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The Learning Partner: dialogic approaches to monitoring and evaluation in international development

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This article describes an evaluation approach in international development that challenges the current emphasis on compliance and limited involvement of local stakeholders. Emerging from a five-year study across eight sites in across the globe, the Learning Partner approach begins with two ideas. First, evaluation is a process of learning and adaptation. Second, evaluation flourishes through partnerships. We begin by joining this model to developments in evaluations over the last 50 years, illustrating its connection to evaluation theory as well as its extension beyond current evaluation practice in international development. We share how this approach shapes the evaluation process through collaborative storytelling and describe both the approach and the practice. While not yet a decolonial evaluation approach, we advocate that it gestures towards decoloniality and opens the question: how can we begin to decolonize the evaluation process?

Keywords: evaluation; learning; decolonization of evaluation; knowledge management; storytelling

1. Introduction

Evaluation and monitoring in development has increased in recent years as funders demand greater accountability from programs and initiatives. Based on the principles of anti-corruption and outcome-based project work, the emphasis in evaluation and monitoring focuses on external, objective, and empirical studies that illuminate how well local programs and initiatives meet funding standards and (often) externally determined outcomes. This frame assumes evaluation to be politically neutral (Chilisa & Martens, 2021) and makes invisible local concerns and desires to have data for both program improvement and program vision. This common approach to evaluation contributes to the colonization of knowledge. In working to address both pressures for accountability and desires for program improvement and innovation, a new approach to monitoring and evaluation emerged. This approach responded to evaluation critiques in international development (Corsetti, 2022; Bestor, 2022) and amplified two ideas as central to the approach. First, we shifted from exclusive emphasis on compliance and accountability to recognizing evaluation's pedagogical role. Evaluation is

about learning and adaptation (Corsetti, 2022). Second, the approach moved from involving participants to building partnerships. Central to the approach is a commitment to include voices that have typically been excluded from evaluation (Chilisa & Mertens, 2021; Frehiwot, 2019). This approach embraces the understanding that 'local evaluation participants should be conceptualized as an intrinsic part of the evaluation process rather than as mere "data sources"' (Mbava, 2019, 14). What these two movements created is what we came to call the Learning Partner. As we continue to work to decolonize evaluation, the learning partner approach is a beginning, and maybe even a decolonial gesture (Mignolo, 2014) for evaluation in international development. While this paper explores how evaluators create high quality evaluations that are contextually sensitive and culturally responsive, our work also provides a beginning response to the question: how can we begin to decolonize the evaluation enterprise? Stein et. al (2020) & Andreotti (2021)'s mapping of coloniality/modernity and its relation to reform offer clues in this endeavor (Figure 1).

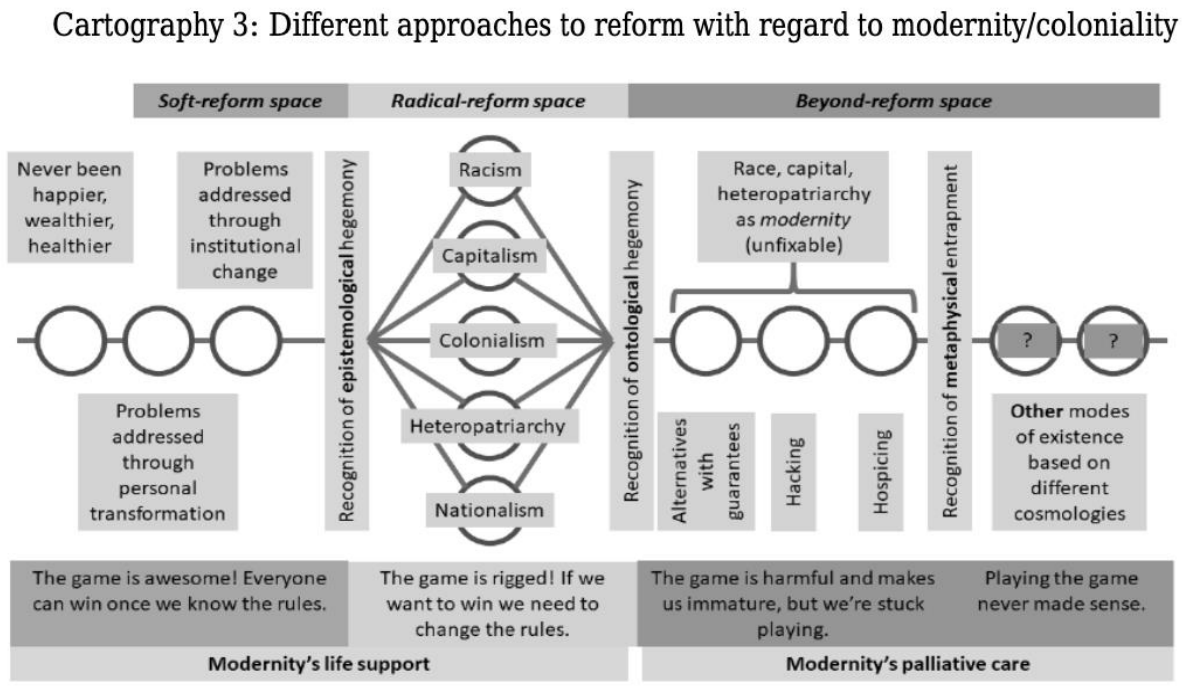

Figure 1: The spectrum of reform with regard to modernity/coloniality.
Source: Stein et. al, 2020, p5; Andreotti 2021, p. 91

