CHAPTER 3
Starting the Evaluative Journey

We often forget to draw a new picture because we are so busy criticizing other paintings.

—DEBASISH MRIDHA, American physician, philosopher, poet, seer, and author

Now that we have clarified some basic evaluation terms, and have taken our suitcases in hand, let's talk about one place to start an evaluative process. And no worries: A conversation about monitoring will naturally be wrapped into the discussion. Whenever we are serving as evaluators or working with an evaluative process, it is critical for us to thoroughly grasp and explain the intervention with all its complexities, obscured and otherwise. While each chapter delves deeper into, and continues to untangle, the intervention and the evaluative process, Chapter 3 provides one place to start: the reason(s) for the intervention's existence.

I am going to share a trade secret with you: Most evaluators do not instinctively understand an intervention in its entirety, or in all its intricacies and nuances. Even if an evaluator is an expert in a technical field within evaluation (e.g., a specialist in education evaluation), she rarely (if ever) knows automatically, and immediately, exactly what or how to evaluate an intervention. Evaluators are not omniscient (and be very wary of ones who claim to be!). Evaluators need to have a clear understanding of *exactly* what an organization is doing or planning to do (the **intervention**); to fix, change, or make "it" better ("it" being the **problem statement**); and for whom, exactly, the intervention is intended (the **beneficiaries**). And that is just the *start* of what evaluators need to know. Now that this trade secret has been shared, let's delve into these three concepts, starting with the intervention.

Introducing the Intervention

Despite what seems to be a common belief, an evaluator cannot magically answer the question "How do we evaluate it?" or "What did it accomplish?" without first knowing what "it" is that is being monitored or evaluated. The clearer "it" is, the easier it is for the evaluator to answer these and other questions.

BOX 3.1. Using the Term *Evaluative Process*

The term **evaluative process** is used to describe the entire flow from inception of the intervention, to what happens, to the valuing of what happens or does not, to the sharing and use of that information, and everything in between. The process and discussions described in the book can occur before an intervention starts (forward-looking, the planning phase); as the intervention unfolds (in real time, or for an innovative or developmental process); or after the intervention or components of the intervention have taken place or ended (retrospective).

What Is the Intervention?

Whether designing an intervention so that it is evaluable, monitoring an intervention as it is being implemented, or conducting an evaluation of the intervention, an evaluator first needs to understand what the intervention *is.* (See Chapter 1, pages 11–12, for a full listing of other nouns that can be substituted for *intervention*.) There are a few exceptions, such as in developmental evaluation, where the purpose is to inform and document the intervention as it unfolds; see Chapter 15 for specifics. The basic details that are often needed to understand an intervention, and therefore the basic questions that are usually asked, focus on (1) what it does, (2) what it aims to fix, change, or otherwise improve, (3) what it aims to accomplish, (4) how it intends to accomplish that, (5) where, and (6) for whom. Additional useful information could include (7) who provides the funding, (8) how long the intervention has been in place and for how long is it likely to be in place, and (9) who implements the intervention. These questions guide the early search for information about the intervention.

Ways to Obtain Data about the Intervention

Having conversations, reading documents, and observing (i.e., going to see something), are initial ways to obtain data describing the intervention. While the following pages provide a *brief* introduction to the types of data collection often used to learn about the intervention, Chapter 5 offers a more detailed discussion on data collection.

Reading Documents (Conducting a Document Review)

One way to obtain data describing the intervention is to read documents. The purpose of this process, also called a *document review* or *archival document analysis,* is to help inform an understanding of the intervention or answer a question in the evaluative process. The documents can contain words, numbers, or pictures (e.g., videos, drawings, or photos). Documents can be sourced from those who fund the intervention, obtained from implementation staff, requested from managers, or found on the internet, to name a few sources. Types of documents may include (to name just a few examples) pamphlets, funding proposals, meeting notes, business plans, quarterly or monthly reports, newspaper articles, promotional videos, theories of change (see Chapter 8 for a description of such theories), monitoring frameworks, or previous evaluations. An organization or intervention's website or webpage is often a very useful place to get started, as it likely provides a short description that gives a sense of the intervention, as well as other documents. However, the website or webpage should not be the sole source of data or information. Although it may provide easily accessible information or data, these may also be outdated or may only provide a partial picture.

Having Conversations (Interviews)

One way to understand what the intervention is, and why it exists, is to ask different people who probably have different perspectives on and insights about the intervention. As a starting place, consider talking to people who implement the intervention (perhaps those who designed it) and those who manage it, either individually or as a group. You can also talk to those who benefit, receive services, or otherwise take part in the intervention. These conversations are called *interviews*. Interviews can use open- or closed-ended questions.

An open-ended interview question is one that has no preselected answers. An example of such a question is "Tell me about your experience of reading this book." The upside? A person can say anything, thus providing a wealth of information. The downside? A person can say anything, thus providing broad and perhaps haphazard (and not useful) information. A more focused yet still open-ended question can also be used, such as "Describe what you like about how M&E is discussed in the book." That question guides the person to talk about what they liked about how M&E was discussed, not just any topic in the book. There are advantages and disadvantages of using more focused (sometimes known as leading) questions. The advantage is that it increases the chance of obtaining usable answers for description. The disadvantage is that respondents may be more likely (either consciously or unconsciously) to provide an answer they think you want to hear, and perhaps not mention another topic that would have proven informative.

An interview can also use closed-ended questions, which may or may not have predetermined answers. An example of a closed-ended question is "Do you consider yourself an evaluator?" which can be answered "Yes," "No," or "Not yet." Advantages of closed-ended

questions are that they are often easier and quicker to ask and answer. A potential glitch is that someone who brings no knowledge can still answer the question, even if the person asking the question does not realize that; similarly, a person who does not understand the question can still likely provide a response. Furthermore, if there are preselected answers, the *actual* answer a person wants to give may not be a choice.

The evaluator can mix question types as needed. Finally, an evaluator can ask follow-up, open-ended questions to either an open- or closed-ended question, which are called *probes*. An example would be "Tell me, what makes you think that?"

Going to See the Intervention (Observation)

Observing the intervention can be a good way to begin to understand what the intervention does. Before an observation can take place, however, an evaluator will need to ask about and adhere to any applicable guidelines, such as obtaining ethical or legal permission, understanding what is culturally appropriate, and considering practical things such as determining appropriate times for visits. Observation can be done with a checklist that will provide focus (e.g., a set of closed-ended questions as described in the previous section); a partially structured guide that gives some guidance on what to observe, such as thematic areas (e.g., male–female interaction, use of cellphones); or an exploratory approach that provides no guidance (the evaluator uses just a blank journal or the electronic equivalent to take notes). Typically, an evaluator will observe how participants and staff interact, what the intervention does (e.g., tutoring, training), or how participants gain access to the intervention (e.g., is it near a bus stop or in a central location?), though observations can be broader. The chief advantage of observation is that it immerses the evaluator into the field, providing a sense of the intervention (e.g., its context and meaning) that often cannot be derived from interviews or document reviews. A disadvantage, however, is that when people know that an evaluator is coming, a different picture may be presented from what happens normally. In addition, observation can be costly and time-consuming.

Gathering and Organizing Data for a Nutshell Description

In interviews, when people respond, their words (their own or preselected ones) are called **data.** In the document review, the words and pictures gathered are also called *data*. In observation, what is observed is also called *data*. (For a reminder of the distinction between *data* and *information,* see Chapter 1, page 13.)

Here is one example of the steps to consider when you are starting an evaluation and you need to learn about an organization or an intervention. Visit the webpage or website (if one does not exist, move to the next step). See what kinds of program descriptions and documents exist. Then call the organization and ask for additional documents not currently on the website that would be useful in understanding the intervention. Give some

examples from the list provided on page 41 (e.g., newspaper articles, quarterly reports, evaluation reports). Read the documents, and sketch a description of what is known thus far. Then write down any areas that need clarification, and use these to inform the interview questions. Share the questions with the organization (by phone or email); then ask who is best situated to answer these questions, and organize the interviews. The interviewees (also called *respondents*) may or may not be able to answer the questions. If not, that is fine; continue to ask the unanswered questions throughout the evaluative process. Your initial sketch of the intervention is what is called the *nutshell description* (defined in the next section). This is just one approach of many that can be used to grasp the initial understanding of what "it" is that we are seeking to monitor or evaluate.

