# Evaluation that frees us up from project boxes to cherish values inherent in communities

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# Introduction – Problem Statement

Evaluation has been an accomplice to dissecting reality into narrow project boxes without questioning values embedded in them. We evaluators can help by offering approaches to “think outside the box.”

# Introduction - What can we do?

I am going to introduce three examples:

- Systems approach;
- Evaluation of place-based initiatives, and;
- The indigenous evaluation approach

But first,

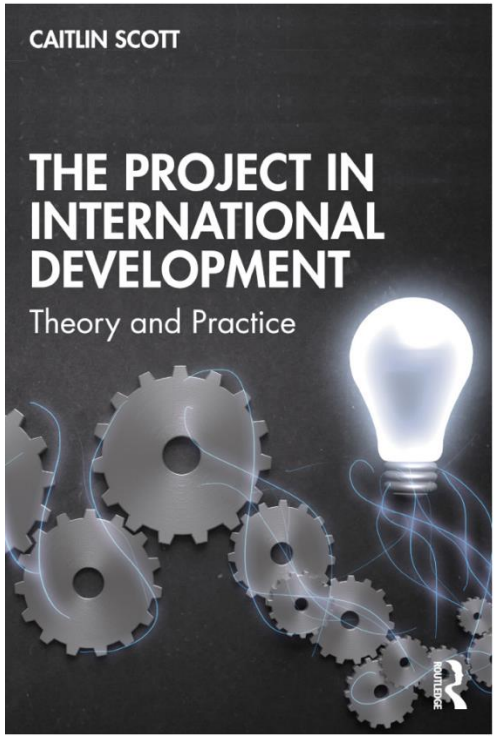
I would like to pay my respects to Indigenous people and Elders past and present who have been the caretakers of our land.

# Reality --We put them into boxes called “projects”

# What is “project mentality”?

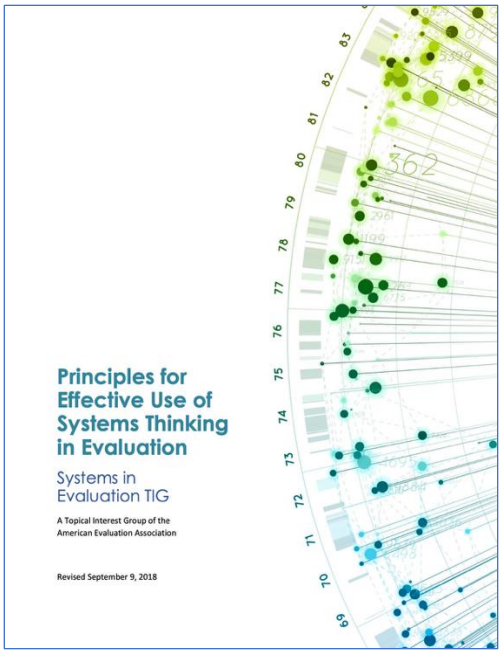
- A mindset focused on completing a specific goal within a fixed timeframe, budget, and scope,
- With upfront planning, structured execution, and an emphasis on delivering predefined outputs,
- Effective for one-time initiatives with clearly defined objectives.

But, there are drawbacks!




"In the machinery of development today, the project is both a standardised and standardising frame for work, with some critical underlying and often invisible assumptions: such as a **simplistic** and **direct relationships between inputs and outputs**. (bold added by the presenter)

# Systems Thinking in Evaluation




The SETIG (Systems in Evaluation Topical Interest Group) of the American Evaluation Association (AEA) compiled the "Principles" document in 2018

"(T)he principles were developed based on four core systems concepts - interrelationships, perspectives, boundaries, and dynamics.

| SYSTEMS-IN-EVALUATION PRINCIPLE | INTERRELATIONSHIPS PRINCIPLE | PERSPECTIVES PRINCIPLE | BOUNDARIES PRINCIPLE | DYNAMICS PRINCIPLE |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| S1 | I1 | P1 | B1 | D1 |
| S2 | I2 | P2 | B2 | D2 |
| S3 | I3 | | B3 | D3 |
| | I4 | | | D4 |

There are, in total, 16 Operating Principles

P1: Identify and represent diverse perspectives and the values on which they are based. Seek dissent as well as consensus.

D2: Design an evaluation plan that is responsive to emergent developments; collects information about what, when, how, and why change occurs; and incorporates learning as it is received to document and respond to dynamics in the evaluation.

# Critical Systems Heuristics (CSH)

(an example of tools for evaluating systems)

| x4 Sources of influence | x3 Stakeholder attributes: Stakeholders Social roles | Stakes Role-specific concerns | Stakeholdings Key problems | x2 Broad groups |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Sources of motivation<br>Who gets what? | 1. Beneficiaries | 2. Purpose | 3. Measure of success<br>(principles)<br>Check on values | The involved |
| Sources of control<br>Who owns what? | 4. Decision makers | 5. Resources | 6. Decision environment<br>(accountability)<br>Check on power<br>(of the system) | |
| Sources of knowledge<br>Who does what? | 7. Experts | 8. Expertise | 9. Guarantor<br>(promises)<br>Check on complacency | |
| Sources of legitimacy<br>Who suffers what? | 10. Witnesses | 11. Emancipation | 12. Worldviews<br>(premises)<br>Check on fundamental meanings | The affected |

*Taken from TB871 module materials (The Open University, 2020a)*

https://dougbelshaw.com/blog/2024/08/16/tb871-critical-system-heuristics/

# Place-Based Evaluation


PBAs (Place-Based Approaches) are defined as collaborative, long-term approaches that:

- are based in a geographically bound location
- focus on local needs, local solutions, and the unique attributes of a place
- involve more than one statutory agency (e.g. schools, police, hospitals, health services, child welfare, youth justice); and
- demonstrate meaningful engagement and involvement of local communities (including private citizens, local services and organisations, and local community groups) in the design and/or delivery of the approach.

