

Solutions when the Solution is the Problem: Incorporating Learning and Accountability into Complex Problem Solving

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Key messages

- Evaluation should serve multiple purposes, only one of which is discerning 'impact'
 - Facilitating real-time learning, understanding variation, is vital
- Different professional/civic groups make and require different kinds of knowledge claims
 - Learn to distinguish between them
- When making claims about 'complex' and 'chaotic' projects, need to change the terms of debate
 - Roads ≠ pills ≠ microcredit ≠ schools ≠ governance
 - Methods per se aren't rigorous
- Knowledge of context(s), implementation dynamics and impact trajectories are crucial to understanding and verifying all knowledge claims
 - Need to deploy social, not just economic, theory
 - Deploy mixed methods research designs, as appropriate

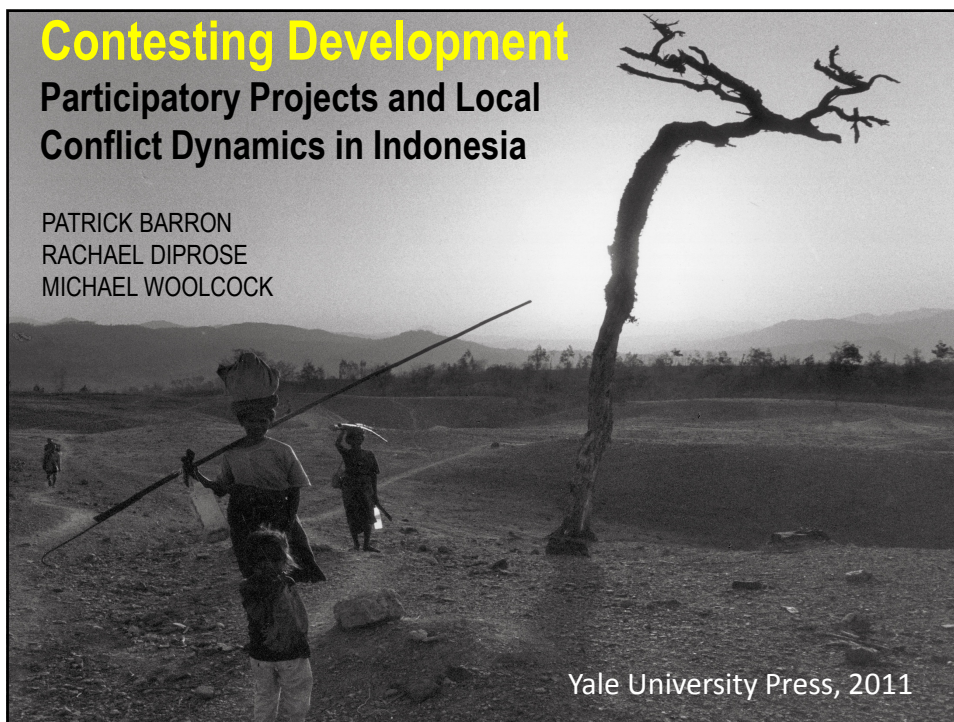
Overview

- Background, qualifiers
- What's the problem?
 - Getting the questions right
- What is a 'complex' intervention?
- What types of interventions dominate? Why?
- Matching problems and evaluation tools
- Key challenges...
- ...and what we might do about them

Contesting Development

Participatory Projects and Local Conflict Dynamics in Indonesia

PATRICK BARRON
RACHAEL DIPROSE
MICHAEL WOOLCOCK



Yale University Press, 2011

What's the problem?

- How to make 'known' interventions work better?
 - Especially key public services
 - Water, education, health...
- How to design, implement and assess responses to problems whose resolution is, *ex ante*, unknown or *unknowable*?
 - Especially tasks that can't be ducked, outsourced
 - Justice, governance
- How to meet the requirements of diverse professional constituencies?
 - Researchers (identification, publication...)
 - Practitioners (be useful *here*, help me *now*)
 - Administrators (satisfy political, procedural imperatives)

Getting the questions right

- From emphasis on
 - 'Does aid work?' or 'Does *my* aid work?' to
 - 'What is the particular development problem we are trying to solve?' 'What *type* of problem is it?' 'For whom is it a problem?'
 - 'What range of solutions are sound, supportable, implementable?'
 - 'What should we reasonably expect a given intervention to have achieved, by when?'

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 - ‘What should we reasonably expect a given intervention to have achieved, by when?’
 - Selling generic solutions to solving specific problems
 - Divining LATE to understanding SDs
 - The aggregate evidence will always, inherently be “mixed”
 - Ex ante design and ex post evaluation to enhancing real-time learning and implementation capacity

What is a ‘complex’ intervention?

