

From Evaluation to Learning in Social Change

The challenges of “Measuring Development, Holding Infinity”

By Srilatha Batliwala

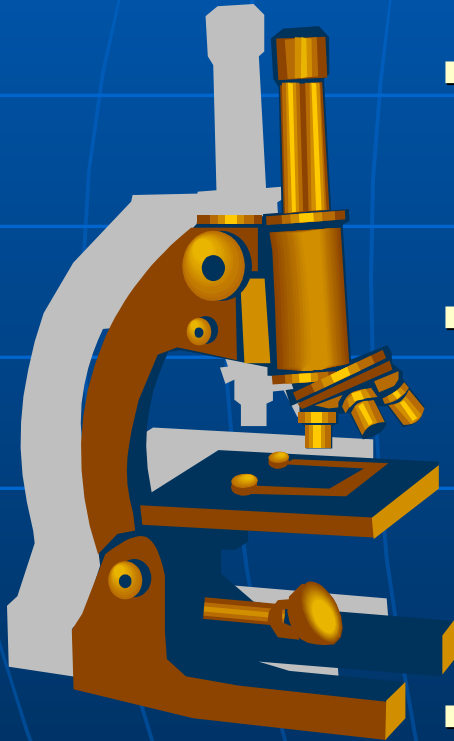
Knowledge is power

Two forms of knowledge power:

1. The knowledge economy - knowledge as a commodity, patented, owned, sold
2. The knowledge democracy – knowledge as public property, free, accessible, empowering



In the knowledge economy:



- The theory-practice divide is very porous
- Researchers and practitioners work together to develop new ideas, products, processes
- Applied knowledge generates huge profits and economic – political power: new drugs, cosmetics, weapons, intelligence, software, etc.
- Result assessment is goal-oriented, flexible-dynamic, and critical (sales targets, market shares)

In the knowledge democracy,

- Knowledge is
 - A shared resource
 - Jointly generated
 - Publicly owned
 - Of different kinds, each respected
 - A tool for empowering and mobilizing marginalized groups
 - Used to advocate / negotiate people-centered and justice-oriented change

Why do we measure results?

In theory.....

- To see if resources have been appropriately utilized
- To be accountable for the way we use public resources
- To assess if we have done what we set out to do
- To see if change has happened
- To learn how change happens and intervene more effectively
- To build new theories of change

Why do we measure results?

In reality....

- Because donors require it...
- To sustain or obtain funding...
- To expand our organizations and projects...
- To compete for grants / contracts...
- Result assessment data is rarely shared with primary stakeholders
- Target groups rarely involved in setting goals or shaping frameworks of evaluation, or in actual assessment processes
- Little critical reflection on or re-casting of our theories of change

Measuring Abstract Ideas – the challenges

What is it?

Where is it?

What's in it?

What's the use?