The Nutshell Description

Synthesizing data from interviews, document reviews, and/or observation provides a broad initial understanding of the intervention, called a *nutshell description*. Such a description is needed to begin to understand what the intervention is aiming to accomplish, how it intends to accomplish that, where, when, and for whom. It is called a *nutshell description* because of its brevity; ideally, the description would fit into a proverbial peanut shell. In the early stages of the evaluative journey, it is not likely that all the intervention's details will be clear (and that is fine). For example, the funding document, a recent monitoring report, and several interviews may all suggest that the intervention aims to address troubled youth; however, the details are not consistent regarding exactly what is being done, or specifically for whom (e.g., the term *troubled youth* is not defined). Thus the nutshell description provides "enough" of an understanding about the intervention to enable the monitoring or evaluation process to move forward. A clearer, more detailed intervention description will iteratively emerge through the evaluative journey.

Identifying gaps, inconsistencies, or conflicting descriptions generates *clarifying questions* to be asked during the monitoring or evaluation process (questions the evaluator asks to clarify the intervention); the answers to these questions will then inform further interviews, document reviews, or observation. Exposing inconsistencies between stakeholders' perspectives and experiences can be particularly important to engaging with realities, as opposed to what is on paper. For instance, an evaluator could ask, "Your documents say that the intervention is aimed at troubled youth. However, my interview notes suggest that you only work with youth who have drug addictions. Can you tell me a bit more about the beneficiaries?" These kinds of details affect how and what to monitor and evaluate. For instance, both interventions may be aimed at youth who regularly skip school and have failing marks; however, one intervention would also address drug addictions, while the other intervention would not. Each intervention then suggests different kinds of results (some of which are likely to be overlapping), which will affect, for example, decisions about what to monitor and evaluate.

Depending on the timing of the evaluation process, the nutshell description may describe what the intervention is designed to achieve, what is happening, what did happen, or a mix of all three (i.e., some parts have been implemented while others have not). What follows is an example of a useful nutshell description for the girls' education intervention. This example is followed throughout the next several chapters.

Girls' Education Intervention: Nutshell Description

The intervention started 3 years ago and will be funded for 2 more years. It focuses on helping school-age girls access education that is freely given in their community. The intervention mostly focuses on convincing fathers who currently prevent their daughters from attending to support their daughters to get an education. Local knowledge suggests that fathers or father figures often prevent girls from attending school. The intervention also addresses some contextual issues, such as the safety of the girls as they go to and from school. The intervention's theory is based on literature drawn from education, development, and gender studies, as well as local cultural knowledge.

The purpose of the nutshell description is simply to provide a place to *start* a more in-depth conversation about the intervention. With the nutshell description in hand, we now seek to understand *why* the intervention exists. The answer or answers to that question almost always offer a gold mine of information to be used during the entire evaluative process.

Introducing the Problem Statement

Now that we have a very broad understanding of what the intervention is, we (the evaluators) need to understand the *reason* for the intervention. An activity, policy, program, or intervention is put in place for at least one reason. It exists to fix, improve, or otherwise change something, for someone. This "something" is labeled the **problem statement.** There may be one problem or multiple problems. It may be a well-documented problem or a hidden one. Furthermore, different people may describe the problem differently, based on their knowledge, experience, beliefs, or position in society. And some people may not describe it as a problem at all.

Uses for a Problem Statement

Although an evaluation journey can start in multiple places, addressing the problem statement always occurs near the beginning, as it provides a critical foundation for the evaluative process (and it may be the beginning of an evaluator's engagement if he has been asked to help inform the design of an intervention). There are four key uses for a well-researched and clearly written problem statement:

- *It informs how to design an intervention.* Since the intervention aims to fix the problem, whoever designs the intervention needs to know what to fix (improve, enhance, influence, or change).
- *It identifies how the intervention is relevant.* If someone asks a question about the relevance of an intervention, one answer lies in the problem statement: The intervention aims to produce results that fix an identified problem. This is what makes it relevant, and it is also how potential results are identified.
- *It identifies who aims to benefit.* You are probably thinking, "Relevant to whom?" The problem statement helps to clarify who, or what, is intended to benefit.
- *It clarifies what to assess.* When an evaluator is determining what to assess in terms of progress toward results or achievement of them, information is found in the problem statement because the intervention has aimed to fix something. If the problem is fixed or is moving toward being fixed, then the intervention is likely to have been effective (here, *effective* means that the intervention did what it aimed to do).

While these four areas (how to design an intervention, how the intervention is relevant, who aims to benefit, and what to assess) are further informed through other parts of the evaluative process, a good problem statement offers a useful place to start to find some answers (see Figure 3.1).

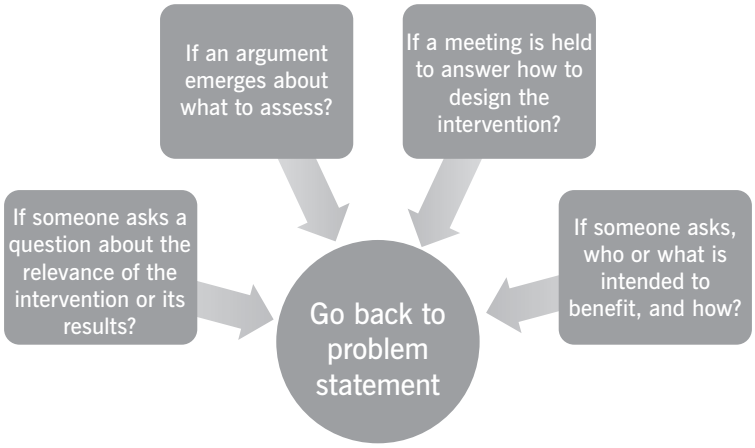


FIGURE 3.1. Problem statement: The questions it can answer.

When Labeling a Problem Statement Can Be a Problem

Sometimes a challenge to working with a problem statement is its label. Sometimes the word *problem* can be found to be abrasive or too negative. When people find the word offensive, it can become a problem in itself—mostly because when people are offended or uncomfortable, they tend to focus on the word they do not like, instead of answering the gist of a question. Thus the question does not get answered. Also, offending a person through word choice does not encourage a person to engage with you. In fact, having a person shut down in the first part of an evaluative process is likely to have a ripple effect throughout, particularly if that individual is in any way influential in the process. (To read more on language, see Chapter 13.) If the word *problem* is not appropriate, do not use it; simply substitute another word, such as *challenge*. For an evaluation to be useful, reflect constantly on how to choose words and frame questions to make the best fit with your clients, stakeholders, beneficiaries, or other actors (for more discussion of these words, jump ahead to pages 60–61). What is defined in this chapter as a *problem statement* can be relabeled to be more culturally or contextually appropriate; it is the information under the label that matters. If the label offends, replace it. Words matter.

Words Matter

How we communicate matters, what we say, and how we say it. Something we say in one situation may be appropriate, and in another it may be offensive or just confusing. Changing a word or a sentence, or an accent or emphasis on a word in a sentence, may elicit a completely different response. A colleague sent me a link to a YouTube video that provides a striking illustration of how words matter (*www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wgi0t2ap-us&feature=youtu.be*).

Identifying the Problem Statement: The Questions to Ask

Now that we know what makes the problem statement useful, and now that we realize we can call it something else if that is helpful, let's talk about how to identify one. An evaluator can ask one or more of the following questions, which are all variations of the same question, to initiate the problem statement conversation:

- What is the problem that the intervention aims to address?
- What does the intervention intend to fix, change, or improve?
- Tell me about the reasons the intervention was developed.
- What gap (or gaps) was this intervention intended to fill?

BOX 3.2. Answering Questions or Asking Them?