	<u>‘Simple’</u> Nets, pills, roads	<u>‘Complicated’</u> Agriculture, microcredit	<u>‘Complex’</u> Education, health	<u>‘Chaotic’</u> Local justice reform
<u>Theory</u> • Predictive precision • Cumulative knowledge • Subject/object gap	High			Low
<u>Mechanisms</u> • # Causal pathways • # of ‘people-based’ transactions • # Feedback loops	Few			Many
<u>Outcomes</u> • Plausible range • Measurement precision	Narrow			Wide

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What types of interventions dominate?

- Our aid architecture strongly favors ‘best practices’ that ‘work’ and can be readily scaled up, replicated
- An ideal project yields results that are...
 - predictable, readily-measurable, quick, photogenic, non-controversial, context-independent
 - roads, electrification, immunization

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 - predictable, readily-measurable, quick, photogenic, non-controversial, context-independent
 - roads, electrification, immunization
- ‘Best fit’ interventions, however, are likely to be...
 - unpredictable, hard to measure, slow, boring, contentious, context-dependent
- The higher the risk and uncertainty, the stronger the imperative to implement ‘best practices’
 - And to confuse change in ‘form’ for ‘function’
- But the obligation to demonstrate efficacy of ‘best fit’ responses (rightly) remains...

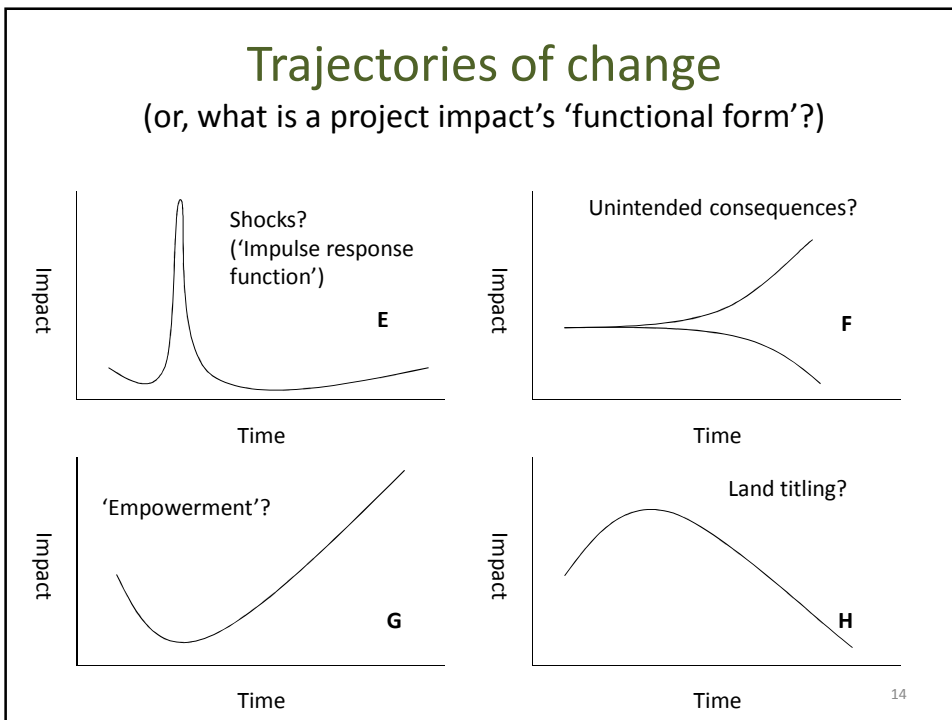
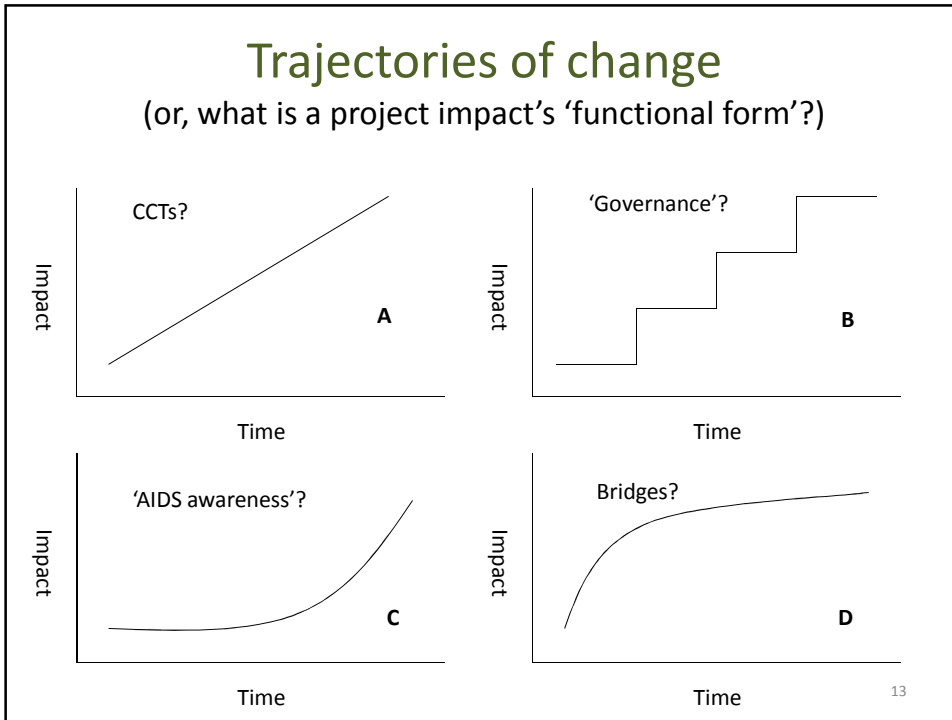
So, what can we do when...