Most approaches to evaluation and learning find themselves in the domain of 'soft reform', where the assumption is that institutional or personal changes can 'fix' systemic issues; however, more recent trajectories such as Culturally Responsive Indigenous Evaluation (CRIE) and the learning partnership model we explore in this paper find themselves in the domain of 'radical reform', where there is a crucial recognition of systemic epistemological hegemony of modernity/coloniality and more nuanced attempts to address it. Moving towards

decoloniality in this field (as well as others) asks us to view modernity/coloniality as ideals that cannot be reformed, and therefore require 'unhinging' (Jivraj et. al, 2020), 'hospicing', and 'hacking' (Andreotti, 2021). This marks the move towards the 'beyond reform' space in Figure 1, above, which necessitates a recognition of ontological hegemonies and the metaphysical entrapment that are part and parcel of the modern/colonial existence. Wisdom-centric cosmologies[1] from the Global South[2] offer fertile grounds for the exploration of what 'beyond reform' decolonial approaches to evaluation and learning can look like. For the purpose of this analysis, however, we couch our narrative in the 'radical reform' space and gesture towards decoloniality (Mignolo, 2014; Andreotti, 2021).

The Learning Partner Approach invites local practitioners to be fully involved in the ongoing monitoring and evaluation of their own work, joining their concerns to the funders', with the result of creating an empirically strong, contextually sensitive and culturally responsive evaluation practice. This paper describes the Learning Partner Approach used to guide the evaluation and monitoring process of an eight-country initiative to support youth entrepreneurship within higher education. The section outlining our approach includes narratives from the field at the partner site in Pakistan, exemplifying how the Learning Partnership emerged over the multi-year initiative.

We center the Learning Partner Approach in the question: How can evaluators create high quality evaluations that are contextually sensitive and culturally responsive? We join these questions to the learning partner model from education scholarship (Magolda, 2004) and describe both underlying assumptions, epistemological frames, and evaluation and monitoring practices that result. We are not alone in exploring questions such as these in evaluation (Stake, 2003; Cousins & Earl, 2005; Fetterman, 2008; Patton, 2012; Hood et al., 2015). However, we have witnessed how evaluation theory and practice have become invisible within international development and hope to illuminate, by surfacing and building from these theories, how evaluation can be responsive both to local practitioners and communities, as well as address funder concerns and questions. In describing this evaluation approach, we draw on the collective wisdom that has developed in this project and share multiple stories and perspectives from implementing an evaluation learning partnership. We begin by mapping this work within the history of evaluation theory and scholarship, documenting how this evaluation practice can be described as normative evaluation practice and how this practice joins to the learning partner framework. Finally, we share how we moved from the idea of the Learning Partner Approach to the reality of learning partnership by describing what the learning partner does and how to support rigorous external monitoring and evaluation as well as supporting ongoing program learning, innovation, and adaptation. Using a series of stories from the field, we describe the different activities that we found support both valid and reliable data collection and ongoing learning and program development within partner sites.

2. What is evaluation?

Within evaluation two central ideas predominate: judgment and use. Judgment has been proposed as the purpose of evaluation. One of the earliest definitions by Scriven described evaluation as judging the merit or worth of something (Worthen, et al. 1997). Others have offered definitions over the years (Weiss, 1998) that expand on this definition, but the central enterprise of evaluation is judgment of merit and worth. *Merit* refers to intrinsic value and *worth* to extrinsic value or goodness (Alkin & King, 2016). This brings up an important distinction in evaluation–something (program, practice, policy, etc.) can have worth and may not have merit for a particular location (Alkin & King, 2016). Evaluation practice considers if something has value overall and if this has value in this location. While often conflated, evaluation theory distinguishes between merit and worth, and invites more critical understanding of what is under evaluation prior to offering judgements. Evaluation begins as a reflective, systematic inquiry, that considers if something is valuable, and if so, to whom. This distinction opens the door for a wide range of approaches to evaluation that move beyond strictly empirical and also consider the meaning people assign to what is under evaluation. This focus of evaluation relies heavily on applied social science, while the second idea, use, may rely more on human science.

Evaluators distinguish evaluation from applied and social research through the overall orientation of the inquiry. While both inquiry approaches utilize a variety of social research methods, analytical processes, and bring an empirical perspective to answer questions, their orientations differ. Research remains oriented to conclusions, while evaluation is oriented to decisions (Patton, 1997). This raises important questions about the evaluation enterprise: if a study is completed and not used, is it evaluation? By now, the field of evaluation agrees that use, or utilization, is a primary purpose of evaluation. An evaluation is only complete when its work has been used. Utilization-focused evaluation (Patton, 1997) is an approach that advocates for a focus on use throughout the entire evaluation process.

It is here that evaluation and knowledge management intertwine. Theoretically, evaluation requires that the knowledge gained through the evaluation is shared and used, especially by those who would benefit the most from what is learned through the evaluation. We know stakeholder involvement remains important for use and that '...engagement, interaction, and communication between evaluation clients and evaluators is critical for meaningful use of evaluation' (Johnson et al., 2009, p. 389). Unfortunately, many evaluation studies continue to remain in the gray literature or the domain of the funder. Knowledge management with its emphasis on people, processes, and technology can be instrumental in advancing evaluation use through championing a knowledge-sharing culture (Salem, et al., 2023). More so, knowledge management can amplify use through sharing of evaluation knowledge widely as well as working to create more inclusive and equitable sharing of knowledge (Salem, et al.,

2023). This joint effort supports the dissemination of learning from evaluation (Feinstein, 2017) and a strong and robust evaluation process.

The United States Center for Disease Control (CDC) offers a useful description of the evaluation process. In their model, evaluation is described as a six-step process that aligns with both the overall purpose of evaluation and a focus on supporting use. The six steps include: engage stakeholders, describe the program, design a study, gather evidence, justify conclusions, and share lessons. Describing evaluation as a process provides a way to understand the learning partner model through how it influenced each of these steps. Before we move into sharing how the Learning Partner shapes the evaluation process, we make visible the theoretical influences within evaluation that support this practice and activity.

