequately nurturing this multidisciplinary role of evaluation will the transdiscipline of evaluation (Coryn & Hattie, 2006) meet its potential.

Conclusions

This article is pertinent because it helps international aid evaluators realize why they now have a historic opportunity to successfully assume a stronger role in achieving transformational progress. It discusses a case example that should stimulate the reader's thoughts and understanding of the current state of evaluation in the international development assistance community. It explains justification for why evaluators must push to position evaluation earlier in the lifecycles of development efforts, using new tools and methods—such as ex-ante impact assessment—to enable evaluators to meet the increased demands of this more strategic role for evaluation; and outlines the new solutions that will be used to achieve pro-poor growth, an achievement that is not only vital in a humanitarian sense but also, as explained, essential to securing the future of a more humanitarian form of freedom and democracy.

This article shows how professional evaluation can help parties involved in international development value chains to better recognize opportunities for success and avoid catastrophic failure, and to better understand the challenges preventing eradication of poverty and what it takes to overcome them. It also provides insight into the coordinating mechanisms that will be needed to promote the harmonized cooperation that will eventually become the solution. Evaluation needs to show how clusters of contributions of individual participants can be appropriately combined to be able to satisfy the significant demands of development and that it is an undertaking worthy of our collective cooperation. Only then will all the necessary participants be able to be

motivated and coordinated to participate in a solution that is sufficiently powerful to overcome the explained challenges.

Success in international development will depend on maintaining ideals and hopes throughout adversity while informing realistic perspectives on what it will take to achieve progress. This will generate the collective understanding and motivate the collective action that is necessary to succeed in such adverse conditions. Hope can be defined as the difference between conservative expectation and more positive intentions. Hope can also be seen as what is necessary to provide the inspiration needed to motivate the extraordinary effort needed to achieve extraordinary results. By taking on a strategic role earlier in the lifecycle of international development efforts, evaluators can motivate participation and effective action, reinforcing positive intentions and unleashing the unbounded potential necessary to achieve global prosperity and poverty eradication. It is up to us evaluators to inform the vision for the future of those involved in development and maintain hope for progress.

The main focus of this article was to clearly delineate the complex challenges and opportunities present in international development aid and how potential new monitoring and evaluation solutions will need to effectively overcome these challenges. Specific attention was paid to how monitoring and evaluation can be enhanced in strategic ways to attain the mutual accountability and harmonization that the Paris Declarations now demands from the international development community. The good news is that much has been done to augment and overcome limitations of past tools and methods. This means that appropriate new solutions can be anticipated that will better meet heightened demands for both mutual accountability and coordination while also enabling customized monitoring and evaluation solutions that practically fit the unique capabilities and requirements of each

unique context. We explored how these new advancements might make it feasible and practical for evaluation professionals to succeed in their more strategic role, enabling the development community to satisfy the Paris Declarations and meet Millennium Development Goals.

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