VIRGINIA TECH

EVALFORWARD TALKS: HOW TO REVIEW THEORIES OF CHANGE?

EvalForward
Evaluation for Food Security, Agriculture & Rural Development

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1 WHAT: ToC BASICS

2 WHY: BEYOND CONJECTURE

3 HOW: EVALUATIVE THINKING

4 CHALLENGES & RESULTS

1

(from Harriet Matsaert on EvalForward)

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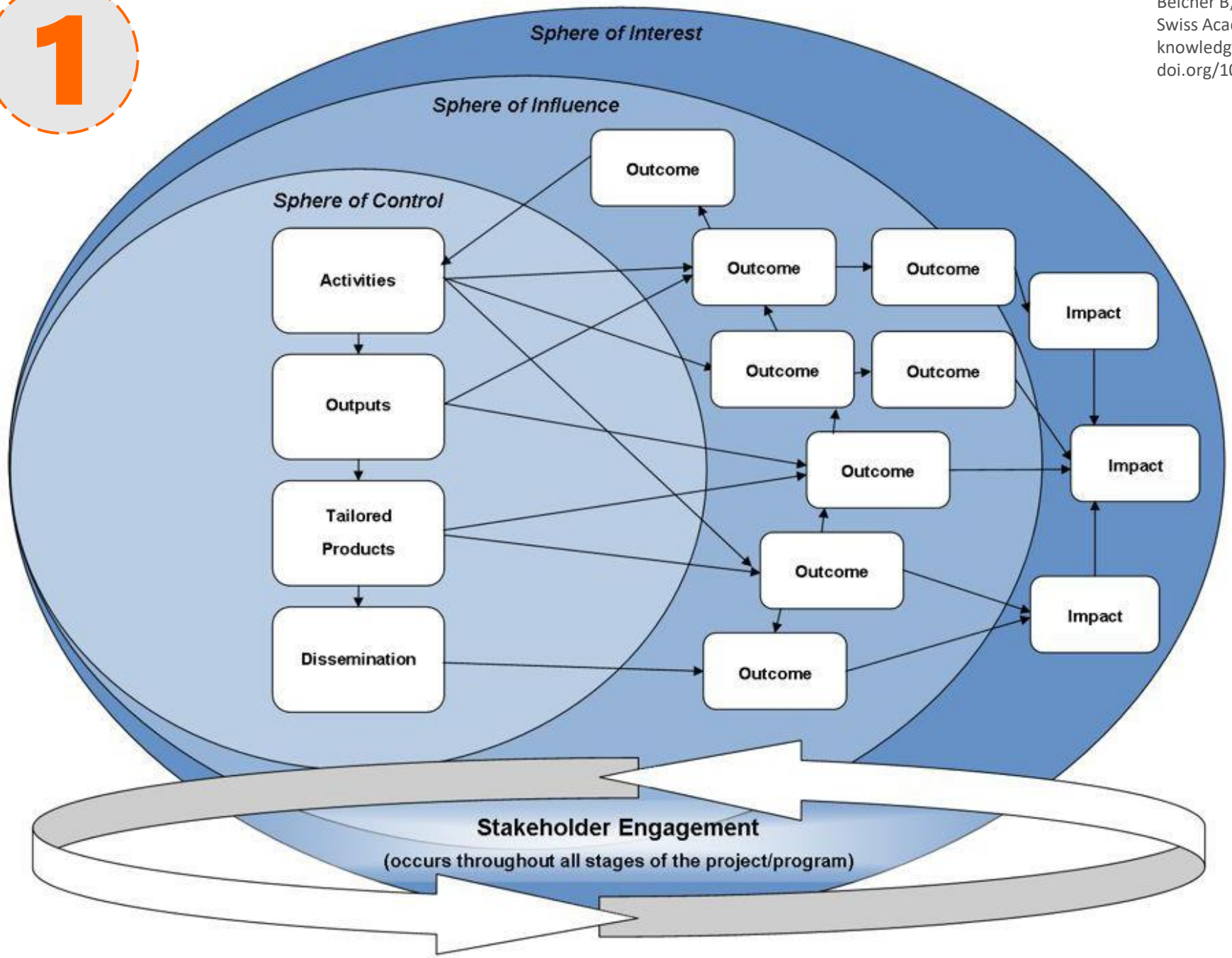

Belcher B, Claus R 2020. Theory of Change. td-net toolbox profile (5). Swiss Academies of Arts and Sciences: td-net toolbox for co-producing knowledge. www.transdisciplinarity.ch/toolbox. doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.3717451