3. Evaluation developments

The Learning Partner Approach to monitoring and evaluation in international development can be described as both a critique of current monitoring and evaluation (M&E) practices and an extension of current, normative evaluation practice. In this section we deliberate on how evaluation scholarship and theory has evolved over the last 50 years in ways that make the learning partner approach a normative evaluation process even if it is considered by some as radical. It does not stray far from current promising practices advocated by leading evaluation scholars and researchers. The Learning Partnership Approach to evaluation receives guidance from responsive, utilization, participatory, and culturally responsive indigenous evaluation theory and practice. As a way to introduce the learning partnership model, we begin with sharing briefly about each of these and what they have contributed to evaluation that we have found important to guide our own evaluation practice.

Responsive evaluation: moving beyond the scope of work

Robert Stake (1975) advocated for responsive evaluation as a way to recognize both local wisdom and context as important factors in understanding merit and worth of a program. Evaluation practice within a responsive frame includes three criteria: an orientation to program activities rather than intents (what does the program do), responds to audience requirements for information, and invites those involved to share what they find valuable (Stake, 1975). Responsive evaluators want to understand not only what the program achieves but also how the context influences what the program does and how. It also draws heavily on the interests of the evaluation audience, inviting them to share what they want to know about the program (Fitzpatrick, 2012). Finally, it takes a stance on plurality of value (Amba & Stake, 2001), recognizing that there is rarely a single value that can be assigned to a program. Understanding the value of a program or practice is complex and depending on the viewer it may be valuable or not valuable.

Responsive evaluation recognized the value of listening to those involved in the program and its beneficiaries. Indeed, it is understood that a primary responsibility of evaluation 'is to be open, to come to understand what is going on there, to find more than your initial issues' (Amba & Stake, 2001, p. 9). This evaluation practice advocated for qualitative and quantitative data to create rich descriptions; '...a rich description of the program and the context in which it functioned were critical to achieving something more than a superficial understanding of the program' (Hood, 2001, p. 35). A good evaluation went beyond understanding if the program met its goals. It also situated the program within the local context and how it came to be understood by those both working in the program and those benefiting from the program. The evaluator had the responsibility of developing a deep understanding of the program and what criteria did people use to judge the value of the program (Fitzpatrick, 2012). Responsive evaluation directly supported ongoing theoretical work around evaluation use.

Evaluation use: effective evaluations engage intended users

Utilization-focused evaluation (UFE) illuminates the primary responsibility of evaluators–to facilitate use. As Patton (2004) describes, 'evaluation begins with the premise that evaluations should be judged by their utility and action use; therefore, evaluators should facilitate the evaluation process and design any evaluation with careful consideration of how everything that is done, from beginning to end, will affect use.' (p. 20). UFE agreed with responsive evaluation on the importance of local stakeholders and goes a step further. It turns over authority for most evaluation decisions to the primary intended users, as stakeholders who are most likely to use what the evaluation learns. In this model, evaluation 'is a process for helping primary intended users select the most appropriate content, model, methods, theory, and uses for their particular situation' (Patton, 2004, 277). UFE contributed three ideas that shape the learning partner model.

The first idea is focusing the evaluation on 'intended use by intended users' (Patton, 2004, 20). While a program will have a lot of stakeholders, there are individuals whose commitment to the evaluation is more than abstract and general–they have specific concerns and have already become interested in specific ways to use what is learned in the evaluation. The responsibility of the evaluator is to locate and invite intended users into the evaluation process. Given that there are intended users who have specific concerns, evaluation is highly personal and situational (King, 2004). A good, empirical evaluation does not guarantee use–involving intended users, 'respecting the people involved in and affected by the evaluation' (Patton, 2004, 21) makes evaluation use more likely. Evaluation use is determined by intended users' involvement in evaluation (King, 2004). Locating intended users and creating connections with them has now become a responsibility for an UFE evaluator. These ideas join to another: evaluation cannot be value-free. Patton (2004) argues that 'evaluation use is

too important to be left to evaluators' (21). Instead, the evaluator works with intended users and shapes the evaluation around their interests and intended uses. Increasing the use of evaluations requires that the authority of the evaluator is reduced and shared with intended users.

Participatory evaluation: joining use and power

Participatory evaluation extends the ideas within utilization-focused evaluation by collaborating with intended users in the entire evaluation process. Participatory evaluation shifts the power balance in evaluation from the evaluator to program participants. Cousins & Whitmore (1998) review two primary types of participatory evaluation (PE), namely practical and transformative, and describe both as having similar interests ('to enhance the use of evaluations') and forms ('evaluator works with members of the community of practice') (p. 9). Participatory evaluation recommends a collaborative arrangement between evaluator and practice-based decision makers, and advocates for '...involving stakeholders and community members in all aspects of the evaluation project, including the highly technical ones' (p. 14). The role of the evaluator within participatory designs shifts from authority over the design to facilitating and training participants to design and conduct an evaluation. The evaluator creates opportunities for participants to become involved in all evaluation activities, including technical ones (Cousins & Earl, 1994). This evaluation approach has raised questions about the evaluation enterprise as typically conducted.

Participatory evaluation has revealed two ideas that continue to influence evaluation scholarship. First, it recognized the different knowledge that both evaluators and practitioners bring to an evaluation enterprise. Evaluators bring technical knowledge and practitioners bring a 'thorough knowledge of context and content' (Cousins & Earl, 1995, p. 9). Joining these two ways of knowing create authentic insights which are not feasible with an outsider's perspective (Anderson & Freebody, 2014). Rather than understand intended user involvement as a weakness to evaluation, the practice and scholarship on participatory evaluation has also illustrated this collaboration to be a strength in understanding the program and its outcomes. This practice has also made visible that use requires a different form of evaluation with a focus on relevance and ownership (Cousins & Whitmore, 1998). Through direct involvement in crafting the focus and design, PE increases the utilization of what is learned. It strengthens the primary purpose of evaluation: use.