Answering evaluation questions is often what evaluators are asked to do—yet knowing how, what, when, where, why, and with whom to ask good questions is an essential part of being an evaluator. Throughout the book, I provide examples of questions that can be used to elicit information. However, these questions will need to be modified, adapted, or otherwise cultivated to support each unique evaluation journey. For example, you may need to use words that may be more specific or more appropriate to the context, or to change the wording of a question from present to past (or past to present) tense. Or you may need to change the common noun (e.g., *intervention*) to the most appropriate one (e.g., *program, organization, policy, activity*).

These questions can be explored by using data-gathering techniques similar to the ones used to generate the nutshell description: document reviews, interviews, observation, or all three. If the questions are used to guide an interview, consider carefully how each question is worded. These questions are written as open-ended questions, meaning that they are intended to encourage wide-ranging responses. Unless you have narrowed down the answers needed, or you only require brief answers, avoid asking closed-ended questions. At this stage in the process, you will want to encourage an in-depth discussion about the problem statement because there is so much to learn about one, and from one.

Sometimes the four questions listed on the previous page may not elicit useful responses (i.e., data). If this happens, consider one (if not more) of the following options, which take different approaches to identifying the same information.

- Your organization/intervention exists because . . . ? (Rather than have someone answer a question, have the person complete a sentence.)
- Can you tell me a bit more about the background of this intervention? (Asking for a general history often encourages a nice, easy dialogue.)
- In the next 5 years, what do you expect to see change or improve, or just be different, because of the intervention? (A time frame sometimes helps people focus.)
- Tell me a bit more about what makes the intervention critical or necessary. Who thinks this? What makes them think that? (A more informal and general conversational approach may be helpful.)
- What do those of you involved in the intervention want to accomplish? (The person states what they want to achieve. You then take the answer, and restate the flip side or opposite of that, and it becomes the problem. I demonstrate this "reverse" tactic a bit later in this chapter.)

These questions can be mixed with the first set of questions; each set is not exclusive. At this point in the process, a problem of any size can be identified; this is the starting point of the conversation. These questions can be supplemented with probes as needed, such as "What makes you think that?" or "Can you tell me a bit more?"

Different-Sized Problems: Breaking Down the Problem Statement

The problem statement can (and should) be separated into two categories: the **grand problem(s)** and **pocket problems.** The words are not intended as labels per se. Rather, they are organizing concepts to guide a discussion that will allow an evaluator to explore how an intervention addresses *what* problem, which then leads to *what* specific, intended result. Eventually, the process will link the problem statement to the intervention to the results, all at the same levels (i.e., a grand problem is linked to a grand result; a pocket problem is linked to a pocket result). I describe the process in an iterative manner in Chapters 4–10. Here we are starting to lay the groundwork.

The Grand Problem

The grand problem is the larger problem, such as gender violence, pollution, or obesity. Sometimes it can be described at a lower level or with more specificity, such as "Children have poor nutrition in Town G." In other words, the grand problem is the largest problem the intervention is aiming to address, put a dent in, or use as the "guiding light" (the light that all can see, yet realize that it may not be reached in the foreseeable future).

The Pocket Problems

All the pocket problems, when combined, form the grand problem; the reverse is also true (i.e., the grand problem can be broken down into the pocket problems). Figure 3.2 shows an example. The pocket problems can be broken down further into mini-sized ones if we continue to ask the never-ending "why" questions (e.g., in the Figure 3.2 example, "Why do few healthy food choices exist in the elementary school?"). Essentially, the problem statement needs to be broken down as far as needed to inform these three kinds of understanding:

- *Before implementation.* To understand how to design the intervention so that it addresses specific problems, and in doing so to identify where expected results will happen, and for whom.

- *After implementation.* To understand why the intervention did what it did, where, and for whom.
- *After implementation.* To understand why the intervention had (or did not have) the results it did, where, and for whom.

Additional information gathered throughout the evaluative process will also inform these understandings. In addition, how an evaluator engages with and uses the problem statement will vary, depending on when she enters the process: either forward-looking (planning an evaluable intervention), in the moment (as when supporting innovation), or backward-looking (evaluation).

BOX 3.3. Using Pocket and Grand Problems

When people respond to initial questioning about the problem statement with a grand problem, ask questions to break the grand problem down into pocket problems. If they respond with a pocket problem, build the pocket problems up to a grand problem. This is an iterative process, and the discussion is likely to go back and forth between the two. In the process, gaps may be identified, such as when the pocket problems do not build up to the grand problem, or there is no awareness of what pocket problems form the grand one. These are all part of the evaluative findings.

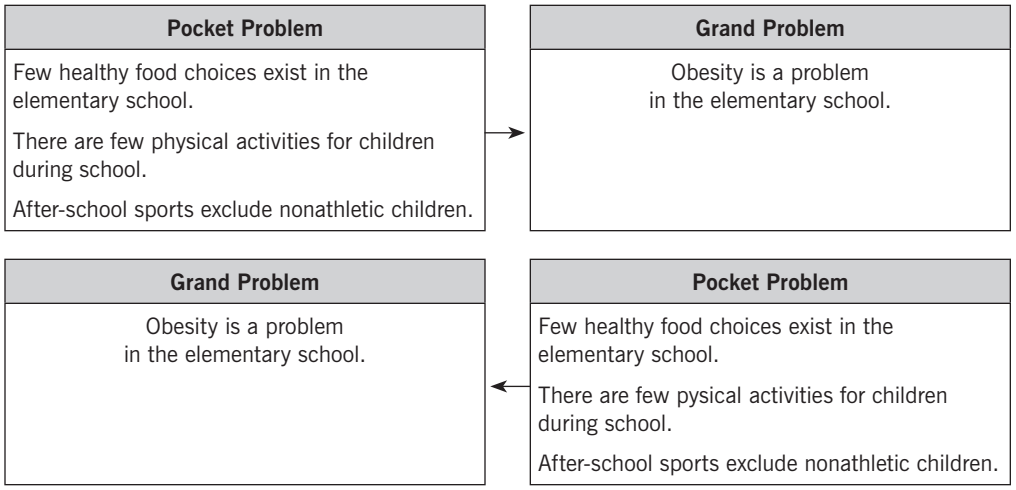
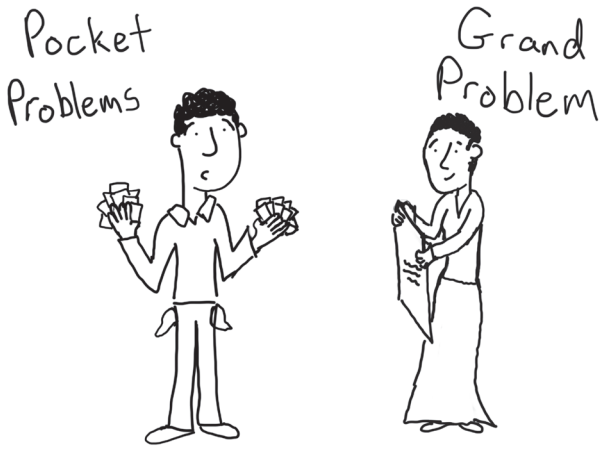


FIGURE 3.2. Pocket and grand problems.

There are no concrete definitions of grand and pocket problems, or even specific ways to write them; the terms are not intended to constitute a formula or to be used to squish problems into a predetermined check/tick box. Rather, what is offered is a loosely structured way of thinking. The thinking allows a person to conceptualize, explore, and facilitate a detailed discussion that organizes thoughts on how, and which, problems are addressed by what parts of an intervention, and how all this relates to intended (and/or actual) results. If this approach seems a bit messy, or if it is not clear how it is used in practice, skip ahead to Chapter 6 to see the concepts in action—then come right back.



A warning is in order at this point: Do not rush to finalize the problem statement. The fluid evaluation process systematically, iteratively, and repeatedly interrogates it, and in doing so, identifies the pocket and grand problems, which creates a strong foundation for any type of planning, monitoring, or evaluation. To refer to Aesop's fable of the Tortoise and the Hare (see "A Conversation with My Readers" at the start of the book), the evaluator's aim is to be the Tortoise, not the Hare—that is, to win the race with slow, steady effort. With that in mind, let's explore the problem statement from a slightly different perspective (which may overlap with the one we have just discussed, or may bring new insights): separating what causes the problem from what is a symptom of that cause. Knowing the difference, and then clearly identifying which (if not both) the intervention aims to address, will influence expected results and help determine what to assess. Curious? Read on.