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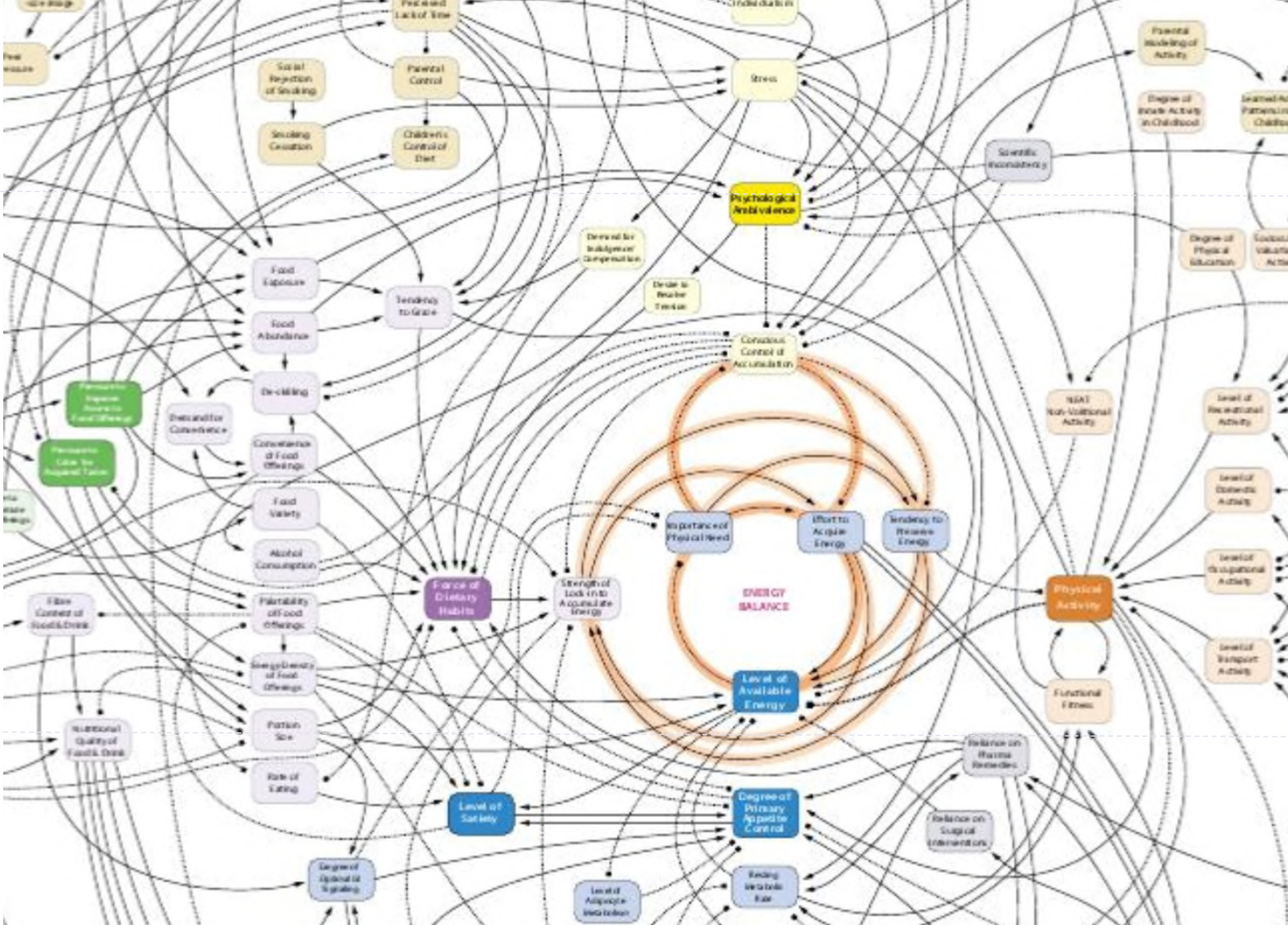


(from Silva Ferretti on EvalForward)

1

WHAT: ToC BASICS

- ToC > logic model, log frame, etc.
- Varieties of graphical and/or narrative representation
- Levels of complexity and detail
- *… not the focus of this discussion*

2

WHY REVIEW : BEYOND CONJECTURE

- A CoC (Conjecture of Change), wishful thinking, rather than ToC (see Eric Graig)
  - Re: assumptions, evidence, social theory (Stein & Valters, 2012)
- Was created by a limited, isolated few
- Was created and then forgotten
- Is imagined to be static, not in flux (see Nelson Godfried Agyemang on EvalForward)

2

WHY REVIEW : BEYOND CONJECTURE

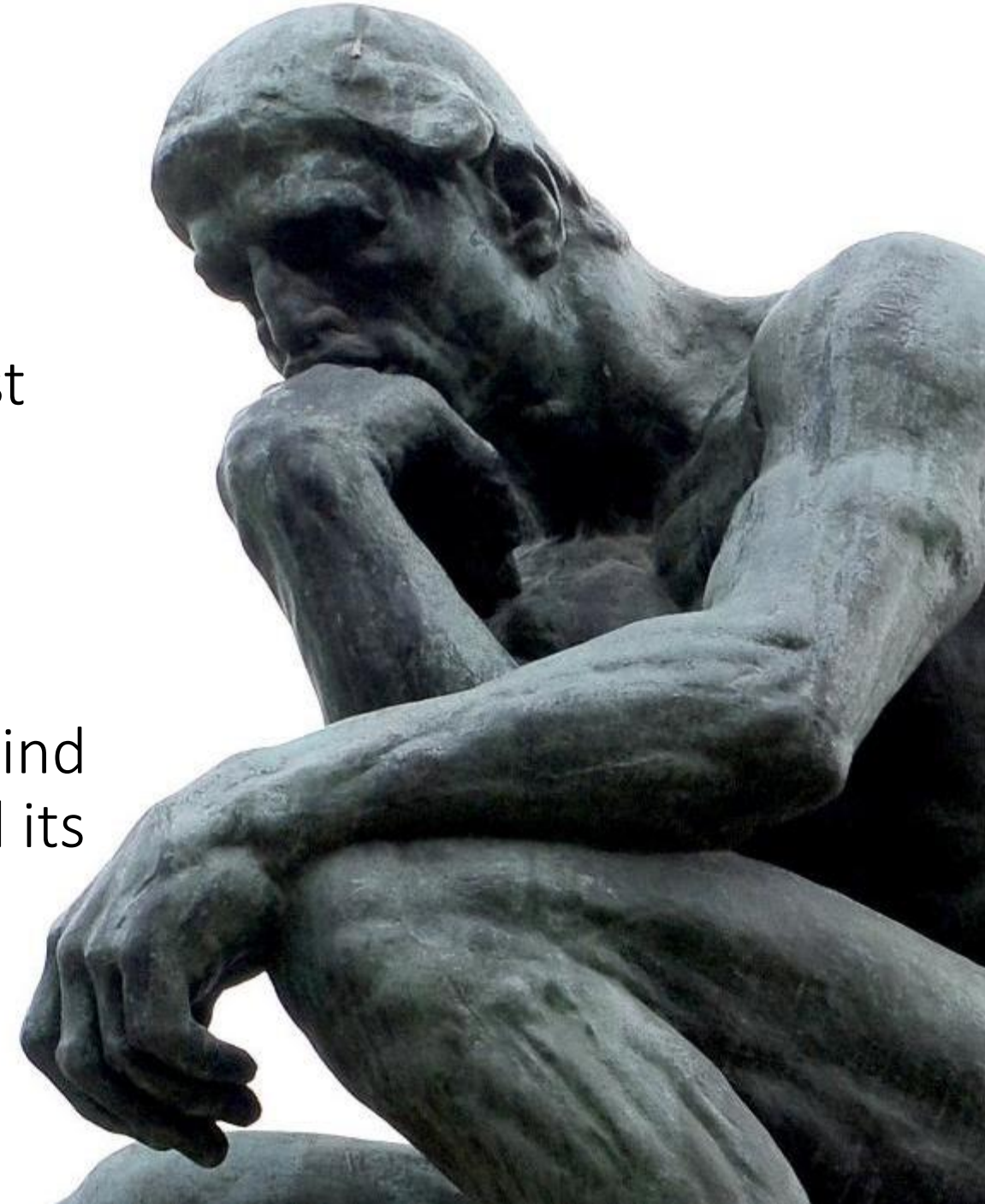
- To identify and question assumptions
- To identify evidence gaps
- To establish grounded validity
- To enhance voice, participation, and collaboration (both instrumental and ethical)
- To center *praxis* (the unity of theory and practice)
- To achieve better results

