Unanticipated consequences of development interventions: 
*a blind spot for evaluation theory and practice*

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1. Development programs almost never work out as planned

• The outcomes of most programs are unpredictable
  – Programs propose simple, linear solutions to complex problems
  – Even when programs go smoothly and are implemented as planned – human behavior is difficult to predict

• Programs operate in complex systems with constantly changing economic, political, security, natural environmental and socio-cultural environments

• Program planners have much less control than they often think
2. So why are evaluators still surprised when programs have unanticipated outcomes?

• Unanticipated outcomes still catch planners and evaluators off guard even though experience has shown that very few programs work out exactly as planned

• Many unanticipated outcomes, including serious negative consequences, are not even detected by many evaluations
Some serious negative outcomes not captured by the evaluation

• **A food-for-work program in Central America:**
  – Many women were forbidden by their husbands from participating in the project
  – Some women were seriously beaten by their husbands for attending meetings

• **A slum upgrading project in South East Asia:**
  – Prior to the official start of the project many slum dwellers were forced (sometimes at gunpoint) to sell their houses at a very low price to people with political contacts

• **A road construction project in East Africa:**
  – Prior to the first supervision mission the government destroyed a number of houses to avoid paying compensation to the families as specified in the loan agreement
3. Why are evaluations unable to detect these unanticipated outcomes?

- Funders only want evaluators to look at whether their programs achieve their intended outcomes/ goals
  - Don’t rock the boat
- Real-world evaluation constraints:
  - Budget, time, data constraints
  - Political and organizational constraints
Many evaluation designs make it difficult to identify unanticipated outcomes

- Many theories of change and logic models only explain and assess how a program is expected to achieve its objectives
  - They say very little about other things that might happen
- Results frameworks only monitor intended outcomes
- Conventional quantitative evaluation designs only assess whether observed changes can be attributed to the program intervention
evaluation designs make it difficult to identify unanticipated outcomes [continued]

• Structured surveys collect information relevant to program objectives but rarely provide an opportunity for respondents to talk about other things on their mind
• Difficult to find/interview vulnerable groups and those who do not benefit
• Focus groups often only cover people involved in the project
Many unanticipated events occur outside the vision field of the evaluation

- Many key events occur before the evaluation begins (e.g. people are forced to sell land or houses at bargain prices)
- Other events occur when the evaluator is not there (at night, during the rainy season, in the privacy of the household)
- Many critical events occur after the evaluation has ended
- Many quantitative evaluations have no contact with the program between the application of the survey instruments (pre-test and post-test)
• Evaluators often ignore context
• Budget constraints mean that the poorest and most vulnerable groups who live far from the village center, often cannot be interviewed
4. Why should we worry?

• Unanticipated events:
  – Seriously reduce the efficiency and effectiveness of programs
  – Important lessons are not learned
  – The vulnerable and voiceless tend to be the most affected
  – Some groups or communities can be significantly worse off as a result of development interventions
5. What can be done?

This section draws on and expands the framework presented in:

Jonathan Morell *“Evaluation in the Face of Uncertainty: Anticipating Surprise and Responding to the Inevitable”*  
Guilford 2010
What can be done?

Understanding the nature of the unexpected

• Types of surprise
  – Surprises we anticipate and address
  – Surprises that could be planned for and detected
  – Surprises that cannot be anticipated

• The probability and magnitude of surprise is related to:
  – The level of innovation in the program [*uncharted territory*]
  – The nature of the intervention
  – Fidelity to the design protocol
  – Robustness of the program in different settings
  – Level of understanding of the program context
  – Time between the intervention and the estimation of outcomes
What can be done?
Ways to foresee and address unanticipated outcomes

• Use of theory-based evaluation
  – With focus on mechanisms, linkages and testing assumptions

• Systematic use of past experience
  – Participatory consultations with affected populations

• Break the evaluation down into shorter segments

• Adapt forecasting methods used by planners

• Broader definition of the role of monitoring
What can be done?

Agile evaluation

• Always have a “Plan B” [see next slide]
• Flexibility in terms of data collection
• Flexible designs that can be rapidly adapted to changing circumstances
• Dynamic monitoring
• Unpacking the program into separate, but closely linked, components
  – Each of which is easier to evaluate
• Constant review of the program theory and the underlying assumptions
“Plan B”
Planning for the unexpected

What to do when:

• the program begins before the baseline study has been conducted?
• the comparison groups vanish?
• the program is restructured?
• Essential data is not available?
  – It may be intentionally withheld
“Eyes wide open” evaluation
Knowing what is really happening on the ground

• Find out about critical events that took place before the evaluation/program officially began
• Develop diverse sources inside and outside the program to make sure you know what everyone else in the country knows
• Check who you are getting information from and who you are not meeting
  – Know who participates in focus groups
• Develop creative ways to get information on, and about, non-beneficiaries and groups who are worse off