Culturally responsive (Indigenous) evaluation: responsibility to silenced voices

Culturally responsive evaluation (CRE) extends from the evaluation ideas introduced and recognizes the influence of culture and cultural ways of knowing on the evaluation process. Historically, marginalized and disenfranchised communities had evaluation done to them, rather than for or with them. CRE, and the related practice of culturally responsive indigenous evaluation (CRIE), both situate evaluation (or any inquiry process) within cultural

ways of understanding. As Hood, et al. (2015) argue that an evaluation is culturally responsive if it fully takes into account the culture of the program that is being evaluated' (Frierson, Hood, and Hughes, 2002, 63) as well as the needs and cultural parameters of those who are being served relative to the implementation of a program' (p. 282). It rejects the assertion that evaluation can be culture-free and neutral (Chilisa & Martens, 2021).

Historically, evaluation has been used both as an instrument of harm, dehumanization and colonization (Chilisa & Martens, 2021; Cloete, 2016; Hood, et al., 2015; Bowman & Dodge Francis, 2015). Evaluation practice was 'dominated by external evaluators who often were ignorant of the context and culture within which the evaluation was conducted (Cloete, 2016). This ignorance led external evaluators to focus on program evaluation outcomes as defined by sponsors, at the expense of the beneficiaries' views of what counted as valuable outcomes.' (Gaotlhobogwe et al., 2018, p. 49). CRE addresses these injustices through elevating lost ways of knowing and centering the evaluation in cultural values and norms (Gaotlhobogwe, et al., 2018). It makes visible sovereignty and community autonomy, recognizing the multiple jurisdictions for evaluations in historically marginalized and indigenous communities (Bowman & Dodge Francis, 2015). Evaluations achieve a rigorous and responsive method only when they attend to culture and context in the study's design (Chilisa & Martens, 2021; Hood, et al., 2015).

As a practice, CRE expands on the process of evaluation (CDC) to include stages of preparing for the evaluation, framing the right question, and adapting instrumentation. These additional stages assign evaluator responsibility to learn about the history, story, and social relationships of the location where the evaluation will take place, recognize the power of framing evaluation questions, and assess instruments for the bias they make invisible. Throughout the process the focus is on ensuring 'evaluation should be a tool of transformation, improvement, and empowerment to solve chronic issues in society' (Waapalaneexkweew & Dodge-Francis, 2018, p. 27). It renews a commitment to collaborations and partnerships as evaluation methodology, with the guiding framework of 'we work with you, not on you' (Bowman & Dodge Francis, 2015, p. 339). These practices join to an overall commitment that evaluators can address equity and bring balance to the evaluation process by attending to historically marginalized groups (Hood, et al., 2015). CRE and CRIE remind us of evaluator responsibility, the knowledge embedded in relationships, and the reciprocity required to complete a culturally reliable, valid, and rigorous evaluation.

4. Decolonizing evaluation: a moral imagination of knowledge and its use

Moving from CRIE to decolonizing evaluation is both a natural extension and a significant shift. CRIE can be viewed as a decolonizing evaluation approach in Andreotti's (2021) framework. It simultaneously provides an alternative with guarantees, a 'hacking' of the evaluation process, and a way to 'hospice' certain evaluation practices so they eventually stop being centered in evaluation of international development. Decolonizing evaluation also raises further insights because we 'breathe' coloniality (Cummings et al., 2021; Andreotti, 2021). Evaluation rests within epistemological, axiological, and ontological understandings, with historical ties to the colonial enterprise. Moving beyond this enterprise requires a new moral imagination and a recognition that decolonizing evaluation refers to a plurality or pluraverse of options and actions (de Sousa Santos, 2007, 2014; Cusicanqui, 2012; Mignolo, 2011). Coloniality emphasizes the grand narrative while decolonial recognizes multiple narratives that provide understanding (de Sousa Santos, 2007; Mignolo, 2014). Moving from a singularity to a plurality challenges current evaluation orthodoxy. Decolonizing evaluation begins by accepting and updating epistemological, axiological, and ontological underpinnings of the evaluation enterprise.

Decolonial evaluation has an epistemology. It begins by acknowledging that knowledge has been colonized and creates space for critique and transformation, arguing that the 'decolonization of knowledge is a group of processes and actions that intentionally dismantle the entrenched, unequal patterns of knowledge creation and use that emanate from our colonial past…' (Cummings et al., 2021, p. 65). The epistemological assumption is that 'knowledge is subjective, objective, relational and includes spirituality and vision' (Chilisa & Mertens, 2021, 246). It seeks out epistemic justice, including addressing both testimonial and hermeneutic injustice (Cummings et al., 2021) to address how power shapes knowledge. A decolonized evaluation will invite multiple ways of knowing to be surfaced and witnessed. This becomes amplified through a set of values to guide the evaluation enterprise.

Decolonial evaluation embraces an axiology that emphasizes 'relationality, respect, reverence, responsibility, reciprocity, reflexivity, and responsiveness' (Chilisa & Mertens, 2021, p. 246). The evaluator has an obligation to the local community beyond bringing expert knowledge of evaluation and its practice. The decolonial evaluator joins with stakeholders to witness understanding and engages in dialogue and conversation with the community as a primary evaluation practice. Decolonizing evaluation espouses a new branch of evaluation theory emphasizing context and needs (Chilisa & Mertens, 2021). Within this framework, 'the evaluator's role is to establish the extent to which a program or policy addresses the needs and priorities of the beneficiaries and is culturally and contextually relevant for the local populations' (Chilisa & Mertens, 2021, p. 244). Emphasis shifts from

the distant to the local, where merit and worth gain meaning in context and through the expressed needs of the community.