3

HOW TO REVIEW

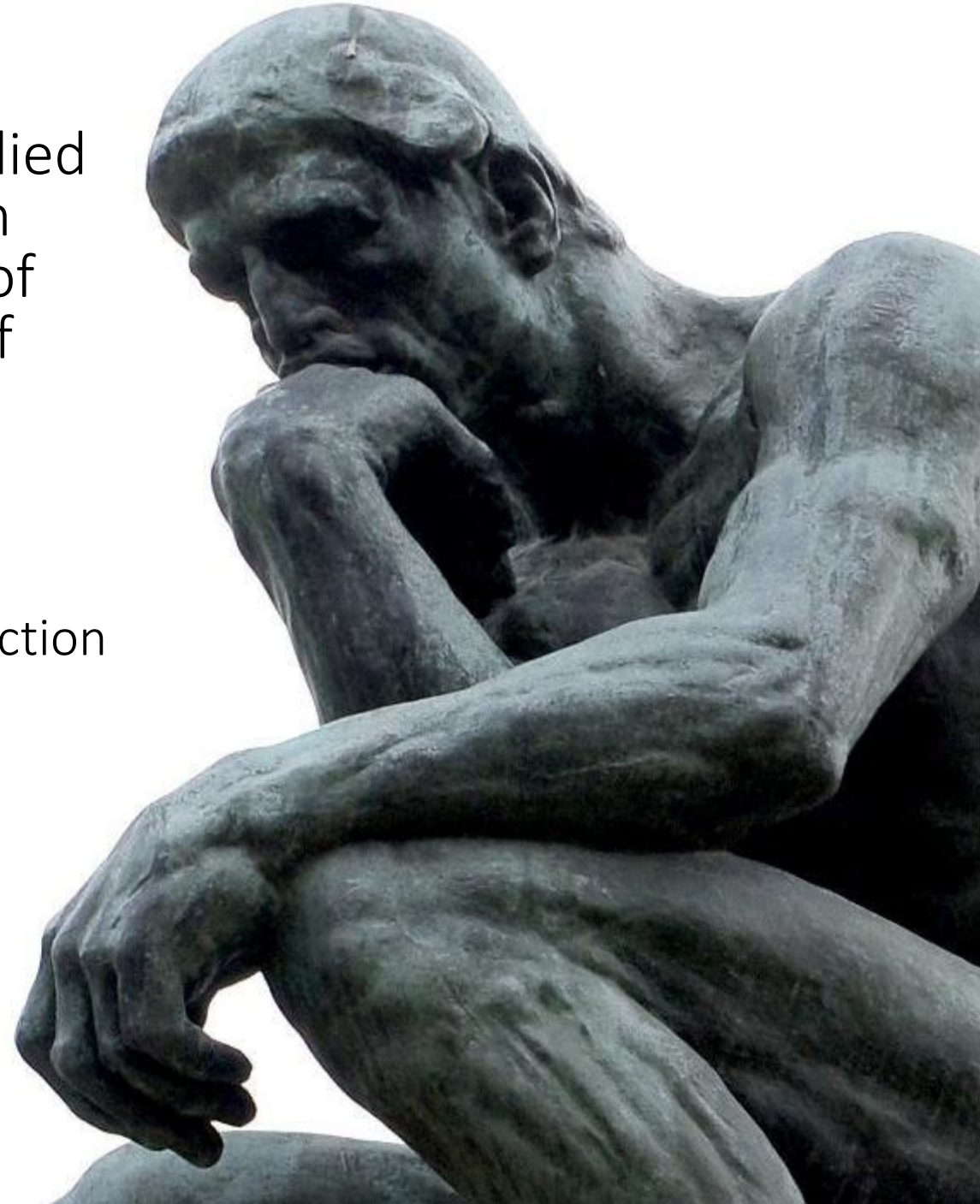
- Get buy-in and participation from multiple levels of the system
- Get time and space to meet in person
- Get into small enough groups per area/focus
- Get to the ‘sticky wall’
- Get practicing and applying *evaluative thinking* as reflective practice

- “Evaluative thinking is a way of doing business.” (Patton)
- “…being results oriented, reflective, questioning, and using evidence to test assumptions.” (Wind & Carden)
- “Reflective practice”(Baker & Bruner)
- “questioning, reflecting, learning, and modifying … It is a constant state-of-mind within an organization’s culture and all its systems.” (Bennett & Jessani)



- Evaluative thinking is critical thinking applied in the context of evaluation [and program management], motivated by an attitude of inquisitiveness and a belief in the value of evidence, that involves:
  - identifying assumptions,
  - posing thoughtful questions,
  - pursuing deeper understanding through reflection and multiple perspective taking, and
  - making informed decisions in preparation for action.

(Buckley, Archibald, Hargraves, & Trochim, 2015)



3 HOW TO REVIEW

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

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Assumptions, conjectures, and other miracles: The application of evaluative thinking to theory of change models in community development

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ABSTRACT

Unexamined and unjustified assumptions are the Achilles' heel of development programs. In this paper, we describe an evaluation capacity building (ECB) approach designed to help community development practitioners work more effectively with assumptions through the intentional infusion of evaluative thinking (ET) into the program planning, monitoring, and evaluation process. We focus specifically on one component of our ET promotion approach involving the creation and analysis of theory of change (ToC) models. We describe our recent efforts to pilot this ET ECB approach with Catholic Relief Services (CRS) in Ethiopia and Zambia. The use of ToC models, plus the addition of ET, is a way to encourage individual and organizational learning and adaptive management that supports more reflective and responsive programming.