BOX 3.4. A Problem Statement, Revisited

An intervention addresses something that someone considers a challenge, a problem, or something that needs improvement, fixing, or change. A statement summarizing that "something" is called a *problem statement,* which is made up of *grand* and *pocket problems*. We evaluate interventions to see whether, or to what extent, how, and for whom the

intervention has addressed (or is currently addressing) the entire problem statement, or just elements of it.

Clarifying Different Kinds of Problems, and Why It Matters

We have just noted that the problem statement has two parts: grand and pocket problems. Once those are established (or sometimes as they are being established), another perspective provides useful information: identifying whether the problem is a root cause or a symptom of that cause.

Distinguishing the Root Cause versus a Symptom

Here is an example of a root cause versus a symptom. Sometimes I have a headache. I take some aspirin, and the headache goes away. Maybe it never comes back. Maybe it does. Maybe the headache is a sign of a lack of caffeine, which is the sign of another problem (drinking copious amounts of caffeinated coffee or black tea and caffeinated diet soda can cause a caffeine addiction). Or maybe the headache is a sign that I need stronger reading glasses. Or maybe it is a sign of something more serious.

Let's say that I have another headache. Someone gives me one bottle of aspirin. When I take my aspirin, I have no headache. If I were asked at that point in time, "Does the intervention work?", my answer would be a gleeful yes. Problem solved. Or is it? When I run out of aspirin, my headache returns. Sometimes treating the symptoms (removing the pain) will not have longer-term intended results because it has not addressed the real reason (root cause) for the pain. Furthermore, the headache may result from multiple root causes, such as a need for glasses *and* a lack of caffeine. For now, let's keep it simple and assume one root cause; then I will complicate it.

Let's say the person who gives the aspirin to me digs a little deeper about the cause of my headache before he provides an intervention. Perhaps he then identifies the root cause (caffeine addiction), and provides an intervention to cure my caffeine addiction. During the intervention, the headaches grow worse (they need to get worse before they get better). If there is an evaluation at that time, I probably will provide negative feedback. And furthermore, if the funding is stopped at that point (e.g., because the evaluation says the intervention is not working), I will still have headaches, and likely my caffeine addiction as well. However, let's now say that when the intervention is fully implemented, it solves my addiction (I now drink herbal tea) and achieves my intended longer-term results of not having headaches. Now let's add back in the more complicated situation mentioned above—that the headaches are results of multiple root causes (not only a caffeine addiction, but also a need for glasses). And this is where evaluation becomes a bit more complicated. There may

be no result from my drinking herbal tea and breaking my addiction because another root cause needs to be addressed at the same time (the root problem being reading without proper glasses). Problems can be simple to address, or they can be complicated, and that is why they need to be broken down to be understood.

Assumption Infestations

Beware: Discussions that clarify root causes and symptoms can be infested with assumptions. See Chapter 4 for an in-depth look at assumptions and facts and their importance to the entire evaluation process.

There are two lessons in the headache example.

1. When an evaluator is informing the design of an intervention (forward-looking) or conducting an evaluation (backward-looking) she needs to clarify what the intervention is aimed to change, fix, or otherwise address: root cause(s), symptom(s), or both.
2. The evaluator needs to identify at what point the evaluation happens during the intervention's implementation. This second lesson is only foreshadowed here; it is discussed more fully in Chapter 6.

Why is knowing that the root cause has not been identified, or maybe just not addressed, or that only symptoms have been addressed, important for evaluators?

Identifying the root cause and symptoms can be useful to an evaluation process for two reasons:

- *The discussion of root cause and symptoms clarifies the intended results.* Knowing which problem the intervention is aimed to address clarifies the expected results. As such, it provides insight (not often *the* answer, but insight) into what to monitor and evaluate in order to understand if results happened, or why intended results did not happen.
- *It provides insight into questions on sustainability. Sustainability* is a "suitcase word" of note (i.e., it needs to be unpacked). For more on suitcase words, their dangers, and how to mitigate them, skip ahead to pages 138–140, and we dig into the concept of sustainability in Chapter 7. The key point here is that the discussion about root causes and symptoms generates a wealth of information that may support at least part of an explanation as to why something is sustained (it addresses a root cause) or is not sustained (it addresses a symptom).

Looking for the root causes and symptoms of a problem, and which of these the intervention aims (or aimed) to address, should be on your radar screen.

Avoiding the "Why" Question by Asking a "What" Question

Starting a question with "Why" can be difficult to answer, as it is essentially asking a theoretical question. Switching the "Why" to a "What" allows for a more concrete descriptive answer. Paula Bilinsky, an evaluator who introduced me to evaluation, once told me, "It is often better to handle a 'why' question with a 'what' question." For example, if you want to know why a person is attending a program, it can be challenging for many to answer the question "Why are you here today?" Asking the person, "What made you choose to come to this program today?" is likely to result in more concrete answers, as it is a more direct question.

Why—I mean, what are some examples of what happens when an evaluator identifies that the intervention is not addressing, or has not addressed, the root cause?

Consider these three evaluation scenarios in which the evaluator identifies that the intervention has not addressed the root cause, and notice how that influences evaluation use.

1. *Evaluation finding is used.* The implementer is aware that the initial research used to design the intervention was poorly done. Although the symptom was addressed, and results have been achieved, the implementer is concerned about the potential of the result lasting (the sustainability of the effect). The implementer welcomes the evaluator and his finding that the intervention has not addressed the root cause, and uses that information to make substantive changes to the intervention. Thus the evaluation is used to influence the intervention.
2. *Evaluation finding is rejected.* The program implementer has effectively addressed a symptom that is of critical importance to the donor, and has achieved the intended results. The evaluation, however, shows that the root cause was not addressed, and therefore there is a high probability that the results will not last. Both the implementer and the donor reject that evaluation finding and claim success. No changes are made to the intervention.
3. *Evaluation finding is quietly ignored.* The implementer has been under tremendous political pressure to "get going and get results." The evaluation finding that the symptoms are being addressed but not the root cause is of little interest to the implementer, who is dealing with continuing pressure to keep moving ahead. The report is shelved.

Even when an evaluator understands the importance of addressing the root cause, or at the very least of knowing that the root cause is not being addressed, evaluation clients may not bring the same appreciation. It happens. At the same time, the evaluation may be very much appreciated, and provide useful information that is used to inform the program.

Our intervention has been implemented extremely well, but the results are dismal. Could something be wrong with the problem statement?

Absolutely. There could be many reasons why the results are dismal, which should be explored (see Chapters 4–8 and 12–13 for additional potential reasons). However, for now, let's look at some common ways a problem statement may contribute to poor or unexpected results.

- *The problem statement only addresses one key root cause, when several exist.* See the headache example starting on page 51. If only one key root cause is addressed, but not the others, there may be no, or few, intended results identified.
- *One or more pocket problems did not exist when the intervention was designed.* Another reason is that at least one new pocket problem has arisen since the intervention was designed. This is often quite likely, considering that communities, people, politics, policies, or other **variables** (i.e., things that can change) may be constantly changing. For example, while childhood obesity may have been a problem 5 years ago and remains a problem today, the pocket problems, or the factors causing obesity in children, may now be different. In other words, what was *not* a problem 5 years ago may be a problem today, which then influences the intervention's ability to achieve the intended results (i.e., it is likely the wrong intervention).

It seems like asking questions about the intervention and developing the problem statement are good places to start an evaluative journey. However, these are not the questions I am usually asked at the start. In fact, no one has ever asked me to sort out the problem statement. My clients usually ask me to "just" assess results and the effectiveness of their intervention. Can you explain a bit more how to convince my clients that I need to clarify the problem statement?