Decolonial evaluation shifts the ground of evaluation and reimagines the evaluation enterprise. It challenges the current construction of knowledge and expands how we can come to know and understand. It emphasizes a moral commitment to others as well as learning and it recognizes and values context and local needs equally with other concerns.

Learning Partnerships

The literature on evaluation, as well as antiracist and decolonial perspectives on development evaluation (Bowman & Dodge Francis, 2015; Chilisa & Martens, 2021; Cloete, 2016; Feinstein, 2017; Hood, et al., 2015), suggest a need to define and practice evaluation differently. Drawing from the above history and perspectives, we explored ideas and perspectives outside the field of evaluation to try to understand how to get at the essence of what a better evaluation could be: partnerships, based in shared ethics and values, toward learning that supports our shared work. As we began our shared work, we called it a Learning Partnership. This phrasing shifted the stance of the evaluators in everyone's eyes toward partnerships for learning. We found that this term was already in use by Marcia Baxter-Magolda (2012) to describe learning partnerships between students and educators in higher education. Baxter-Magolda's description of learning partnerships shares much in common with our practice. The three key assumptions, and corresponding practices, of learning partnerships, as she names them, are:

- Knowledge is understood to be complex and socially constructed, that is, based in constructivist ideas, and situated within understandings of history and power (Cummings et al., 2021). The evaluator does not hold knowledge through positivist, empirical study alone (in fact, this can get in the way). Evaluators create a context that validates and values participants' capacities to know.
- Individuals are central to knowledge construction. Rather than based in Western individualism, we interpret this to mean that learning and knowledge must be constructed within the framework of relationships with others and other ideas (Chilisa & Mertens, 2021). No presentation of findings is enough - everyone who might learn from the evaluation must be part of the process. Learning must be situated within participants' existing knowledge.
- Authority and expertise are shared in the mutual construction of knowledge among peers. This most strongly challenges standard approaches to evaluation and situates the evaluator as a participant in, and sometimes facilitator of, recognizing and sharing the practice experience and wisdom of those involved.

An evaluator working in a learning partnership utilizes these key assumptions and practices to co-construct a learning partnership throughout the evaluation process. Rather than reproducing problematic relationships of power and authority, an outside facilitator can be a valuable partner. Their value externally to participants in the learning partnership can be offering credibility, supporting communications with other partners, and proposing articulations of the work that surface its uniqueness while rendering it at least partially recognizable to existing funding/power structures. Their value internally to the other learning partners may be even greater. They can help partners see and name their work in a new light, model and embody the 3 key practices and 3 key assumptions, facilitate the formation and sustainability of a community of practice, and provide a critical creative companion (Titchen, 2018) offering new opportunities and modes of thinking and/or practice.

Learning partnerships center around a constellation of key questions, including:

- Who are we - individually and collectively? Whose stories or voices do we hear most/least or give most/least power to? Whose stories do we need to listen to better?
- How do we want to learn together and from each other? What processes can we establish to support this learning?
- What is our brilliance and expertise and how do we support its sustainability and magnify its power?
- What critical and creative questions do we hold about our practice that will encourage it to become better?

In developing the Learning Partner Approach, we layer this stance and questions into the existing evaluation process.

5. **Learning Partner Approach**

Evaluation is an inquiry process. One description of this process that we use to guide our evaluation work is the Framework for Program Evaluation, as described by the CDC (CDC, 2018). Their framework includes six steps: engage stakeholders, describe the program, design evaluation, gather data, justify conclusions and use and share lessons learned. We see these as six activities, given that oftentimes they occur simultaneously over the course of conducting an evaluation. In this section, we introduce the six steps followed by a story from our practice as learning partners that illustrates how we animated the activities. The stories are shared as ‘narratives from the field’ and constitute personal reflections from our partner site in Pakistan, which was led by the third author. We conclude each section with guidance to support learning partnerships as an evaluation process.

Stakeholder engagement

Stakeholder engagement is often the first activity within an evaluation process. This step is often treated perfunctorily and symbolically, rather than taken seriously, in practice. International requests for proposals often require an evaluation design and provide a program description, essentially skipping the stage of engaging stakeholders. However, engaging stakeholders is an essential aspect of evaluation. Stakeholder engagement has several purposes. First, stakeholder engagement is correlated with evaluation use (Patton, 1997), a primary concern and desired outcome of evaluation practice (Yarbrough et al., 2010). Second, engaging stakeholders also informs the overall design of the evaluation as challenges, issues, and interests of stakeholders becomes clearer. Finally, engaging stakeholders provides a confirmation check on program descriptions, allowing the evaluator to have a better understanding of the program, the next stage of an evaluation process.

Narrative from the field: out with the checklist

> *Before the first visit, the learning partner asked us to think about what success meant to us. It was an astounding shift from the usual M&E practices we had experienced before, where the evaluator would usually send a checklist of milestones and deliverables in advance and expect us to gather evidence that proved it had been completed. In this instance, there was no checklist for programmatic achievement; it all started with a question: 'what would success mean to you, if everything went right?'*
>
> *This was the first time an evaluator said to us: 'what do you want to measure'? Our team had the ability to share with an evaluator what we thought success ought to be, and the evaluator was keen on helping us understand if we were achieving this. This approach placed us at the center of the decision-making process. The Learning Partnership Approach to the evaluation of our work then inspired our model for community engagement and participatory program design with indigenous communities in Northern Pakistan. Putting the community into the center was seen as deeply humble and a relational way of approaching social impact work. It manifested as an almost self-effacing impetus that reaffirmed the core message: 'I am not here as an authority or evaluator, I am here as a supporter, a cheerleader, a coach, a friend' - the perfect combination for a hierarchy-of-power-busting engagement.*

Key takeaway

Truly restorative stakeholder engagement that (re-)centers the primary teams and the communities involved in a project can be an immense learning opportunity for the evaluator and the perfect way to nourish the deep relationality inspired by indigenous approaches to evaluation. It scaffolds deep learning that supports program improvement and accountability.