Measuring Change – the key questions

**What
changed?**



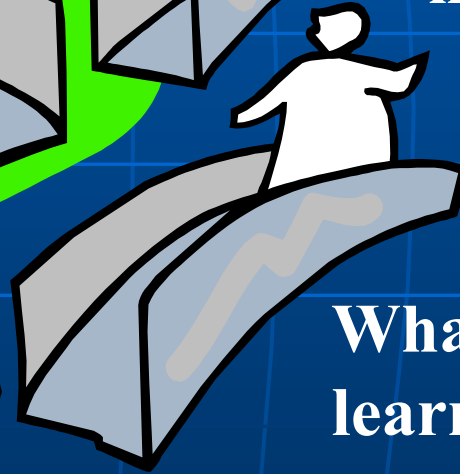
**How did it
happen?**



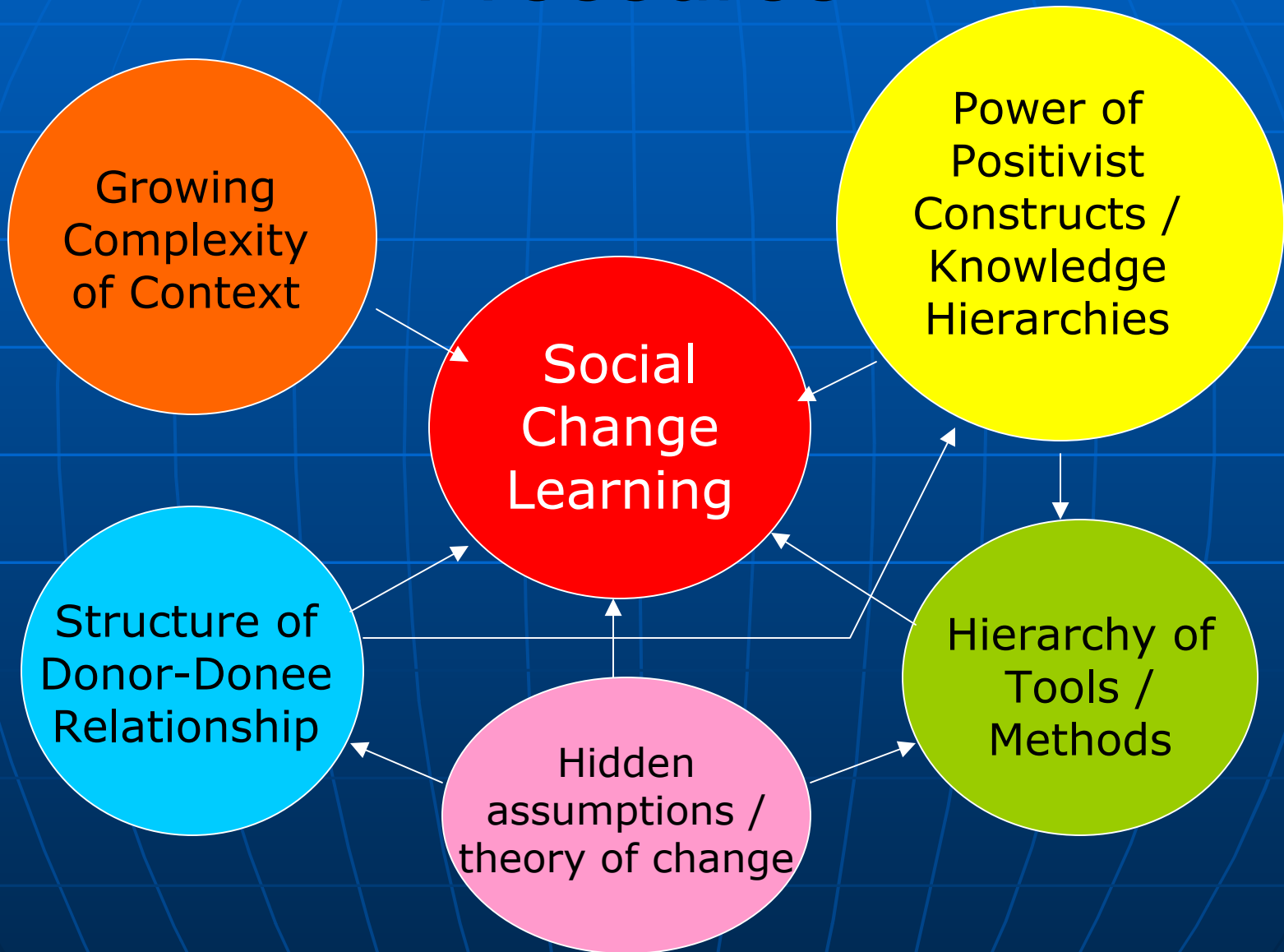
**Who's
involved?**



**What did we
learn?**



Pressures



Challenges of result assessment - 1

- Growing complexity of social problems / Increase of variables affecting communities:
 - Macro-, meso-, and micro-forces acting on communities have multiplied
 - Changing role of the state – e.g. disinvestment in public services
 - Impact of global and national political and economic forces (market forces, structural adjustment policies, fundamentalism, war on terror)
- Unexamined assumptions and theories about change