Even when your clients, boss, or colleagues ask you to start in a different place, such as assessing results or identifying indicators (indicators are explained in Chapter 9), an evaluator first needs to have a basic understanding of the intervention and of what problem it aims to address. Rushing forward and trying to assess results, and linking those results to the intervention without first understanding how the intervention is linked to a problem, are likely to be challenging if not impossible. After acknowledging your clients' needs, explain

the following logic (you may want to jump to Chapter 4 to read about facts and assumptions before using the following example):

A problem statement describes what needs to be fixed, changed, or improved (it is a fact). An intervention is implemented to fix it (it is an assumption, sometimes with a few facts mixed in). If the intervention works, it will have intended results (assumptions) and perhaps unintended ones. The results should erase the problem statement, or at least put a dent in it. Thus, to understand if the intervention is effective, we first need to understand what the problem is, how the intervention aimed to influence that, and what results were expected. Understanding each of these three items informs assessment decisions—and, indeed, a monitoring framework and evaluation design.

A follow-up to that suggestion is to select one or several of the questions listed earlier in this chapter (see page 47) and engage in a discussion. For example, "Tell me a bit more about what makes the intervention critical or necessary. Who thinks this? What makes them think that?" The responses to those questions may start the necessary conversation that leads to exploring the need for a clear problem statement.

I would be remiss not to mention other real-world possibilities for engaging in problem statement discussions. Challenges may arise when an intervention has been aimed to fulfill a political or personal agenda, "fit" within what the donor wants to do, or spend down a budget, and has never been intended to address a fact-based social problem. (A problem statement needs to be fact-based, not an assumption of a fact. As noted above, to read about the need for fact-based problem statements, go to Chapter 4.)

Wait. What if I find out that the reason for the intervention is to fulfill a political or personal agenda, fit what a donor wants to do, or spend down a budget, and I need to conduct an evaluation? What happens then?

This is a tricky situation, that's for sure. Let me provide some guidance. First, tread carefully. Second, just being aware is beneficial, as it helps you to navigate the situation. Third, consider how the evaluation *process* may be useful to someone, at some point, in some way. This is called process use. To understand more about and engage with evaluation process use, see page 229. Fourth, realize that even if the intervention was to fulfill a political agenda, for example, it may still be an intervention that aimed to do some good for something or someone, and would benefit from evaluation; or maybe not.

Admittedly, the proverbial monkey wrench is thrown into the process when the real reason for the intervention is based purely on a political or personal agenda. Even so, engaging in reality, and knowing that other reasons can exist, can bring useful insight to the evaluative process. Here is an example.

A small town (let's call it Town A) has well-maintained primary schools that have consistently good academic results. Town A is affluent. The adjacent town, Town B,

lies within the same political zone (i.e., the same elected officials represent both areas). However, Town B schools have consistently poor primary school results, specifically in math and science. Most families in Town B live at or just below the poverty line. The government provides a free math and science tutoring program in Town B. Residents of Town A hear about the program and demand the same intervention for their town, where most children score average or above average on the same exams. The officials, who are concerned with re-election, decide to provide Town A with the same academic program. An evaluator is asked to evaluate the intervention (with no knowledge of these circumstances). While he finds no significant academic improvement in Town A, in Town B he identifies substantial increases in math and science scores. He may conclude that the intervention has worked in Town B but not in Town A, or that it is not necessary in Town A, and recommend that the intervention only receive further funding for Town B. Uh-oh.

Imagine, however, that the evaluator stops and asks this question: What problem did the intervention intend to address? He finds out that in Town A, the intervention has been provided to solve a political problem, and in Town B, it has been aimed to address an educational one. What *needs* to be evaluated is if Town A residents have been pleased to receive the intervention, and if so, whether they have voted for their local representative to serve another term. After all, in Town A that has been the intervention's actual goal. What is assessed in Town B should remain the same: measuring the math and science achievement of targeted children. In the real world, it is highly unlikely that an evaluation will assess how people from Town A vote, and link that to the intervention; however, knowing that alternative reasons exist for an intervention to exist (as opposed to an actual social problem) will keep an evaluator sane when he exhausts all other logical reasons, or his recommendations are rejected. (Cut funding from Town A? Um. No.) All I can say is that it is the real world out there, people, and not sweeping reality under the rug is one of the many tough aspects of being a good evaluator.

Who does the problem identification, and who does the rest of the evaluative process—the researcher, evaluator, program manager, or someone else?

Here is a very nice example of how a researcher, evaluator, and program manager can work together in harmony, which elaborates on our discussion in Chapters 1 and 2. The researcher (or the evaluator, using her research skills) identifies the problem that needs to be addressed through using a research design that provides facts; the program manager reviews these facts and designs the intervention to address one or all of the problems, noting specific results for certain people, animals, or the environment. The evaluator works with the program manager to ensure that the intervention is evaluable, and identifies the criteria that will be used to determine the intervention's value, merit, and worth. In rare cases, the three roles may be performed by one person. In more common scenarios, each role is carried out by multiple

people. Note, however, that the evaluator often arrives after the problem is identified, and often after the initial intervention is designed (though not always).

I thought that the place to start engaging in an evaluation process was to focus on the intervention's theory. Can I start there instead?

Sometimes people consider the starting place of an evaluative journey to be discussing the program's theory. I find that a more difficult and less tangible place to start. The main problem is that it *is* theory—which often does not provide a concrete enough starting place for the evaluator or for those with whom she needs to engage. Rather than discussing program theory first, I focus on untangling the logic (which is what we are doing here in this chapter, starting with the problem statement), which then provides a scaffolding for a move to a theory discussion (the process is still iterative, though; discussion on theory is just brought in later). To learn more about (and be able to facilitate a concise discussion of) theory and logic, or if you would like to start an evaluation journey by discussing intervention or program theory, please jump ahead to Chapter 8. For now, let's look at the evaluator's role in facilitating and describing the problem statement.

The Evaluator's Role

The evaluator can fill many different roles with regard to the problem statement. If she is there when the intervention is conceptualized, she can play an active role in identifying and confirming that there is indeed a problem. If she arrives after the intervention is designed or implemented, she can then facilitate a process to identify the grand problem and then unpack it into pocket problems, or the reverse. Sometimes the evaluator must sort out what the intervention is aiming to address on her own, or with her team, often through a document review. Regardless of the process, remember that an iterative interplay exists among the discussions of the problem statement, intervention, and results, and that each discussion helps to clarify and refine the others. While facilitation skills prove useful in this process, logical thinking and patience are necessities.

BOX 3.5. Facilitation

If you are using this book to learn about working in the field of evaluation, or to guide self-reflection, then facilitation skills are not yet needed. If you are using this book to engage others in an evaluative process or teach others about being an evaluator, then facilitation becomes a critical skill. Facilitation skills are developed over time, and are not something that one can learn effectively in an afternoon, in one course, or by reading a book. Strong facilitation skills demand a combination of reading, practice in a variety of settings, and self-reflection.

Learning to Be a Facilitator

If you know someone who is a good facilitator, ask to observe him in action. If you know more than one facilitator, this is even better, as different people have different facilitation styles, processes, and games. Observe, practice, reflect, observe, and practice again. If you are not fortunate enough to know at least one good facilitator, think back to a well-facilitated class, workshop, or seminar: What made the facilitation strong? What did not go well? How would you do it differently? Then practice, reflect, and practice some more.

Facilitation

- ***Have a minute?*** Take a look at the website of the International Association of Facilitators (*www.iaf-world.org/site/index.php*), which provides various types of resources.
- ***Have several hours?*** If your interest is deeper, consider reading *Facilitating Evaluation: Principles in Practice* by Michael Quinn Patton (2018a).
- ***Want to have some fun?*** Check out Chris Lysy's blog (*https://freshspectrum.com/blog*), where he provides cartoons depicting everyday evaluation conversations that bring touches of levity to facilitating evaluation processes.

The world is messy. Where I work, defining what my intervention is attempting to change is complicated. I see problems (and other influences) all over the place that likely affect what my intervention is trying to address and achieve. What about those other problems and influences? How do I sort this out, in terms of monitoring and evaluation?