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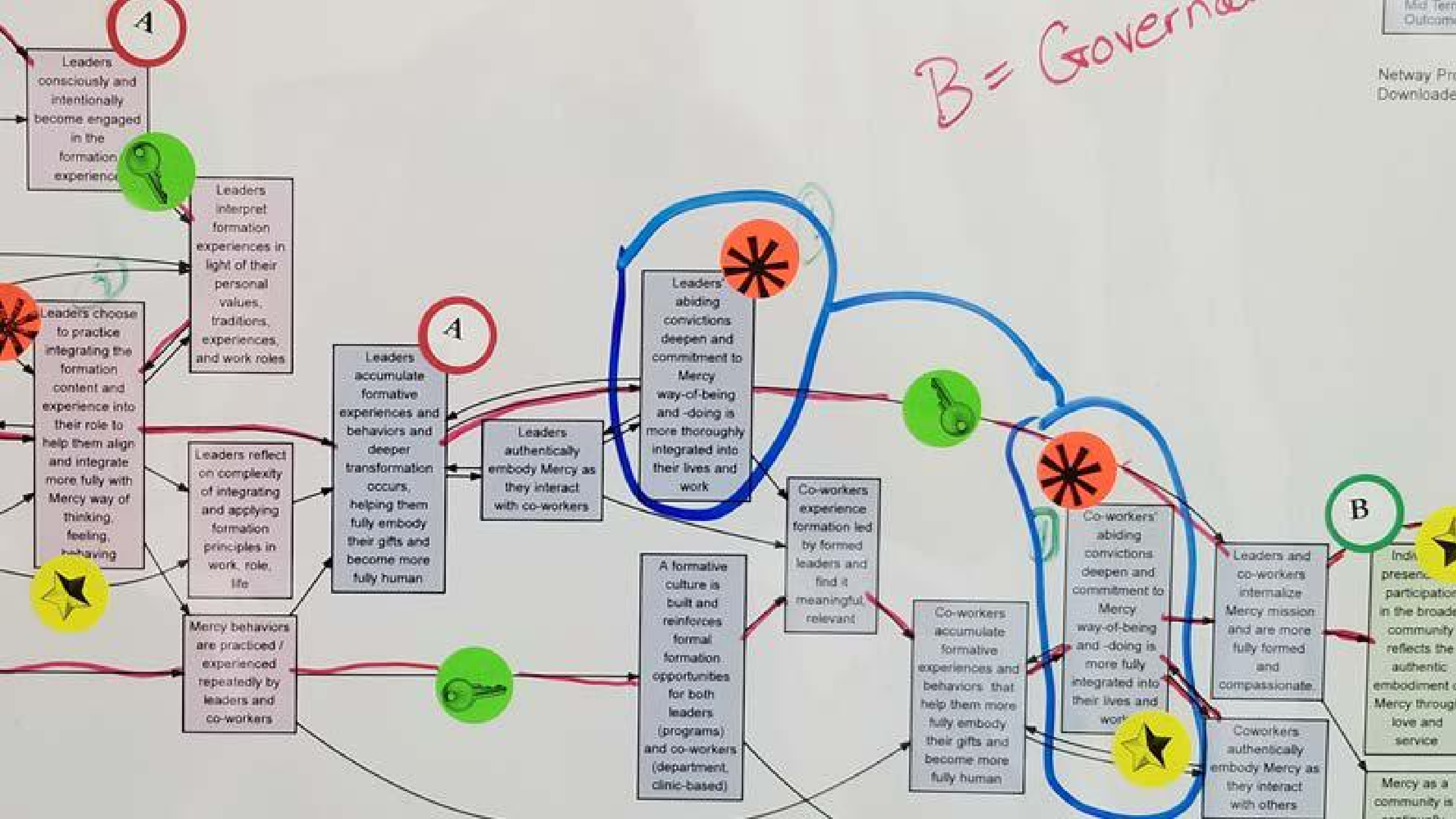
Fig. 1. Evaluative thinking workshop participants creating and analyzing theory of change models. (Photo credit: T. Archibald and G. Sharrock).


A
Leaders consciously and intentionally become engaged in the formation experience
Leaders interpret formation experiences in light of their personal values, traditions, experiences, and work roles
Leaders choose to practice integrating the formation content and experience into their role to help them align and integrate more fully with Mercy way of thinking, feeling, behaving
Leaders reflect on complexity of integrating and applying formation principles in work, role, life
Mercy behaviors are practiced / experienced repeatedly by leaders and co-workers
A
Leaders accumulate formative experiences and behaviors and deeper transformation occurs, helping them fully embody their gifts and become more fully human
Leaders authentically embody Mercy as they interact with co-workers
Leaders' abiding convictions deepen and commitment to Mercy way-of-being and -doing is more thoroughly integrated into their lives and work
A formative culture is built and reinforces formal formation opportunities for both leaders (programs) and co-workers (department, clinic-based)
Co-workers experience formation led by formed leaders and find it meaningful, relevant
Co-workers accumulate formative experiences and behaviors that help them more fully embody their gifts and become more fully human
Co-workers' abiding convictions deepen and commitment to Mercy way-of-being and -doing is more fully integrated into their lives and work
B
Leaders and co-workers internalize Mercy mission and are more fully formed and compassionate
Coworkers authentically embody Mercy as they interact with others
B = Governa
Netway Pr
Downloade