(p.9)

# Challenges in Evaluation of PBAs

- Wicked problems
- Emergence and variability
- Complexity
- Interactions with context
- Community and stakeholder engagement
- Operating at multiple levels
- Challenges in measuring change
- Challenges in attribution

It is therefore recommended that evaluators are ambitious and creative!
(p.19)

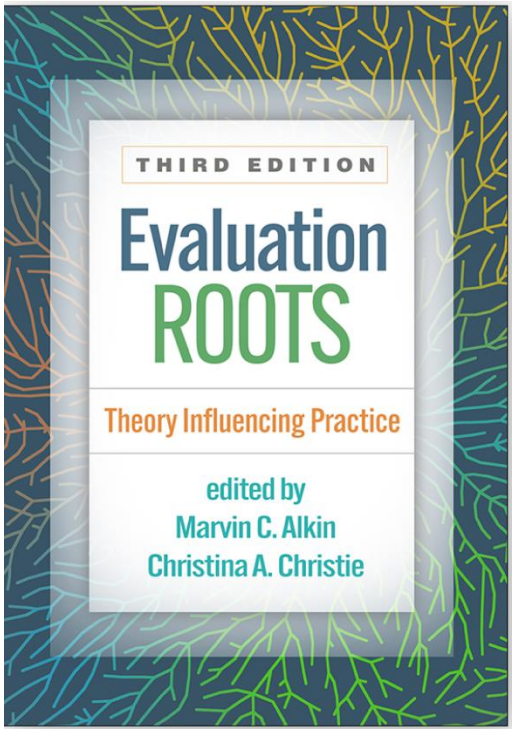
# RE-AIM Framework

(an example of tools for evaluating PBAs)

| RE-AIM Dimension | Definition |
|---|---|
| Reach | Number and representativeness of individuals participating |
| Effectiveness | Impact on outcomes, including unintended and negative and economic outcomes |
| Adoption | Number and representativenes of settings and individuals initiating the intervention |
| Implementation | Delivery as intended, adaptation, costs of delivery |
| Maintenance | Sustainment and institutionalisation of implementation, sustainment of impacts |

(p.20-21)

# Culturally Responsive Indigenous Evaluation




Chapter 13. Culturally Responsive Indigenous Evaluation: An Indigenous Journey Through Culturally Responsive Approaches, Fiona Cram & Jill Anne Chouinard

Through the interconnectedness of indigenous peoples and the land, we ... contend that culturally responsive, **Indigenous evaluation is not a "branch," but rather the roots** that secure the tree within the richness of the territory of evaluation. (p.147)

# Culturally Responsive Indigenous Evaluation

| Dimensions | What it is | Requirement on **Evaluation** |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Ontological | •Nature of reality<br>•Those with power in our society can create and legitimize their own reality while marginalized, marginalizing others<br>•Privilege is blind to itself | •Need to critically assess their own world views and versions of reality to ensure that cultural context is not lost. |

# Culturally Responsive Indigenous Evaluation

| Dimensions | What it is | Requirement on **Evaluation** |
|---|---|---|
| 7. Relational | •Understanding and listening are considered key relational dimensions<br>•(Creating) trusting, respectful and open relationships | •Work closely with the program or program beneficiaries<br>•Include a cultural guide (if needed)<br>•Spend time both formally and informally in the community and builds relationship<br>•A key characteristic of this dimension is evaluators' self identity, as their positioning along the insider-outsider continuum frames the epistemology (challenge simple, dichotonomous insider-outsider binaries) |

# Summary

We evaluators can help changemakers and resource providers (such as foundations) understand diverse ways of “thinking outside the box!”

I have introduced three approaches:

- **Systems approach** offers principles of systems thinking and tools such as critical systems heuristics that enable evaluators to surface and critically consider boundary judgments;
- **Evaluation of place-based initiatives** which focus on local needs, local solutions, and the unique attributes of a place;
- **The indigenous evaluation approach** whose 10 dimensions (I have introduced 2) challenge us to reexamine our own world views and values embedded in them by engaging with stakeholders with a focus on cultures and traditions.

# Thank you very much!

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## References

Cram, Fiona & Jill Anne Chouinard (2023) , Culturally Responsive Indigenous Evaluation: An Indigenous Journey Through Culturally Responsive Approaches, in Alkin, M.C. and Christina A. Christie (eds), *Evaluation Roots: Theory Influencing Practice (Third Edition) ,* New York: The Guilford Press.

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