Causal Pathways – The Third Pillar to Project Design

A FIT Case Study in Zimbabwe

Learnings from FIT Funded SMO St. Mary's Road United Church and local partner SCORE Against Poverty

Overview

Understanding Complex Systems While Working with Communities

Communities in which development actors work are based on multiple complex systems – political, religious, cultural, colonial, indigenous – all of which have different levels of visibility and impact.

A cultural practice, for example, that is visible and interpreted as negative by an outsider, may be viewed as positive in a traditional religious or cultural setting within a community.

Most international development projects' own evaluative tools are not designed to capture or understand complex contexts or unexpected changes during testing or implementation. This can have a profound, costly impact if the project is scaled up or replicated and fails. One solution is integrating a Causal Pathway evaluation into project design, testing and implementation.

What Are Causal Pathways?[1]

 Causal Pathways evaluations look at contributions from both the intervention and other causes or variables in the larger context in which you are testing or implementing a project. By viewing an intervention as part of the larger ecosystem in which it operates, it enables us to better understand the various pathways/mechanisms which combine/interlink thus giving a wider-angle view and thus enable better choices while engaged in social change.

Causal Pathways (CP) evaluations are beginning to gain traction, not only as an evaluation tool, but as a contributing lens to designing and elevating projects into a highly sustainable, positive change in community well-being.

To find out more about causal pathways check out:

https://www.causalpathways.org/

1 https://www.causalpathways.org/ (Shared Understanding)

Causal Pathways as An Evaluation Tool

While the mapping and exploration of Causal Pathways can be used at various stages of a project, it is most useful when applied at the planning stages and continued throughout. This involves a more open-ended exploration, of how change is happening more broadly in the system.

It involves:

• Inclusive processes for defining desirable outcomes and the causal pathways that contribute to them.

• Explicitly including the actions of actors and factors indigenous contexts to the situation.

• Digging deep for causal stories that centre local agents of change throughout the system.

• Stories which centre around local agents and represent the co-evolving relationships between change efforts and the system in which they operate.

• Causal analysis can lift and leverage the power of stories, lived experiences, and multiple ways of knowing to create shared understanding across all those involved in the work.

• Outcome measurement alone, without insight into how change happens, can be misleading as a guide to navigating the future. The lack of attention to causal pathways in complex settings obscures unintended impacts or unexpected influences on the outcomes.

Applying Causal Pathways as a Lens

When one combines this evaluative approach, with a **localization approach** to design projects, alongside a solid inclusive **gender strategy** , one ends up with a three-legged platform which elevates any project into a highly sustainable, positive change in community well-being.

The broad purpose of all three of these complementary approaches is to ask:

• How is power changing in this system?

• What is driving or blocking the change as it relates to what people on the ground are doing?

• What is the collective desire and how to act on it?

• Collecting data on 'understanding the how and why of the ecosystem in which the change happened.

How St. Mary's Road United Church Identified Causal Pathways as an Unintended Testing Outcome and Evaluation Tool for Future Interventions

The Innovation

St. Mary's Road United Church and local Community Based Organization, SCORE Against Poverty completed a testing project in Zimbabwe which addressed harmful gender norms in rural areas.

The project tested if a community-designed program that redefined masculinity and associated norms in a positive, supportive way at the family level, utilizing intent instead of mandate, lead to Transformative Sustainable Gender Equity (TSGE). For example, engaging with participants to desire marriage to be a partnership of equals rather than treating wives as an asset to be controlled.

It included the 'Men Can Cook Competition' (a skills-based learning opportunity taught by women) and the Men's Forum on Gender (a platform for discussing norms and attitude shifts led by trained male facilitators) which addressed the lack of opportunities to cultivate empathy and positive masculinity in men.

With these components the innovation aimed to increase overall family wellness, lightening the load of women in the home and created a platform for men to safely discuss their feelings while women served in advising, decision-making, teaching and/or leadership roles. By engaging both men and women, masculinity, family relationships and associated cultural norms shifted.

The primary goal of this innovation was in transformative changes in behaviour/outcomes of men including men engaging with cooking more meals, assisting in family chores, advocating on behalf of women in the community. For women, the innovation aimed to increase access to assets, change perceptions related to women working outside the home and becoming more in involved in community committee's and projects.