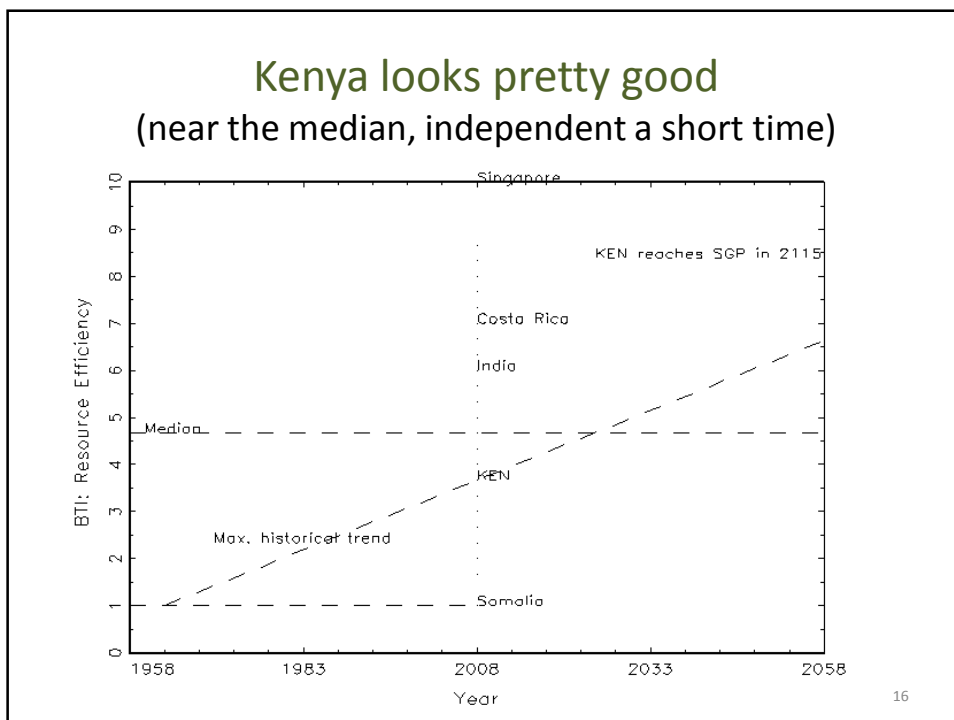
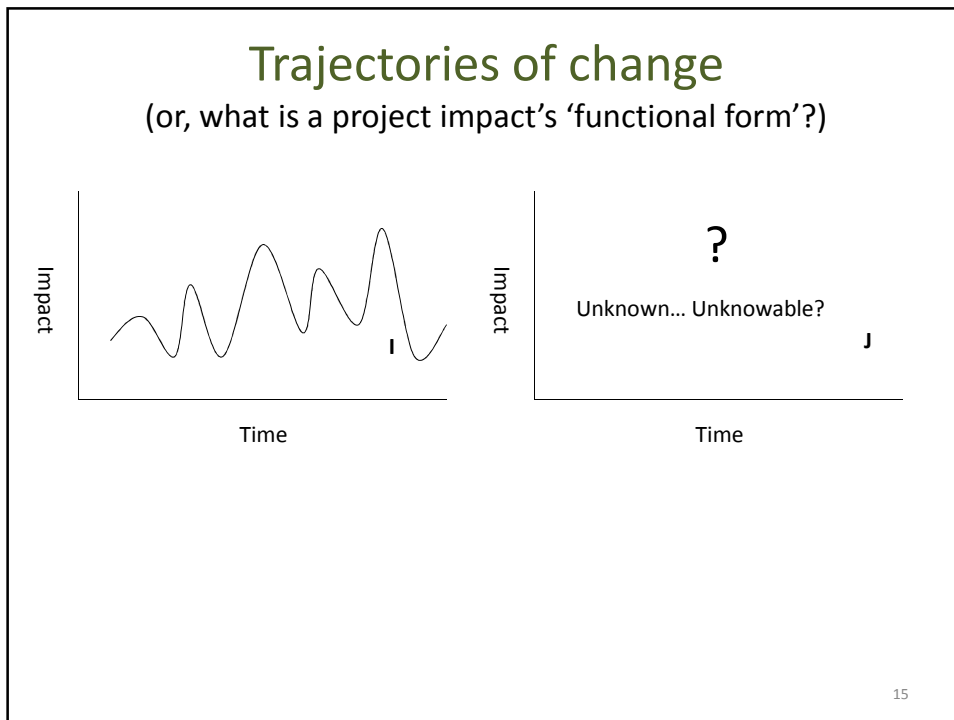
- Inputs are variables (not constants)?
 - Facilitation/participation vs. tax cuts (seeds, pills, etc)
 - Teaching vs. text books
 - Therapy vs. medicine
- Adapting to context is an explicit, desirable feature?
 - Each context/project nexus is thus idiosyncratic
- Outcomes are inherently hard to define and measure?
 - E.g., empowerment, collective action, conflict mediation...