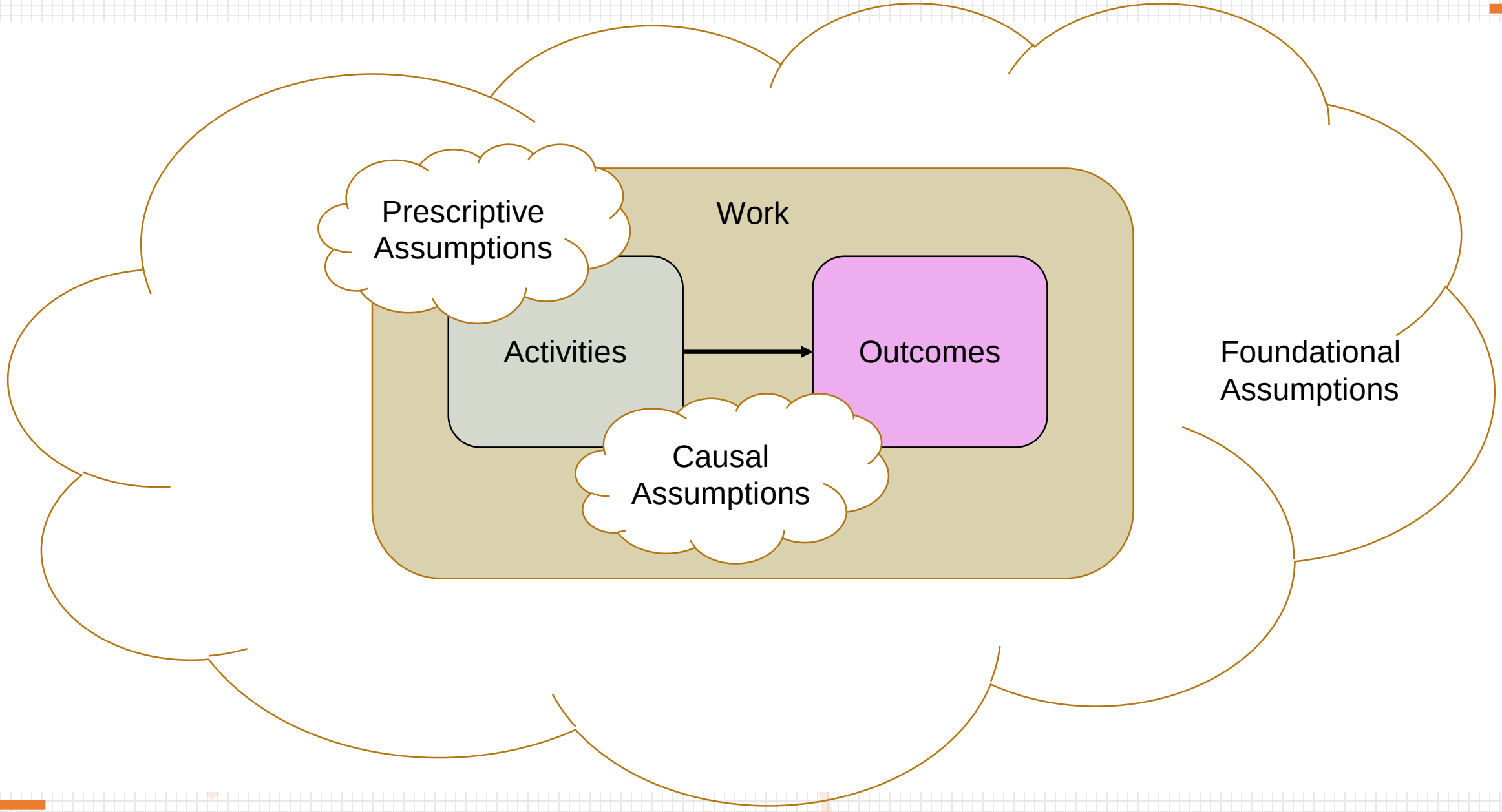
3 HOW TO REVIEW

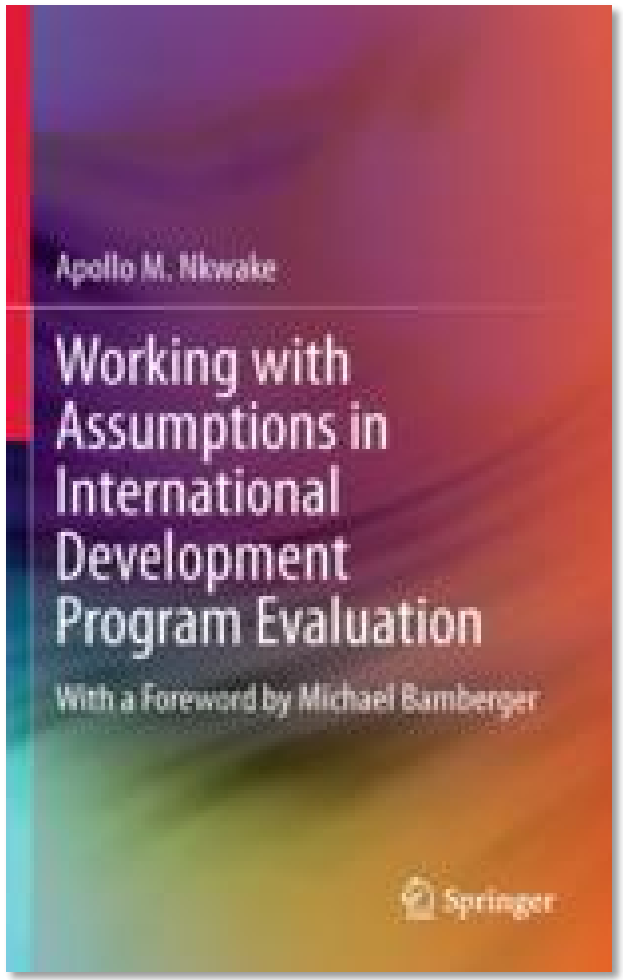
1. Look for good ideas and note/highlight them. These might include particularly good or novel outcomes, good links, whatever deserves recognition.
2. If you see big leaps in logic, add a brief note with a suggestion if possible.
3. If you see something that makes you wonder about a how the project is defined issue, add a brief note with a suggestion if possible.
4. If you see something that is likely to be confusing to an outsider, or that could be worded more clearly, mark it and add a brief note with a suggestion if possible.
5. From your own perspective and what you know of the key stakeholders' perspectives, think about whether the model captures a full view of the project. If necessary, propose an additional outcome or activity.
6. Look for themes or common threads among outcomes and make a note of them.
7. If you think there is a key assumption being made that may have been missed, make a note
8. If you think there is a key contextual factor that should be mentioned, make a note
9. Step back and think about the model overall. Prepare some comments and observations to share as appropriate.