While not familiar with the tool of Casual Pathways, St Mary's and SCORE's commitment to localization and gender equity motivated them to ask similar Pathways questions about why the project had been so successful and was it replicable & scalable.

At the time the testing project started the team only had two tools, first, localization, a deep understanding of language, culture, and livelihood for that area. And secondly a solid gender equality approach. The project was hugely successful, and its impact went far beyond equity of family care.

By really digging into the context and asking what happened and why, within each of the different parts of the project, some very fascinating information was uncovered, not only about the actual normative behaviour change (outcomes) in the home, but also the positive ripple effect in the community.

Testing Outcomes

• Positive multi-generational impact on gender equity. By husbands actively cooking and caring for the children and aged family in the home, it closed the gap of traditional hostility between mother and/daughter-in-law. Boys started emulating their father and doing chores previously consigned to mothers and daughters.

• Increased family social and emotional wellbeing, children noticed and spoke out about the positive change in the emotional climate of the home on ongoing measure and felt more secure and loved.

• Increased family income generation as a result of newfound skills around dialogue on planning and discuss ideas together as well as sharing assets & family chores needing to be done.

• Decreased in gender-based violence in the family and the community based on the formation of new exposure to male champions and other men modeling positive norms as opposed to drinking buddies.

• Better parent/school relations as a result of parents spending time every two weeks with the home economics teacher who was guiding the cooking classes and the Early Childcare Specialist teacher who was caring for their child during cooking and Forum discussions.

• Increased credibility for the Community Based Organization from the community traditional leaders due to their willingness to acknowledge and bring cultural spirituality, not religion, into the discussions.

These findings were generated by deep dialogue over time with those involved in and affected by the project. Then the new learnings were triangulating back to the participants, their families, community leaders, traditional as well as state, for verification.

This process was used to collectively test assumptions, to validate the 'pathways to change' that emerged, and to discover which information contributed to pathways that could help us learn and act in new ways. An important reason for the last part was to build an understanding of the ecosystem around the project, what was the context of the whole project, its parts and their interrelationships.

While the twin pillars of localization and Gender Equity enabled St. Mary's and SCORE to gain heightened effectiveness and sustainability this new learning and understanding of Causal Pathways, now gives provides a third pillar to project design, Causal Pathway awareness, localization and an inclusive gender strategy.

Is my uncle willing to buy
sanitary napkins for my mother?

The connection between localization & causal pathway evaluations -
a personal story from the founder of SCORE Against Poverty

By V. Pugeni, C. Pugeni & D. Maxson

Is my uncle willing to buy sanitary napkins for my mother? This simple, socially disruptive question, by a 15-year-old boy in Zimbabwe, threw chaos into the traditional practice that would have given all the assets of a dead husband to his brother leaving the widow/mother and three children penniless and at the mercy of the uncle. After his dad died, 15-year-old Vurayayi's uncle went to the plantation to try and take control of his father's pension. Here was a story about the abuse of power, about a young lad who, unknowingly, considered and acted upon the three questions key to Causal Pathway thinking.

What has happened, why is this happening to me, and what is the context I can understand in order to respond.

The first two were obvious, the third seldom considered when responding to unwanted change.

 However, what Vurayayi knew was the context! The local (patriarchal) cultural norm was unequivocal, - when the husband dies, the assets go to the oldest living male relative on the father's side. Vurayayi's only hope was to try attempt to have his mom obtain his father's small pension, from a parastatal plantation. The one which his uncle was trying to take, in addition to the few assets that their father had left. Perhaps he could use his cultural knowledge to turn the situation around (and he did).

By asking the above disruptive question at the pension hearing, he was able to highlight where power lie, how and why that power would be used and what would be the consequences. In the end Vurayayi was awarded the pension, as the oldest male child and then promptly gave control of it to his mother, publicly at the meeting so that there would be witnesses that his uncle could not dispute going forward.

This story exemplifies how causal analysis can disrupt conventional thinking. It highlights the fact that the "information/assumptions" that are brought to the table are only partially true at best and make visible patterns that will allow new ways of understanding that are more sustainable.

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The article is based on conversations between the three over a one-year period.

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