It is also an excellent impetus towards decoloniality (Andreotti, 2021) which creates the space for the breakdown of mainstream power hierarchies and a refocus on local knowledge, goals and wisdom.

Define the program

A clear understanding of what is to be evaluated facilitates both the evaluation design and its use. Defining the program can take a wide variety of forms, although most include a logic model or theory of change, as well as a history of the program and its major accomplishments. As complexity theory and systems thinking has expanded in recent years, especially related to the current understanding of wicked problems, Patton (2011) advanced the ideas of developmental evaluation. In developmental evaluation the focus is not on defining the program, but on documenting how the program develops to respond to current issues. The process recommends creating at least a working program definition to support evaluation design.

Narrative from the field: defining a program is a process, not an endpoint

> *During the first year of a multi-year project, our team was struggling with a number of challenges. We had a high attrition rate for both program participants and the implementation team and the lead partner team was apprehensive about the viability of the program. By their very nature, these were complex, adaptive challenges, which often meant that they had a relational, emerging nature. They could not be anticipated at the beginning of the program, and were likely to continue throughout the course of the multi-year funding. In an effort to mitigate various risks, the learning partner team offered to hold weekly calls with us. These were meant to help surface and address problems before they became significant challenges. They ended up being opportunities for reflection and critical action, as we worked through emerging challenges. The learning partner did not try to fix the challenges, but instead created a safe space, a sounding board, and at times a friendly face, to work through issues and think through responses.*
>
> *As part of one of these calls, we went over the deliverables my company had initially agreed to at the beginning of the program. I shared how we had agreed to foster the creation of 20 social enterprises every six months, which as I said it out loud sounded completely untenable. 'That's a stupid number', I recall us agreeing. We then set out to think about a feasible number and how to go about attaining that. We took a closer look at what was not working in terms of the program content, particularly curricular pieces that we were trying to replicate from the Global North. Once we added local case studies and engaged context-specific pedagogical approaches to the updated curricula, the program's participant graduation rate increased exponentially. We*

> *also updated the time horizon from graduation expected at six months to a spectrum between 6 months to a year. At the end of the 4-year funding, our team helped create 80 new social enterprises.*

Key takeaway

In complex, deeply relational work that is part and parcel of social change and systems transformation, it is difficult to determine the problems and outcomes in advance– a learning partner may have to take on a myriad of roles, from cheerleader to mirror to shoulder-to-cry-on. A successful learning partner reaffirms: 'there is going to be chaos and this is normal. Good practice adapts and will change over time.'

A key principle of learning partnerships is putting a program into the larger local and global ecology. So much of evaluation isolates and removes the program from its setting. Learning partners pay attention to how this program manifests in this place at this time.

Designing the study

When most people think about an evaluation process, they most often think about the study design. At this point in the evaluation process, the evaluator frames major evaluation questions and a process for responding to these questions. Evaluation questions can be diverse but must provide a direction for the evaluation. Through designing a study, the evaluation becomes more defined and systematic, another standard of evaluation. The study design provides a clear pathway to systematically ask questions, select a sample, gather data, analyze the data, and report results. All of this is commonly included in an evaluation study design.

Narrative from the field: the power of a shared vision

> *Regular site-visits from learning partners were great opportunities to review and amend our shared understanding of our vision and activities. A couple of days into the learning partner's second visit, we sat in the director's office discussing how things were going. At this point, my team was very comfortable with the learning partner and viewed them as a mentor and true partner in learning. As they heard us conversing down the hall, a couple of folks came over and joined the discussion. Over the next half hour, the rest of the team joined the room one by one until the full team was present, sitting in various nooks and corners, animatedly discussing why we do what we do and how we know it's working. At some point, by force of habit, we started capturing key words on sticky notes and putting them up on a central wall. Before any of us realized it, we were deep into a generative conversation about the values and vision behind our collective work. These values and vision eventually became the*

DNA of our work as a team, and led to a thorough and doable evaluation study design for the learning partners.

Key takeaway

In a Learning Partner Approach, with a decolonial impetus, reorganizing steps and questions is key. The learning partner did not start with a prefabricated study design, but instead created a fluid, dynamic process, whereby our team and the evolving nature of our work informed what was to be studied, what types of data could be gathered, and what kind of evidence could be collected. It is also in the practice of deep relationality and service, that the learning partner was quick to cede the space for a generative conversation on the shared vision of the implementing team, which eventually led to the best outcomes for the learning partner in terms of figuring out the optimal study design.

Gathering evidence

With an evaluation study design, the evaluator can begin the work of gathering evidence. While there is still overwhelming attention to quantitative data collection, evaluation study designs include a wide range of methodologies and methods for gathering evidence. A primary concern within evaluation is gathering evidence that stakeholders find valuable and significant. Given the importance of use, evaluators consider what evidence has credibility among stakeholders.

Narratives from the field: the Alhamdulillah tree

When I started the Social Innovation Lab (SIL) in Pakistan and received multi-year funding, Anjum Altaf, my advisor and the Dean for the School of Humanities and Social Sciences at our partner university, told me the story of the Orangi Pilot Project (Khan, 2005) and the story of a striking approach to M&E that Akhtar Hameed Khan undertook as part of the wide-scale waste management efforts in peri-urban low-income communities in the Orangi area in Karachi, Pakistan.