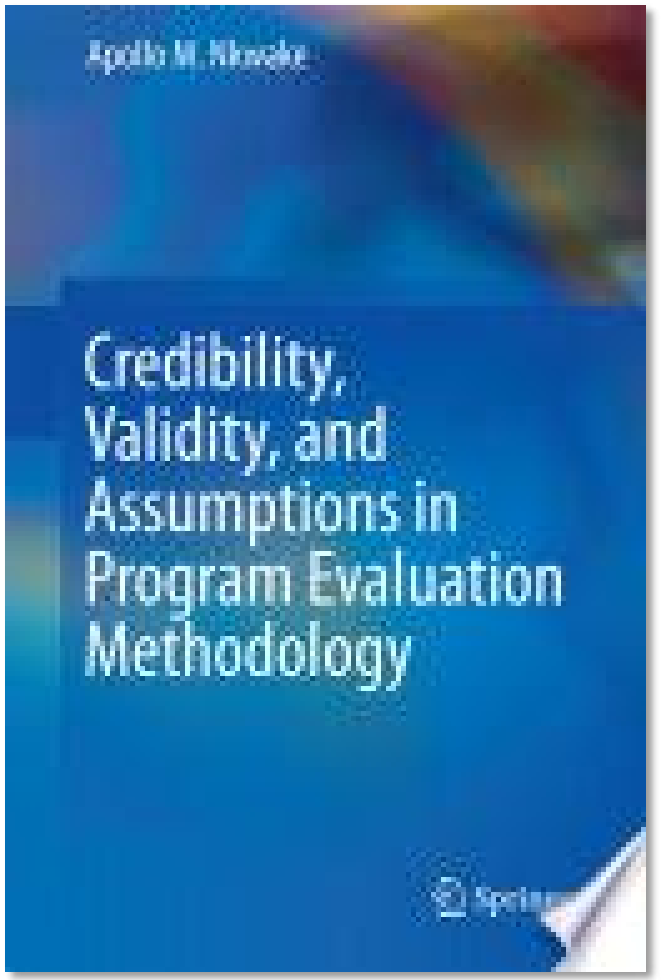
Types of Assumptions

- **Causal**: about how different parts of the world work and about the conditions under which these can be changed. e.g., *If we do X, then Y will result*.
- **Prescriptive**: about what we think ought to or should be happening in a particular situation. e.g., *All projects must have a gender component.*
- **Paradigmatic**: deeply held foundational beliefs about the world, like a world view. e.g., *Scientific knowledge is fundamentally better than indigenous knowledge.*

Brookfield (2012)


Prescriptive Assumptions
Work
Activities
Outcomes
Causal Assumptions
Foundational Assumptions





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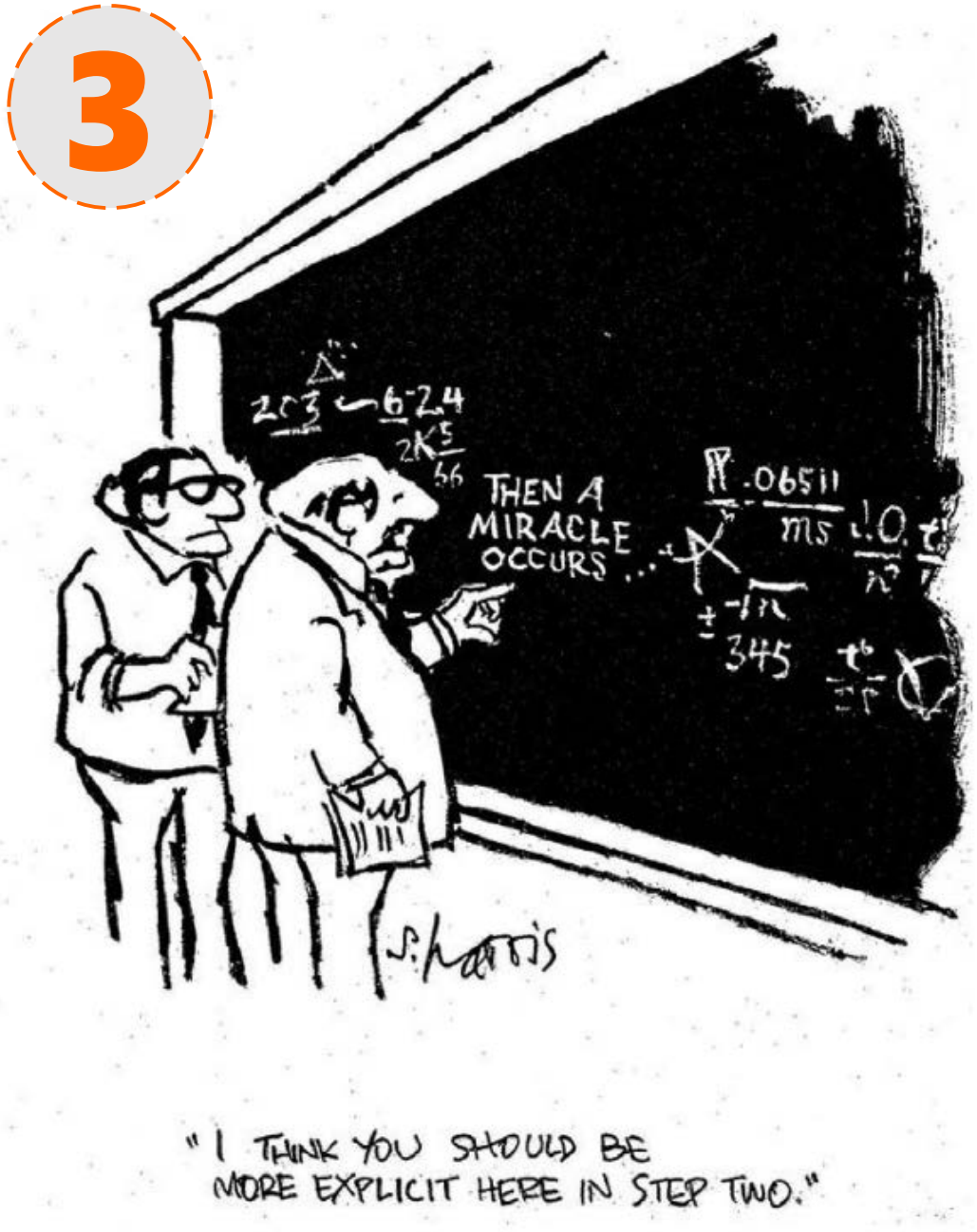


Fig. 2. "I think you should be more explicit here in step two" cartoon by Sidney Harris. Copyright by sciencecartoonsplus.com. Used with permission.