The world indeed seems *simple* at times, *complicated* at other times, and *complex* at still others. These terms are associated with the Cynefin framework, which includes two more categories, *chaos* and *disorder* (Kurz & Snowden, 2003). Using these words brings in language that specifically acknowledges systems thinking in evaluation, and thus addresses the issue raised in your first statement: The world is a messy place. The evaluative process described in this book provides one basic starting place for understanding an intervention, what it aims to achieve, and what can influence it. The process slowly builds, and eventually different elements that complicate the world around us are added and bring the needed level of complexity to the discussion. We will get there, all in good time. When faced with a complex or complicated problem, I often feel overwhelmed (which throws my brain into chaos and disorder), and thus I break down the evaluative process so that it is graspable (before I have a breakdown myself). I begin just by trying to simplify, clarify, and focus. And then, and only then, do I start to bring in the complexities that I need to engage with, in order to understand what else may be influencing the program and its results.

I have just mentioned the usefulness of the Cynefin framework. I recommend an article by Snowden and Boone (2007) on applying the Cynefin framework, where they provide

real-life examples of its usefulness. Two other great thinkers in the systems field are Donella Meadows (*http://donellameadows.org*), whose approach to systems is user-friendly and easily accessible, and Bob Williams (*www.bobwilliams.co.nz*).

The perception of a problem can be just as much of a problem as the problem itself, right?

The perception of a problem is indeed a problem to be discussed. However, exploring people's perceptions is different from engaging with what they perceive to be a problem. Clear as mud? If there is a fact-based problem that girls do not go to school because they do not have access to school uniforms, then one intervention would be to provide the uniforms. However, if that is only a perception (it is not actually true, people just think that), then providing the uniforms will not solve the problem (because the intervention is addressing a perception of a problem). In this case, an evaluator needs to find out why that perception exists and address that perception. An evaluator needs to know how, or to what extent, that perception has the potential to negatively affect the intervention or its results.

Is a situational analysis the same the thing as identifying a problem statement, or a root cause and symptoms?

A situational analysis is often broader than simply identifying a problem statement. A *situational analysis* is a process that looks at a situation to understand what is happening, why, and what needs to be addressed. The analysis helps to ensure an intervention's relevance. There are several elements to a situational analysis:

- Defining the extent of the problem in that context.
- Identifying the perceptions and experiences of key stakeholders in relation to the problem.
- Identifying what already exists to address the problem, and the gaps in those already existing strategies and/or interventions.
- Identifying possible partners.

Ask if a situational analysis was done at any point in time, as it has the potential to provide a wealth of data for any evaluative process.

Wait, what about a needs assessment? What is that?

A needs assessment identifies what is needed by a specific group of people, is used in many professions, and can be conducted via many different methods. For example, a needs assessment can be used to identify what specific knowledge and skills exist, and what skills and knowledge are needed, thus identifying the gaps where training needs to take place. Needs

assessments are also conducted in a broader sense, for determining what the needs are, for example, in a community. See below for further reading.

BOX 3.6. The Reasons for Developing a Clear Problem Statement

Without an exact understanding of what an intervention is trying to change, address, fix, or make better, it is nearly impossible to be clear about anything else in the evaluative process. A clear problem statement, and the facts that support the statement, are vital for designing and focusing a relevant intervention, for assessing its progress toward or achievement of results (or lack thereof), and for understanding who is intended to benefit.

We now have a *general* idea of what the intervention is (nutshell description) and a general understanding of why the intervention exists (problem statement). We now need to understand who (person) or what (place or thing) is intended to benefit or in some way receive services from the intervention.

Useful Tools for Identifying Root Causes

- ***Have a few minutes?*** Check out this summary of the Five Whys tool (*www.betterevaluation.org/en/evaluation-options/five_whys*).
- ***Have a few hours?*** Check out what is called the *fishbone* or *herringbone* analysis, among other names (*www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newTMC_03.htm*).
- ***Have a day?*** Use one of these two websites to work through an example; each one provides guidance in a step-by-step process (*http://web.mit.edu/urbanupgrading/upgrading/issues-tools/tools/problem-tree.html* or *www.sswm.info/content/problem-tree-analysis*).
- ***Have a few hours a night?*** If you are interested in learning more about needs assessments, check out this online publication: *A Guide to Assessing Needs: Essential Tools for Collecting Information, Making Decisions, and Achieving Development Results* by Ryan Watkins, Maurya West Meiers, and Yusra Laila Visser (2012; go to *www.openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/2231*).

Introducing Beneficiaries and Six Related Terms

Beneficiaries is a common term for the persons or groups an intervention is intended to benefit. **Stakeholders** are not necessarily beneficiaries, but can be. Stakeholders are literally those who have a "stake" in the intervention and its results; in other words, the intervention and its results matter to them, in some way, for some reason. Stakeholders may or may not benefit, directly or indirectly. *A beneficiary is always a*

stakeholder; however, a stakeholder is not always a beneficiary. Stakeholders can be powerful allies or detractors in an evaluative process, or even nonentities (although this is unlikely). A **gatekeeper** is someone who has the power to block or influence access to information, people, or places; a gatekeeper can be either a stakeholder or a person who is not obviously or directly related to the intervention or evaluation. Another related term you may hear is **audience.** An audience is anyone likely to use the evaluation. The reality on the ground is that most often beneficiaries are the least likely group to read an evaluation report and use it; often the donor, manager, or implementer will use the evaluation findings to inform the intervention, which then affects the beneficiaries, though there are definitely exceptions. Knowing the audience informs how to communicate the evaluation findings. The audience is sometimes a **client,** and the term *client* is most often referring to those who commissioned the evaluation. The person who commissioned the evaluation can be called the **commissioner.** The term **actor** can also be used, particularly in evaluations that draw on a systems approach. *Actor* is an encompassing term that includes those who are interested in or likely to influence the intervention and its findings, and it can refer to more than people, such as the economy or a policy. An evaluator needs to know whom the intervention is intended to benefit; who has a stake in, or is interested in, the evaluation process and/or its findings; and who needs what information communicated to them in what way, for what reason, when, and how. For now, let's get back to discussing beneficiaries.

FOCUSING ON THE INTENDED BENEFICIARIES

The entire reason why an intervention exists is to make something better for someone or something. Thus "Who or what is going to benefit from the intervention, and in what way?" is a pretty darn important question.

When you are reading through documents or conducting interviews, ask three questions (see Figure 3.3):

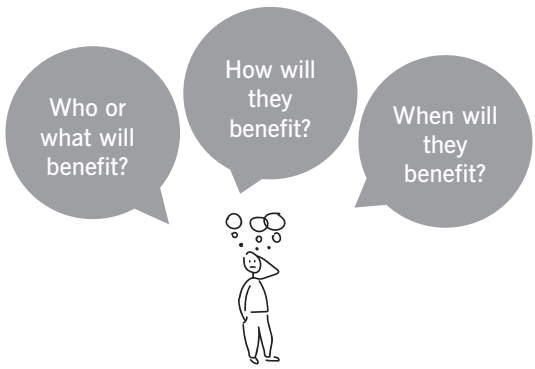


FIGURE 3.3. Considering who or what benefits.

- Who or what will benefit from the intervention?
- How will they benefit?
- When will they benefit?

The answers to these questions will provide insight into the relevance of each part of the intervention. More specifically, the answers provide information that further elaborates on the problem statement, the intervention, and the results.

- *The problem statement.* The answers to these questions identify who thinks the problem is a problem for whom. (This provides insight into who values what.)
- *The intervention.* The answers illuminate who is intended to benefit from what parts of the intervention, and how. (This conveys insight into how to design the intervention.)
- *The results.* The answers sort out who (e.g., a person or group of people) or what (e.g., a forest or an animal shelter) is intended to benefit from the intervention in what way (how does who or what benefit) and when that is intended to take place. This further clarifies the intended results (see Chapter 7 for a specific discussion of results).

Defining the Intended Beneficiaries

When evaluators ask who (or what) are the intended beneficiaries, people often tend at first to give very broad answers, listing groups or thematic areas like "children," "the environment," or "animals." It is important to probe the answer and gather as much descriptive, specific detail as possible. When "something" (or anything) is being evaluated, the more specific the "something" can be made, the clearer it becomes *what* to assess and *where* to gather information, and the lower the chances for misunderstandings become. For example, if the thematic answer is that children will benefit, probe for a bit more detail: Children who live where? What age groups? Children with siblings? Children with single parents? *These kinds of differences are important—to the beneficiaries, the design and implementation of an intervention, its intended results, how they are valued, and what to evaluate.* For this reason, the conversation should end with a rather precise (e.g., "children under the age of 12 who have unemployed parents and live under the poverty line"), and less thematic (e.g., "vulnerable children"), understanding of the beneficiary group(s). Information on the beneficiaries critically informs every part of the evaluative process.