As probably the quintessential example of a learning partner before the term was even coined (Orangi Pilot Project was a project in the 1980s), Khan would sit and hang out in the main square of the intervention zone with his tea and snacks every day, for hours on end. The community would usually be quite surprised, wondering: 'who is this guy - what is he doing?' People would eventually get curious, and start talking to him. This way, Khan built deep relationality and started learning more about what was happening in the community. He noted that despite the municipality putting out trash bins, there was still an alarming amount of waste and trash in the streets. The nifty learner that he was, his M&E strategy was to give children from the neighborhoods, polaroid cameras. He then set up a schedule in collaboration with the

community whereby at the end of every week, a child from each neighborhood would go take a photo of the streets and put it up on the community wall in the main square. At the end of the week, if one saw trash in a photo, one immediately knew who did not do their share of waste disposal that week. Khan therefore found a completely new way of gathering evidence but also instilled a sense of community accountability which led to even better results.

This story stuck with me, and one day I ended up painting a tree up on the wall in our communal room. We dubbed it the 'Alhamdulillah tree', which roughly translates to the gratitude tree. We started putting up sticky notes of things that were on-track and 'going right'. Very soon, our entrepreneurs and other community members started coming and putting up notes–it caught on. When the learning partner came for their second visit, they took photos of the tree. One of the photos said 'SIL made my life'. I remember saying to them: THIS is evidence; here is proof that what we are doing here truly works.

Key takeaways

A Learning Partnership Approach requires reciprocity and one cannot take without also giving: in our case, there was a partnership where the learning partner was giving back to the team, beyond a report to the funders. There was something tangible in terms of skills that were being transferred to our M&E team. Whereas the work can often be about (in the design), 'what is it we need in order to report back, given who funded us', it also ought to be about 'what can we give that enhances, supports, and nourishes our collaborators in the sites.' The learning partner constantly searches for ways that program staff are already gathering important data and creates opportunities for this data to be shared and used. The other key idea revolves around what counts as evidence and whose knowledge matters. As a learning partner, it is important to help diversify both 'how' we do and 'what' we do.

Justifying conclusions

As the evidence comes in, the evaluation process moves toward data analysis. The desired outcome from the analysis is not only findings but good justifications for conclusions. The evaluator works in this stage as both a scientist, craftsperson, and artist to communicate what the data teaches in a way that the audience will understand and accept. '...the critical issue is what counts as evidence and what evidence counts?' (Anderson & Freebody, 2014, p. 9).

Narrative from the field: being wise about what is shared

In their multidimensional role, the learning partner found ways to share data in ways that justified what we were doing and what we accomplished. This was especially important when it came to our partner university. During the early phases of our

work, the university was not taking our social enterprise work seriously because it had the term 'social' attached to it. We would often be confused for a program that either supported charities and not-for-profits or social media companies; all of which were inaccurate as the majority of our work was geared towards training and fostering for-profit social enterprises.

The learning partner recognized this inconsistency and confusion and worked to educate both the funder, and additionally our university partner, without which we would not be eligible to continue to receive funding. The learning partner used their status as evaluator and 'renowned expert' to present to the university the evidence they gathered and how it illustrated the value of our program. The learning partner met with the Vice Chancellor of the university every visit to share learnings about the work and how it strengthened the university's mission and vision. This led to the university increasingly supporting our work.

Key takeaway

A learning partner often has to justify evaluations not only to funders but also other key stakeholders and partners of the implementing organization or team. This may sometimes mean, as was the case with us, that the evaluator is put into an advocacy role at the behest of the implementing organization and doing all they can to ensure the longevity of a well-functioning program.

Sharing lessons

It is argued that a primary requirement of evaluation is that what is learned is used. This cannot happen without sharing the lessons. At minimum, the evaluation includes sharing the focus, purpose, and methods used in the evaluation and the intended and unintended learning from the evaluation. Many limited the sharing to intended learning, while others argue this is troubling as it presupposes that the evaluator and program staff fully understand the benefits and consequences of the program before an evaluation is completed, almost making the evaluation irrelevant (Stake, 1975). In the Learning Partner Approach, culturally sensitive evaluation informs our frame of sharing lessons, with '...reporting of findings that comes closest to letting the audience see, hear, and touch the essence of the program and how it is functioning' (Hood, 2001, p. 37). We add to this sharing information in ways that best support comprehension and understanding. This creates opportunities for the sharing of lessons to take many forms, including and not limited to reports, monographs, promising practices, podcasts, videos, visualizations, and artistic expressions.

Narrative from the field: the learning partner as a storyteller

> *Given the myriad types of data, knowledge and evidence the learning partner ended up gathering from our site, their reports often started as place-based stories– describing the noisy, crowded streets of Lahore, or providing quotes from participating entrepreneurs. Even the reports provided to the funder, which they made sure to send us for review beforehand, read almost like testimonies, and provided a portal into our worlds. They were deeply relational, to the land and the people, which resulted in the funding and lead partners often being able to see a side of our work that all the checklists in the world could never have accounted for.*
>
> *As part of learning partners' engagement with us, we also invited the learning partner to participate in two international social innovation festivals we hosted over the course of the program. During these gatherings, the learning partner shared what they learned with others. Both times, this sharing came out in the shape of stories, tales and narratives from the experience (read: adventure) they had accompanied us on. As a program we felt heard and understood, even if some of the data illuminated areas we needed to work on.*

Key takeaway

Sharing lessons can take many forms and is most powerful in a decolonial way when it brings an added depth to the program by creating the space for relational, place-based narratives. Often what is most important about the program is not included in the desired outcomes or goals of the program (Stake, 1975). This inclusion of the sights, sounds, contextual realities of the space and place where a program takes place is key to creating artifacts of deep resonance and a potential for wider transformation.

