A Call to Action

Complexity Matters:
**Aligning the Monitoring and Evaluation
of Social and Behavior Change
with the Realities of Implementation**

The aim of this Call to Action is to:

➤ **Advocate** for the support of M&E of SBC interventions that capture the unpredictability of the change process and reflect the realities of project implementation.

➤ **Show** that proven M&E methods that are appropriately adaptive in response to emergent needs and opportunities can help monitor complexity.

➤ **Argue** that M&E methods that do not address the complexity of both behavior and of program implementation can distort our understanding of SBC

➤ **Support** the claim that data gathered through community feedback and iteration not only can accelerate individual behavior change, but can propel social change.

➤ **Champion** the use of participatory, narrative, mixed methods and learning-based approaches that align with what we know about the context and complexity of SBC program implementation.

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This Call to Action was drafted following the Fall 2015 CORE Group workshop entitled "Behavior Change in the Age of Complexity" and subsequently presented at the International SBCC Summit 2016 and the Spring 2016 CORE Group Meeting. Feedback from audiences at these events has been incorporated into this version of the Call.

Background

Complexity matters. Public health professionals operate in an ever-changing landscape of epidemiological, demographic, sociocultural, economic, policy and environmental variables. This includes working with multiple stakeholders, each with their own interests and concerns. A small change in any one of these factors can lead to large changes in the others. Likewise, the interventions we implement are influenced by funding, implementation capacity, logistics, staffing, tools and technique, etc. And, of course, the process of change itself has long been understood as dynamic and context-dependent. The complexity of the community health and development programming landscape thus poses significant theoretical and methodological challenges for the evaluation of social and behavior change (SBC).

As practitioners, we are often faced with accountability demands—using theories of change to identify the causal patterns between program components and outcomes, while at the same time being asked to focus on program improvement objectives that provide insight on factors leading to the success or failure of a program and the relationships among them. We are asked to undertake monitoring and evaluation (M&E) in the face of complexity. This Call to Action maintains that it is indeed possible to monitor and evaluate

SBC, but that practical, adaptable, and theoretically sound solutions for M&E for SBC in the field are needed.

The purpose of this Call to Action is to advocate for the use of context-sensitive and complexity-aware monitoring and evaluation approaches and spur the commitment of both donors and implementers to make that happen. While most M&E approaches measure progress towards predetermined outcomes, planned implementation strategies, and forecasted pathways of change, we recognize that complexity requires a different approach. We need adaptable M&E approaches that can cope with the process of change and the reality of implementation. We also need methods that lend themselves to learning (improving) and not just evaluating (proving). The field has an enormous opportunity to bring understanding of how to optimize effective SBC interventions over time, but only if funding and support for alternative approaches that are more appropriate for the monitoring and evaluation of SBC are realized.

The field of SBC is premised on some commonly held beliefs:

Implementers of SBC activities can recognize several forms of complexity but for the purposes of this Call to Action, we might reduce these to three broad dimensions. The first is the *Landscape (*sometimes thought of as the *Contextual)* dimension. All programs are shaped by many factors both in the environment in which it is implemented and as part of implementation process itself. This dimension of complexity is often what comes to mind when we think of the interpersonal, socio-economic and structural "context" of an intervention. The second dimension, *Temporal Complexity* highlights how change unfolds over time, or rather, how circumstances change over time and how stakeholders react to those changes. And finally, *Interpretive Complexity* refers to the fact that different audiences and stakeholders will perceive and

interpret factors differently. This third dimension of complexity is rarely considered in complexity and system sciences but the fact that each stakeholder understands and articulates programs and behaviors differently is a fundamental challenge for both M&E and the ability to apply lessons learned.

Recognition of the natural complexity of SBC intervention has led us to some foundational truths:

- The change process is context-dependent and, thus, is highly variable and usually impossible to predict with any precision. But while the complexity of any given context may not be controllable, it can be anticipated and leveraged to promote change.

- Countless factors from knowledge to motivation, current attitudes, local material conditions, social support, social norms, etc. can influence social and behavior change.

- As change is an emergent, ongoing and complex process, it cannot be captured using pre-set process or outcome indicators or within a short timeframe. Importantly, over-reliance on quantification and correlation not only fails to capture the complexity of SBC processes, but actually distorts them.

- Even though it can be difficult, M&E of SBC is both possible and critical for making decisions about program design, shaping approaches to advocacy, improving program implementation and management, and informing future implementation. The context-sensitivity and complex nature of SBC should not stand in the way of attaining these objectives.

Evaluation practices designed to provide a comparison of outcomes use quantitative methods to answer the question "everything else being equal, did activity X produce statistically better outcomes than activity Y?" But while outcome evaluation may usefully generate hypotheses, it generally reveals little about the process of change. In the real-world of implementation, controlling for context is not possible. Retrospectively knowing "what worked" in a particular program (again, the objective of outcome evaluation) does not reliably answer the question of "what works" in general and what will work in future programs.

We therefore believe that aligning our M&E approaches to the local circumstances of implementation reminds us of two additional truths:

- Engaging audiences and other stakeholders in the learning and evidence gathering process has been shown to achieve sustainable change across a range of contexts.

- An interdisciplinary approach based on ongoing engagement and adaptive management that draws on research and theory from complexity, systems and implementation sciences is vital to the relevance and sustainability of SBC initiatives.

Challenges we face in monitoring and evaluating SBC interventions

Attribution vs. Contribution

While measuring SBC outputs seems simple enough – for instance recording the number of radio spots aired, SMS messages opened, participants in meetings, people reached, services accessed – attributing change to process measures or activity outputs is highly problematic. Such measures do not

tell us about the amount or quality of attention paid, level of interest, perceived relevance, how information was received or whether the behavior that changed will be sustained. They cannot tell us whether an activity achieved its effects through interaction with other program activities or other factors unrelated to the intervention nor gauge the likelihood that a particular behavior will take hold or evolve.