When who or what is intended to benefit is made clear (there may be several groups of beneficiaries), there are three important follow-up questions to ask:

1. Who decided, and what process was used to decide, who are the intended beneficiaries?
2. How, if at all, were the beneficiaries involved in this decision?

3. What were the challenges or disagreements, if any, with regard to who would benefit and who would not?

These questions bring to the surface information about values, politics, and power—information that will guide what and how to monitor, how to design the evaluation, and how to interpret and value the findings. Here is an example of how engaging with potential beneficiaries influences an understanding of relevance and valuing in an evaluative process. Group R and Group G live in neighboring communities, have similar demographics (the word *demographics* means the characteristics of a group, such as economic status or age), and have received the same intervention. Group R finds the results of the intervention (how they benefitted) to be useful and important (relevant). Group G does not consider the benefits relevant; instead, it views them as nice to have, but not necessary. What can account for these two very different experiences of the intervention? It emerges that before the intervention started, several potential beneficiaries from Group R were asked what they needed or wanted, and a close version of that was provided. Potential beneficiaries from Group G were never consulted. Not being involved in any part of the decision to have an intervention, the shape of it, or its intended results may have resulted in Group G's feeling left out, alienated, or perhaps miffed; hence its members' response. Or maybe a more obvious reason is that because Group G was not consulted, perhaps the intervention did not meet Group G's needs.

Direct and Indirect Beneficiaries: The Barking Dog Example

In the evaluation process, there are typically two categories of beneficiaries: **direct** and **indirect,** sometimes called **primary** and **secondary.** An intervention should have clearly stated direct beneficiaries, and an idea of indirect or secondary ones, which may include persons, animals, places, or things (e.g., children, horses, a forest). Simply put, when a dog is barking nonstop because he is bored (the problem being that the dog is bored), and someone gives him a ball to play with, the dog is the direct beneficiary. The neighbor who has been annoyed by this barking is the secondary beneficiary—meaning that the neighbor does not benefit directly from the ball (the dog does), but they benefit in that the neighborhood is now quiet. Who is the direct beneficiary gets a bit tricky with a slight change to the orientation of the problem. Let's say that the problem is not about the dog's being bored; the problem is that two neighbors have a poor relationship. The dog's barking is just one smaller, pocket problem that has contributed to the poor relationship; the barking dog is not the *only* problem. So when the dog gets the ball and stops barking, the canine-free neighbor is now less annoyed with the dog-owning neighbor, which contributes to a better relationship. The happy, quiet dog is still a beneficiary (he receives the ball), but the neighbors are the primary beneficiaries of the quiet dog. The neighborhood is the indirect beneficiary, as it benefits when neighbors have strong relationships. Problem statements matter. Beneficiaries matter. Perspectives matter.

Once I worked with an organization that did not like the word ***beneficiary.*** *What then?*

The term *beneficiary* may be a loaded term and should not be used in situations where it brings a negative or uncomfortable meaning. I once had a similar experience where I worked with an organization in which the term *beneficiaries* suggested that a person was passive in receiving something, not an active participant in the process or service. Select a term that is culturally appropriate and acceptable to the organization with which, and the location or context where, you are working.

Eschewing Homogeneity and Examining Heterogeneity

Men are not all the same. Some are married and some are not; some are poor and some are not; and some are well educated and old, and some are young and disabled. Not all young, disabled men are the same; some are sight-impaired, while others have other disabilities. Not even all sight-impaired young men are the same: Some were born blind, some became blind through a degenerative disorder, and some became blind after an accident. A key lesson to remember is that *every difference creates a difference,* and those differences should influence the intervention's design, its implementation, its results, and the ways the results are assessed and valued. In scholastic terms, examining differences is referred to as looking at **heterogeneity** (*hetero-* means "different"); in other words, it is exploring diversity.

The next time you are in a yoga class, a supermarket, a café, or a doctor's office, look around and identify someone who initially seems like you in some basic ways, such as gender, age, height, weight, and race. Then stop and think: In how many ways is it possible that the person is different from you—ways that would make a difference to how they benefitted and valued the same service? What might they value more? Less?

While every difference makes a difference—a way of thinking attributed to Gregory Bateson (1972)—it does not mean that an intervention must necessarily be individualized for each person's circumstances (though it can be). For the evaluator of an intervention, understanding how differences influence people who were assumed to be homogeneous but were not (e.g., school-age girls, forest rangers, athletes, homeless youth) can provide explanations for why an intervention was more effective for certain people, or valued more, or valued less, by different people all assumed to be part of the "same" group. In evaluation, something is valued, and there needs to be an understanding of the source from which these values stem. While Chapter 12 covers values, and Chapters 14 and 15 talk about how different evaluation approaches involve different values, here we focus on how beneficiaries' values and perceptions of the intervention provide one of the more critical places to look for *how* to understand and value a result.

Let's go back to our girls' education intervention. The direct beneficiaries are the school-age girls who currently do not attend school. In how many ways might those girls be different, and how many of these ways would potentially influence the effectiveness of the intervention and how those girls perceive it? Some examples with the potential to make a

difference may include girls who have supportive mothers or other supportive males in the family (but not their fathers), girls who want to go to school, or girls who have brothers who go to school.

Who or What Can Be Damaged or Hurt by the Intervention?

A critical, yet often forgotten group consists of those who can be hurt, damaged, or negatively influenced by an intervention, while others (potentially or actually) benefit. To explore who or what (e.g., the rhinos, the environment) might be in this group, consider asking one, if not all three, of the following questions:

- Who or what can be harmed, hurt, upset, or damaged by the intervention?
- Who or what may have diminished power, benefits, or access to resources as a result of the intervention?
- Who thinks the intervention is damaging in some way, regardless of whether or not it is a reality (perceptions)?

Oddly, evaluation theories, models, and frameworks do not provide a specific term to describe persons, places, or things that can be potentially hurt, damaged or intentionally forgotten by the intervention. Not providing a term ignores the importance of understanding one of the more critical aspects in evaluation (and in society). As critical as it is to know who benefits, it is as critical to know who does not, and even more critical to know who is ignored, damaged, or hurt by an intervention. Perhaps we can call them the *un-beneficiaries*. The knowledge of who or what can be harmed, upset, or damaged by an intervention can broaden the insights of a program implementer or designer, which can lead to changing the intervention or mitigating potentially unpleasant situations. For the evaluator, the information regarding who or what may be un-beneficiaries can be obtained from data that explains implementation challenges, unexpected results, or negative findings, such as data on groups or persons who may have either overtly blocked the intervention or subtly sabotaged it. Engaging with the un-beneficiaries also provides a place to explore values that can be used to identify criteria for how to value findings. Perhaps the un-beneficiaries were the group that needed most to benefit and did not, or perhaps the damage done to them by achieving the results outweighs (from their perspective) the intervention's achievements. Consider, for example, the advantage of having a road link between communities. This link may provide access to better medical care, fresher produce, and jobs. At the same time, the road may damage the environment, including local plants or animals and the water supply.

Data provided by the un-beneficiaries can also explain why certain groups or individuals provide critical feedback on the intervention, even when the intervention has achieved all its intended results. Furthermore, asking the question "Who are the un-beneficiaries?" can provide necessary data to explore and understand larger questions of social justice.

Socially Just for Whom?: Some Food for Thought

Thinking about beneficiaries and un-beneficiaries often poses an unspoken challenge for an evaluator who wants to encourage a socially just society through being an evaluator or conducting an evaluation. The evaluator who concerns herself with social justice needs to grapple and come to terms with this question: In any evaluative process, what is considered socially just for whom, and who thinks that? If there are multiple perspectives on what is socially just, how does the evaluator choose to negotiate and engage with those perspectives, and how does that affect the evaluation, its findings, and its recommendations? At the same time, she may need to grapple with the challenge of implementing an evaluation that is *not* focused on social justice—for example, when evaluation users (or clients) are not particularly interested in that issue.