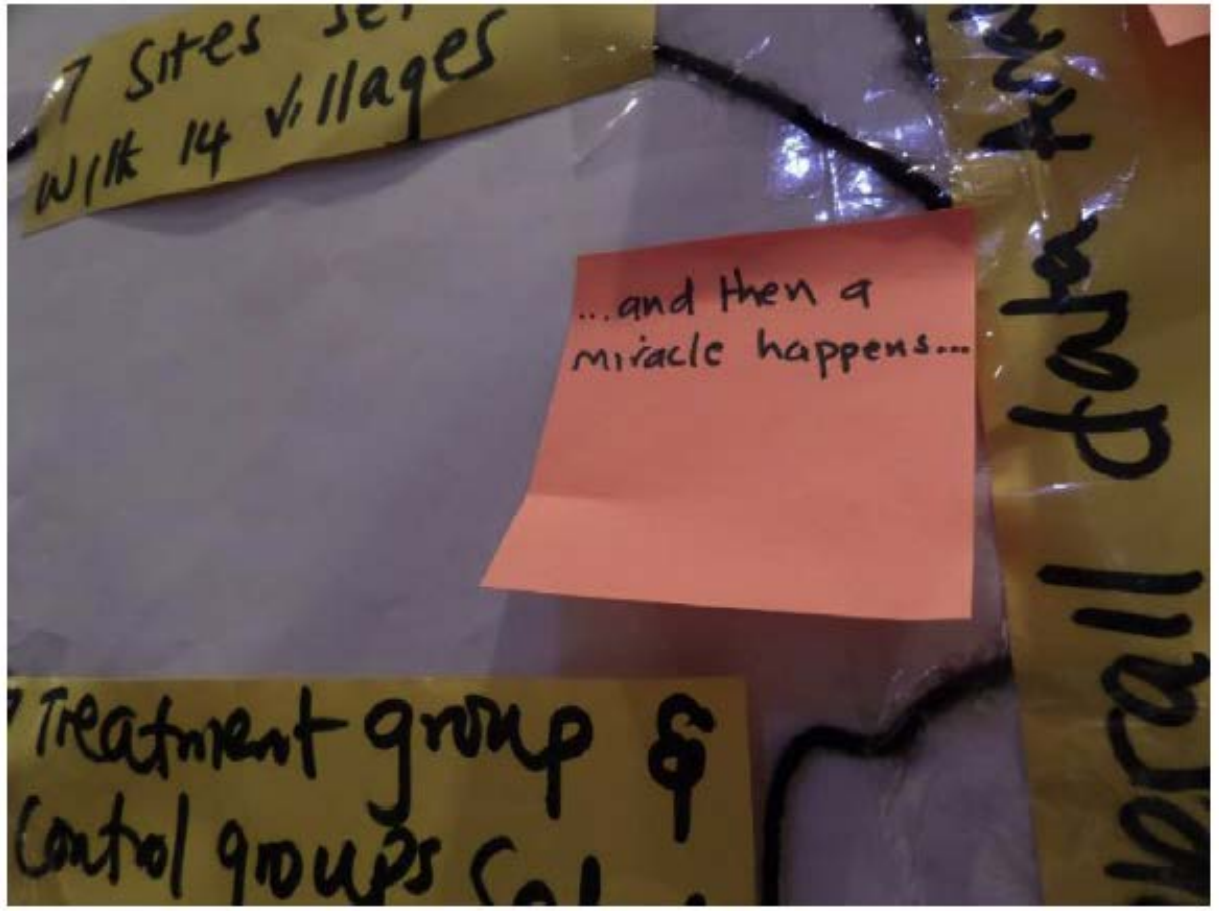


Fig. 3. Peer review comment from a Zambian participant about a peer group's assumptions; based on Sidney Harris' cartoon (Photo credit: T. Archibald).

4 CHALLENGES & RESULTS

Let's do integrated research!

Challenges and strategies for leading a 'Theory of Change' (ToC) process with interdisciplinary teams

Challenge 1: Managing time while dealing with differing perspectives

- Alternate formal and informal interaction formats (e.g. group workshops with bilateral coffee breaks)
- Explore differing assumptions of team members through scenarios and discuss their consequences for your overall vision and specific research activities, instead of forcing a consensus

Challenge 2: Balancing between concrete and abstract discussions

- Use actor's analysis (e.g. movers, floaters, blockers) to arrive at people-oriented statements
- Apply guiding questions to ground the discussions and elicit concrete answers
- Include and give voice to junior researchers with good contextual knowledge

Challenge 3: Ensuring rich discussions while balancing comfort and discomfort

- Break up understimulating comfort zones and arrange new and diverse working group compositions
- Prevent counterproductive discomfort zones by treating each perspective with genuine curiosity
- Take time to reflect individually, then start with group brainstorming and jointly formulate milestones on sticky-notes instead of formulating them individually

Challenge 4: Obtaining buy-in and overcoming reservations

- Explain the purpose of ToC both at the beginning and throughout the process
- Rename the tool if causing too much confusion
- Choose a good intervention mix, being synergistic with on-going activities and include both low and high-hanging fruits

Challenge 5: Fulfilling both service and science roles of ITD

- Plan how to collect, systematize and make use of assumptions from the very beginning
- Go beyond facilitation: perform an integrative science role by digging into the different knowledge fields involved, and identify inter-linkages and synergies between them

Deutsch L., Belcher B., Claus R., Hoffmann S. 2021: Leading inter- and transdisciplinary research: Lessons from applying theories of change to a strategic research program. Environmental Science & Policy, 120: 29-41 (Open Access)