6. Being a learning partner

The learning partner model emerged from a discomfort in the ways evaluation practice was typically shaped and guided. It does not discount or deny utility, feasibility, propriety, accuracy, and accountability (Yarbrough et al., 2010) as important standards of evaluation. It responded to how these are implemented and the colonial system they often support. It centered the idea that evaluation is about learning and partnerships as primary for evaluation in international development. Joining our study of evaluation to our evaluation practice over the last 10 years, we frame our evaluation practice within the values of respect, reciprocity, and responsibility.

Respect

In practice the common wisdom is that trust is required for both therapeutic and learning relationships. While progress can be achieved without this, when trust is emphasized both healing and learning expand. The same can be seen in evaluation with the value of respect. An evaluator has to begin by respecting what has been done and what is trying to be done. An evaluator has to respect the people involved both in leading the effort and those who participate. Respect sets in motion the process of learning. If I respect you, I open myself to learn from you. You have something worthy to teach me. Learning partners begin by building an ethos of respect. Beyond this individual focus of respect, we work to understand the network of relationships that has been developed around this work—who supports, advocates for, partners with, and continues to inhabit the ecology of the program and its supported activities. It goes beyond the individuals and begins to understand the whole—and how each person is embedded within the web of activity and relationships within the program. Respect creates space for reciprocity as well.

Reciprocity

The learning partner actively engages with the standard evaluation enterprise to shape its activities and processes away from retractive and extractive and into collaborative, regenerative, and synergistic. The learning partner as an evaluator must learn from others doing the work and find ways that they too can contribute to the community in ways that are valued, accepted, and responsive to those in the community. Reciprocity raises questions about the legitimacy of taking learning from the community (data collection, stories, observations, conversations) without offering services, opportunities, and materials in return. Asking for data within a partnership requires that one also contributes back to the work in some way. Reciprocity aligns the learning partner practice and provides a reflective framework to guide data listening and gathering.

The values of respect and reciprocity co-exist. Respect frames how one approaches the work, and the people involved. An evaluator recognizes that the program staff and participants do work that has merit and value. Learning about this work and practice deserves acknowledgement and an exchange that further supports the staff and the work. This is true even when the program may be lacking in some way. It is rare to find a program or community committed to change to lack all value. When this value is acknowledged, the evaluator recognizes they too must share their own talents with the community to make connections, develop relationships and signal their commitment to learn about the program and practice on its own terms. This is the responsibility of the evaluator.

Responsibility

Responsibility connects external and internal audiences. An evaluator is often hired by a funder to learn about a funded program. Both of these communities exist within networks of

relationships that speak at times similar but often different languages. The evaluator remains responsible to both communities, signaling that they are neither an external nor internal player but remain located in the space between the communities—constantly seeking to share insights between and communicate understanding among. This relational responsibility becomes a core focus for the evaluation and one that when broken often results in invalid and inaccurate findings and conclusions (in evaluation speak). Understanding one's responsibility to relational accountability raises questions about what and how the evaluation must proceed. With these values as the ethos, the evaluation can begin from a variety of places. We often choose to address power and invite questions.

Addressing power

Unless recognized and named, power remains invisible in the evaluation process. An external evaluator certainly arrives on site with power, often bestowed by the funding organization—the external community upon which the livelihoods of the local program and practice community depends. As an evaluator, we address this aspect of evaluation at an early stage. We name the intended responsibilities that we have been asked to carry by the external community and then invite the local community to share with us what responsibilities that they want us to carry when we work with them. This often sounds odd to community members. We find this to be an ongoing indication of how evaluations often violate the core standards of evaluation, especially the domain context—understanding the multiple perspectives of stakeholders.

Inviting questions

The learning partner leans into questions as a process and method. There are several domains of questions that we invite throughout the evaluation to invite and strengthen relational accountability. These include questions about our responsibilities, that stakeholders carry about the program or practice, about how we can contribute, and about what needs to be shared with whom. We begin by asking for desired responsibilities that we must hold. Then questions continue to frame the practice and interactions. For us, we have found questions to invite and deepen relationships and strengthen relational accountability. If we do not know about the program and those who both work for it and participate in it, it remains impossible for us to be accountable to both the stakeholders and the systematic process of inquiry. The key is to understand and create opportunities at every moment of the evaluation to build relationships and then to embody accountability to these relationships.

7. Conclusions

The Learning Partnership Approach emerged as a critique of the common approach to monitoring and evaluation (M&E) in international development. Through critical reflection

and iterative practice, the most useful activity within the evaluation process was around learning. For this approach, learning is not an end or product; it opens up understanding, challenges reductive answers and explanations, and invites collaborative relationships. A focus on learning shifts the evaluation away from accountability and compliance toward innovation and transformation. The goal is animating a way of understanding that emphasizes humility, iteration, and the emergent. The learning partner also shifts from including participants to building partnerships. It centers dialogue, conversation, and relationships as core features of the process. To really know about something requires that you recognize your relationship with it and how this relationship shapes what you know. Changing your relationship changes what you know and see. This model emphasizes partnering with others who have relationships to the evaluation focus. Our practice experience continued to move slowly towards this frame.

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[1] In this context, we use the term "wisdom-centric cosmologies" to connote different traditional(faith-based) and Indigenous wisdom framework's approach to Life, the Universe, its origin, its nature, and the reason for its existence.

[2] We consider the "Global South" to be more than former colonies south of the equator, and in our analysis this term includes communities and peoples who continue to live under settler Colonialism including the Indigenous communities in North America.