Beneficiaries. Indirect beneficiaries. Un-beneficiaries. Stakeholders. Clients. All these groups are likely to provide useful and varying perspectives (often useful just because they are varying). Yet an evaluator's role goes beyond asking questions and gathering data from multiple perspectives and viewpoints; she also needs to make sense of it all. At times, at least for me, the sense-making role can be a bit (OK, a lot) overwhelming. Yet making sense of data from multiple perspectives is a core reason why evaluators play a critical role in the evaluative process, and in society.

Including Beneficiaries in the Process: Placebo or Panacea?

In a discussion of beneficiaries, the word *participatory,* and the whole notion of *participation,* are often brought into the conversation. Specific evaluation approaches have different meanings and make use of different processes for participation. Some approaches that emphasize participation, yet in different ways, include democratic evaluation, empowerment evaluation, feminist evaluation, developmental evaluation, and, (no surprise) participatory evaluation. See Chapters 14 and 15 if you want to jump ahead to read about evaluation approaches. For now, a very practical discussion wraps up the chapter and takes a down-to-earth perspective on the whole concept of participation.

Irene Guijt (2014) describes participatory approaches as those that in some way involve an intervention's stakeholders (of which beneficiaries are one group, as noted on pages 60–61) at any stage of the evaluation. She notes that the reasons for choosing a participatory approach may be either pragmatic or ethical, or a combination of the two. They may be pragmatic because better evaluations are achieved (e.g., better data, better understandings of the data, more appropriate recommendations, better uptake of findings); they may be ethical because taking such an approach is viewed as the right thing to do. Given these potential benefits, participation in evaluation is often presented as a win–win situation. Nonetheless, such benefits are not a sure thing.

I want to share a stream-of-consciousness reflection on the words *participation* and *beneficiaries*. When someone says, "Oh, I am doing a participatory process," it always makes me

wonder: Who is participating? Who chooses whom to participate? What if a group or person does not want to participate (i.e., forced participation or refusal)? How does a person participate, at what level, and at what point in the process? How does it benefit the evaluation? How does it benefit the beneficiary?

When I am asked to implement a participatory process in a community, particularly in an impoverished one, I feel awkward about the fact that I am getting paid and the people participating are probably not. They might get a cup of tea, or have their transportation costs reimbursed, or receive a small honorarium. People often attend meetings, organized for an evaluation process, at a personal or economic cost to themselves; is that OK? It might be; it depends on the context. Using the word *participatory* does not automatically mean that an evaluation is an inherently fair or just process. A participatory process can be quite exclusionary, for example, allowing (or encouraging) some groups to participate and not others. Or the word can be misleading when groups are invited to participate at times when they cannot; when there are other barriers to participation; or when, even if people do participate, their voices in no way influence the evaluation or its related decisions. Then there is the realization that sometimes beneficiaries do not want to participate; should we (the evaluators) badger them until they do, so that we can say the process was participatory?

Sometimes researchers or evaluators think that gathering data from a person through an interview constitutes a participatory process; that makes me shudder. If that were so, then every evaluation that gathers primary data would be participatory. When we label a process participatory, or when we are being asked to conduct a participatory process, we need to be very clear about how the approach will be used in practice, how it is beneficial to the evaluation, and how it is intended to be useful to the people involved.

Consider asking some, if not all, of the following questions:

- How will the process be participatory, and for whom?
- How will participation be compensated, if at all?
- Whose participation is deemed useful and beneficial to the evaluation?
- Who will benefit through participating, and in what ways?
- Who can get hurt if they are, or are not, involved?
- What part of the process is participatory? Is it participatory for different people at different points in the process?
- How does a participatory approach lead to a more credible evaluation? (For a discussion of evaluation credibility, please see Chapter 5.)
- How does participation support a fair and just process?
- And lastly, who is making all of the decisions in regard to these questions, and how are they made?

Phew. It feels good to share.

Let me end this section by stating that participatory approaches, when done well, can be informative, useful, and beneficial to the participants and the evaluation. Here are some examples of how participatory processes are useful: building the capacity of those who participate (when mentoring and training are part of the process); improving the relevance and accuracy of an evaluation report; bringing the local or internal knowledge necessary to interpret findings; increasing process and evaluation use; and contributing to the face validity of an evaluation. *Face validity* means that an ordinary person can understand the evaluation questions, methods, and analysis without special methodological training, and the evaluation makes sense in a straightforward, logical way.

Another concept that is also intertwined in the conversation about beneficiaries and participation is *buy-in*. Obtaining buy-in is a very popular concept when an evaluation brings together multiple stakeholder groups. In these types of evaluative processes, an often-heard expression is "We need to get buy-in . . . through a participatory process." Be careful with the concept and what it implies. If evaluators aim to create buy-in to an assumption or a value, for example, this also likely means that someone or some group is not only dominating, but winning. The aim of an evaluation that has multiple stakeholders is not for one stakeholder to win; the focus is on gathering and understanding those multiple perspectives, and making meaning out of everything that has been heard and gathered. All stakeholders should recognize their voices (e.g., perspectives, needs, insights) in the report, and therefore find the evaluative process, its findings, and the evaluator to be credible and trustworthy.

Engaging Beneficiaries

- ***Have a few minutes?*** Take a brief look at how Derek Sivers explains that recognizing difference is useful (*www.ted.com/talks/derek_sivers_weird_or_just_different#t-142837*).
- ***Have a few hours?*** Read Irene Guijt's (2014) report, *Participatory Approaches* (Methodological Briefs—Impact Evaluation 5, published by the UNICEF Office of Research in Florence, Italy). While it focuses on impact evaluation, the document provides a wealth of information on participatory approaches, a useful glossary, and excellent resources in the bibliography.
- ***Have a few hours a night?*** Consider selecting a few chapters in *Collaborative, Participatory, and Empowerment Evaluation: Stakeholder Involvement Approaches* (Fetterman, Rodriguez-Campos, Zukoski, & Contributors, 2018).
- ***Have a few more hours a night?*** Sandra Mathison's (2005) *Encyclopedia of Evaluation* provides nice summaries of the approaches mentioned in this chapter, plus a plethora of others. Another place to read about the approaches mentioned is the Better Evaluation website (*www.betterevaluation.org*). Look under the Themes and Approaches tabs.

WRAPPING UP

Writing a nutshell description of an intervention is a useful way to start exploring what to evaluate. This description initiates the discussion of three core concepts: intervention, problem statement, and beneficiary, which are critical to any evaluative process. Identifying the interplay among them demonstrates the necessary interconnected thinking and iterative nature of the evaluation journey. The problem statement, when distinguishing between grand problems and pocket ones, and root causes and symptoms, informs the reason for an intervention, provides guidance in how to design one, and anticipates its results. When a problem statement is well thought out, it provides insight into questions often asked throughout the evaluative process, such as the relevance of the intervention and its results, who aims to benefit, and where results will take place.

Recognizing the role of different stakeholders, one group of whom are the beneficiaries, can generate an awareness of the multiple perspectives that exist; specifically, it can bring to the surface a multitude of values and perceptions that can be used to reflect on the intervention, inform an evaluation design, and influence the criteria for valuing an intervention's results. The discussions in this chapter inform the initial, iterative steps of any evaluative process, and when addressed well, provide a delightful gift to the evaluator. The next chapter delves a bit deeper into the evaluative process and asks you to consider how you know what you know, challenges you to consider how others may think very differently, and explores how to engage with thinking that perhaps does not resonate with your own.

Our Conversation: Between You and Me

The conversation with me is intended to coach you through similar situations you will encounter in the real world.

In the chapter, I shared a stream of consciousness about the concept of participation. I mentioned that sometimes people equate participation with a fair and just process. What was your reaction to that? Pondering about what participation *actually* means helps me to think through what will be my response when a client asks for a participatory process, before they ask me. I use the thought process and questions highlighted in the chapter to do my pondering. What will you do the next time someone says, "I want a participatory process?" How will you respond? What questions will you raise, if any?