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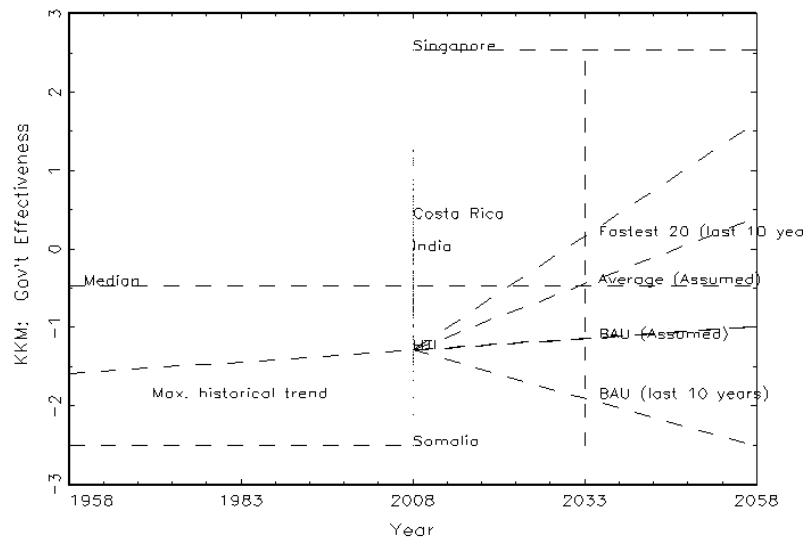
Use mixed methods ('ecologies of evidence')

- Combinations of methods to complement strengths and weaknesses of each
- Understanding context, process
- Enhancing reliability and validity
 - Construct
 - Internal
 - External
- Especially as it pertains to making causal claims
 - Econometrics vs history vs anthropology vs law
- Link to explicit theory of change
 - Sunflowers vs Oak Trees...





Haiti, even at huge accelerations of progress, still far from “developed” levels in 50 years



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Diagnostics to Pragmatics

- Deft pedagogy, active listening, due modesty
- Make theory of change explicit
 - Generates testable hypotheses, promotes accountability
- Use mixed methods (and theory)
- Build constituencies for show, long-run change
 - Need social movements
- Revamp M&E
 - Make ‘M’ as cool as ‘E’ (has become)
 - M & e & E: Monitoring, experiential learning, Evaluation
 - Pritchett et al (2011)
- Open and sustain spaces for
 - Local innovation, real-time learning (“good failures”)
 - Projects as ‘laboratories’, platforms for context-specific experimentation (not the same as experiments)
 - e.g., PNPM (Indonesia), NSP (Afghanistan), CODA...
 - Equitable contests (“good struggles”)

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Source material

- Bamberger, Michael, Vijayendra Rao and Michael Woolcock (2010) "Using Mixed Methods in Monitoring and Evaluation: Experiences from International Development", in Abbas Tashakkori and Charles Teddlie (eds.) *Handbook of Mixed Methods* (2nd revised edition) Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, pp. 613-641
- Barron, Patrick, Rachael Diprose and Michael Woolcock (2011) *Contesting Development: Participatory Projects and Local Conflict Dynamics in Indonesia* New Haven: Yale University Press
- Woolcock, Michael (2009) 'Toward a Plurality of Methods in Project Evaluation: A Contextualized Approach to Understanding Impact Trajectories and Efficacy' *Journal of Development Effectiveness* 1(1): 1-14