Because clear *attribution* is impossible in most cases, we believe that framing evaluation in terms of *contribution* is more likely to reflect a realistic appreciation of context and complexity. Claims of contribution are, of course, more provisional than those of attribution, but that is the point; complexity requires a critical stance towards both quantitative and qualitative data. Our understanding of what produced a change in behavior is always open to further evidence and arguments that strengthen or weaken our claims.

Limitations of RCTs for understanding how interventions achieve their effects

Methodological choices have often led us to make claims of attribution rather than contribution. For some time now, there has been interest among donors in using randomized controlled trials (RCT) to measure program impact and applying standardized indicators to make the evaluation of behavior change more comparable across projects and programs. But as suggested earlier, while RCTs and standardized indicators provide a basis on which to determine and compare outcomes, they are not designed to enable decision makers or practitioners to understand the role that shifting norms, political change, economic growth, and implementation practices played in achieving (or failing to achieve) those outcomes. RCTs provide a very specific kind of answer, but often not to the questions in which SBC professionals are most interested. Conversely, by

systematically including community members and sharing information, data, and findings back with them as part of the M&E of intervention activities, we can move closer to a richer, real-time understanding of change and use this understanding to design responsive, more sustainable programs.

Drawbacks to designs

There are many challenges in assessing the process, the impacts, and outcomes of community health and development programming, given the complexity of the SBC process, difficulties with attribution and the unrealistic demands, targets, and timeframes within which we work. Outcome evaluations are considered by many as the most scientific way, and sometimes the only way to distinguish effective programs. However, they have a few drawbacks including that they are expensive and time consuming, often impossible to establish valid and reliable control groups for, and are often affected by intervening variables, and regression to the mean. Likewise, context-sensitive and complexity-aware approaches come with disadvantages including, lack of appreciation, lower funding and support, low levels of skills and knowledge to effectively apply a participatory, mixed methods approach, timeframe issues, and evaluator bias. It follows that many M&E endeavors fail to apply the most effective and appropriate approach, leading to dissatisfaction with the results. We argue that different M&E objectives and varied levels of complexity should suggest when and how approaches should be applied.

It is critical that SBC evaluation realistically acknowledge limitations inherent in the project life cycle. Not only is the SBC process gradual, but, ideally, SBC interventions should anticipate evolution in response to future circumstances. Social norm shifting, for example, should result in cross-generational effects that transcend any project's life cycle. As significant outcomes of SBC interventions lay in the future, the ideal way to determine a contribution to change is to assess

change over time using longitudinal studies or post-project sustainability studies. But as this is frequently impractical, practitioners should resist pressure to produce short-term results within rigid and unrealistic timeframes.

A Call to Action: Context-sensitive approaches to real-world monitoring and evaluation of SBC

There are a broad range of participatory, ethnographic, systems, narrative, mixed methods and learning-based approaches that are flexible and responsive. Creative processes such as mapping, time analysis, digital storytelling and photovoice are increasingly used for monitoring and evaluation of SBC programming. These types of approaches are suitable for exploring complex situations and problems, and can help provide detail about local contexts.

USAID's recent (2013) Discussion Note on complexity-aware monitoring specifically recommends five promising approaches, all of which can be used to assess SBC interventions if we recognize that we are seeking contribution rather than attribution as our aim.

1. **Sentinel Indicators** – A type of proxy indicator used to indicate if a change is occurring in a complex system.
2. **Stakeholder Feedback** – A one-time measurement or ongoing system that can provide a diversity of perspectives about desired results and pathways to achieve results.
3. **Process Monitoring of Impacts** – A method used to identify likely connections between inputs, outputs, results and impacts and to check during implementation whether these links remain valid and actually take place.

4. **Most Significant Change** – A method that collects and analyzes stories of key stakeholders that describe the most important project outcomes.
5. **Outcome Harvesting** – A method that helps to identify, verify, and describe contribution in contexts where relations of cause and effect are not fully understood.

Of course, the list of complexity-aware approaches above is not exhaustive but serves to remind us that the complexity of SBC is increasingly recognized by donors and other stakeholders as a fact of programmatic life.

In conclusion, the foundational truths on which SBC is premised have been routinely set aside in favor of control and correlation in the belief that this suggests "progress." We do not see this as progress. We owe it to the populations we serve to act on what we know about the importance of context to the nature of change. The potential to improve what we are already doing is enormous, and the costs of ignoring the inherent complexities of SBC implementation are too high. We call for others to join us in urging government agencies, donors, program managers, and implementers to recognize the importance of aligning the monitoring and evaluation of social and behavior change with the complex realities of implementation.

Recommendations for Advancing an Appreciation of Context and Complexity in SBC Programming

Implementing organizations can:

Create rapid assessment tools that implementers can use to gauge context and shifts in context.

Be nimble. Shifts in a project's context of implementation will occur and practitioners should be skilled in adaptive management techniques to detect those shifts and respond to them.

Emphasize in proposals the importance of tracking implementation of projects and acknowledge your organization's commitment to respond to shifting circumstances.

Be humble and expect the humility of others. Resist overblown claims of unequivocal attribution and success.

Donors can:

Recognize that many initiatives have emergent goals that arise as projects unfold and circumstances shift; these may be of significant value to stakeholders and beneficiary populations.

Take a critical, long-term view of the value of alternative methods for evaluating social and behavior change.

Accept reasonable requests for resources as they relate to strengthening complexity-aware technical capacity throughout projects.

Require projects to monitor the implementation process and adapt projects to accommodate shifts in context.

Resist promoting overblown claims of unequivocal attribution and success.

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