Challenges of result assessment - 2

- The trap of several binaries/dichotomies:
 - Macro-micro
 - Quantitative-qualitative
 - Subjective-objective
 - Success-failure
 - Theory-practice
- Emphasis on quantity of data vs. sensitivity of indicators / information
- Are we measuring change in the appropriate time frame?
- The difficulty of assessing our role in change – i.e., the challenge of attribution

The Learning Approach - 1

- Is a historical, relational, flexible approach
- Is located in social power analysis – i.e., in understanding
 - The distribution of resources
 - The ideological underpinnings of social hierarchies
 - The role of institutions and structures in sustaining / perpetuating these ideologies and unequal relationships and access to resources
 - The nature of force / or the threat of force that perpetuates inequality

The Learning Approach - 2

- Maps social power relations and shifts in power relations, i.e.,
 - ✓ Who gets what
 - ✓ Who does what
 - ✓ Who knows what
 - ✓ Who decides what
 - ✓ Who frames the agenda
- Identifies key change *actors, resisters, and relationships*
- Sets specific, contextualized change objectives aimed at enhancing
 - equality (sameness) and
 - equity (equal access)

The Learning Approach - 3

- Surfaces assumptions and builds an explicit theory of change
- Frames and measures change on a continuum, not absolutes
- Transcends binaries / dichotomies – e.g., every “failure” is a learning success
- Democratizes impact assessment (in practice, not just rhetoric) – and the knowledge generated through it
- Values different kinds of knowledge and methods of assessment

The Learning Approach - 4

- Measures results in terms of shifts in social power as well as learning about how social power changes occur
- Makes assessment *part* of the empowerment / development process – i.e., builds learning mechanisms, processes and assessment capability of change agents and communities
- Builds donor learning about change interventions
- Shows evidence of learning in subsequent action / project designs at all levels

The Learning Organization

- Bridges traditional “theory-practice” and “research-action” divides
- Democratizes all processes of result assessment in practice, not just rhetoric
- Restores agency to “primary stakeholders”
- Uses multiple, dynamic methods and measures to map learning and change (transcends binaries)

The learning organization

- Creates concrete, visible, and creative learning mechanisms for itself and its partners
- Invests organizational time, resources and energy in learning processes – creates a culture of learning
- Over time, can help create new theory and practice in social change and development

In summary,

- When revising our result assessment approaches, we must ask:
 - Is the process involving & empowering our constituencies?
 - How is it changing our own frameworks and work?
 - What is the new learning about change that it produces?
 - How are we transforming that learning into new theory / knowledge?

The problem of measurement...



*"Not everything
that counts can be
counted.
And not everything
that can be
counted, counts."*

Albert Einstein

How Mahila Sangha women
assessed their changing
capacities and confidence

Home, Workplace, Sangha,
Panchayat, Gram Sabha, School,
Health Services, BDO, DC, etc.

Home &
Workplace

Home, Workplace,
Sangha

Can negotiate multiple levels and
institutions from family to state

Sundaramamma's measure of change

"I am a landless Dalit woman. Before the sangha, I could only address the Gowdaru (landlord) looking at his feet. Now, I speak looking at his chest. After some more time, I will find the courage to look him in the eyes when we speak..... in our village, this is a big change!"

NSDF Assessment of Change

Process Indicators:

- Street level committees / women's committees
- Housing savings groups
- Slum-level federation / women's federation
- City level federation / women's federation
- National level federation / women's federation

Learning Indicators:

- Meet regularly
- Can self-manage savings program
- Treatment / voice / role of women
- Can conduct their own slum census
- Developed links with local authorities
- Developed alternative settlement plan

“...the work of the development practitioner happens at the intersection of the commonplace and the profound.” (CDRA)