4 CHALLENGES & RESULTS

Overcoming Challenges

- Identify and "tweak" existing processes to embed and encourage evaluative thinking
  - Project/ Activity kick-off meetings:
    - Are our assumptions still valid?
    - Has anything changed in the context?
  - Introduce more evaluative key questions for Portfolio Reviews, project reviews, annual Activity reviews
  - Integrate TOC reflect time into the annual work planning process
  - Integrate simple check-lists to remind people of critical/evaluative questions
  - Explore ways to maintain linkages between evaluative thinking, M&E, and learning but keep each process manageable
- Tie TOC inquiry to strategic/management decisions and processes
- Explore the feasibility of a Developmental Evaluation approach (embedded evaluator)

Evaluative Thinking Results – CRS

- Better staff engagement
  - Senior project staff proactively seeking wider range of views
  - More 'level playing field' for expressing opinions among staff
- Better project participant engagement
  - Greater project participant accountability through check-ins with community members and traditional leadership
- More productive work processes
  - Focus of learning and annual reviews shifting toward critical analysis
  - Deliberate use of techniques and tools to review learning and inform decision making
- More substantive reporting
  - More detailed engagement with monitoring data and use as an "evaluation" tool
  - Greater local contextualization of theories of change
  - Richer reporting by incorporating more perspectives

Source: Guy Sherrock, Catholic Relief Services, CORE Group M&E Working Group presentation, January 2018.

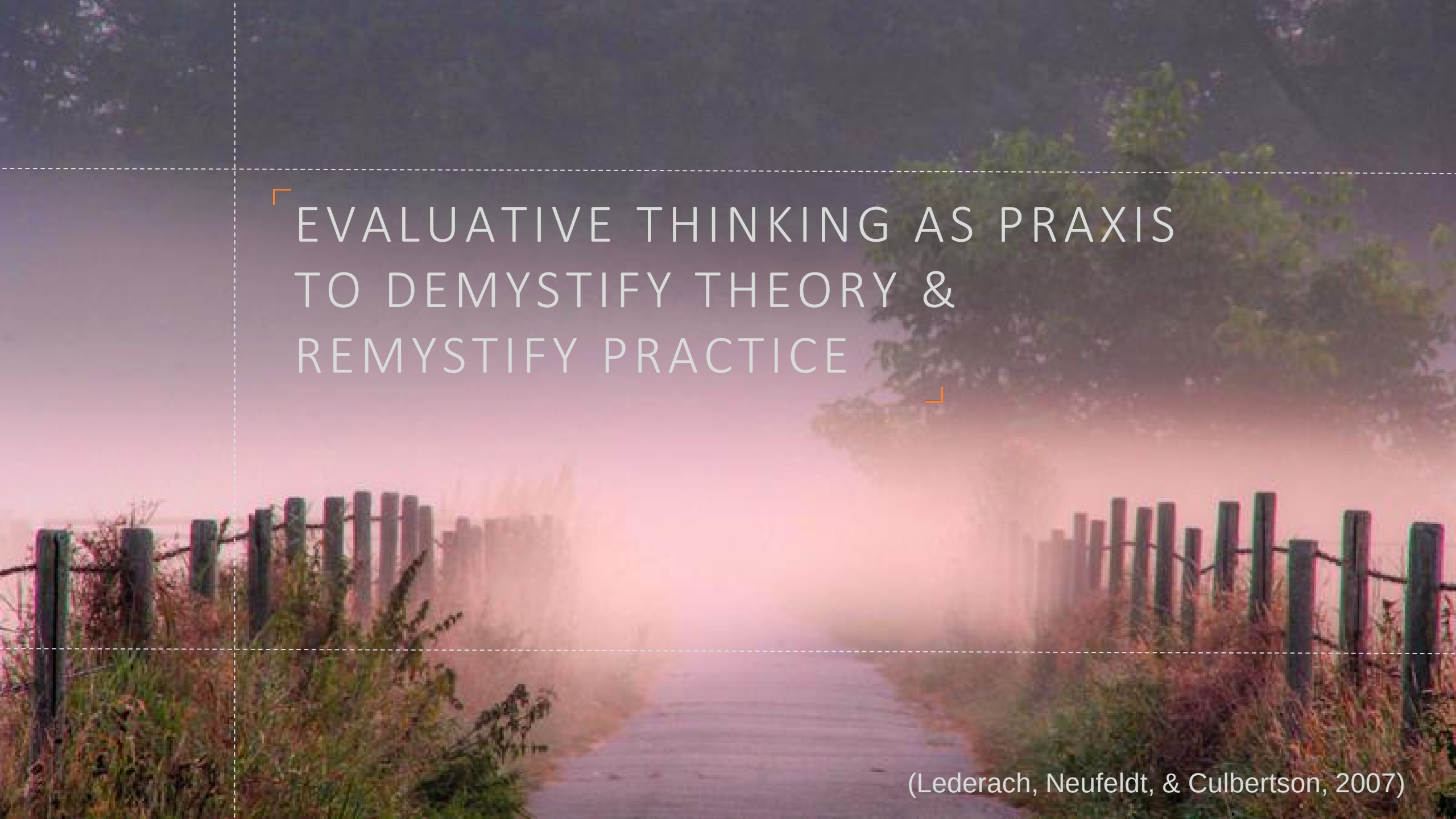
(from Hayat Askar via USAID Monitoring and Evaluation and Learning Activity in Jordan, on EvalForward)

-> Model and/or program change!

4

CHALLENGES & RESULTS

- Reflections
  - Links to USAID's CLA, #AdaptDev
  - Links to new areas in contribution tracing, causal mapping (Powell on Causal Mapping; QUIP; OH; Mayne, Lemire, etc.)
  - The first evaluation job I ever did
  - The most exciting and intriguing work I've done (voice & participation)


EVALUATIVE THINKING AS PRAXIS
TO DEMYSTIFY THEORY &
REMYSTIFY PRACTICE
(Lederach, Neufeldt, & Culbertson, 2007)

THANK YOU

http://bit.ly/EvaluativeThinking

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