**2011 EEN Forum Notes**

**Session Name**: The EEN Morning Show – Navigating Complexity in Our Work

**Speakers**: Mel Mark – Penn State University

Jonny Morell – Fulcrum Corporation

Juha Uitto – United Nations

Beverly Parsons – American Evaluation Association

**Session Date/Time**: 6/23/2011, 10:00 AM

**Note Taker**: Jake Lyonfields

**Main Themes**:

* Ways we think about complexity generally
  + Perspectives on necessary changes in how we think about complexity
  + Perspectives on what changes we need to make in what tools we use/how we use existing tools
* Values we endorse and how they influence logic model generation
* Stakeholders – who are they? How do we resolve conflicts with different stakeholders?

**Detailed Notes**:

* Jonny Morell
  + Definitions – Formal and Informal meeting. We need some way of separating these two ideas. Also, the existence of complex systems does not mean we cannot produce good predictions.
* Beverly
  + 3 ways of thinking about complexity: (1) Think about complex systems. System: A set of interconnecting elements that have an overall purpose; Complex system: one that’s massively entangled, (2) Complex Adaptive Systems. Distinguishing organized control systems and complex adaptive systems, (3) Being able to look at multiple outcomes: sustainability, social justice, and economic development. Ought to take these as guiding principles.
* Juha
  + UN is a big player in global economic and sustainable development. Desire multiple good outcomes, but it’s important to ensure actions don’t produce worse long-term consequences.
* Back to Melvin: When considering all of these facts, we are all really talking about issues of values. Important to consider when considering intended and unintended consequences. Do the members of the discussion have any insight into which values to prioritize?
* Jonny Morell – People produce different outcomes when constructing logic models, even with considering the same problem/idea. Often, we have to have multiple conversations and compromise on which values to prioritize
* Juha – Doesn’t believe there ought to be a tradeoff between things like the environment and the economy in developmental situations because inherent in environmental protection should be an economic component.
* Beverly – We should focus on the connection between environmental issues and human rights. We have an obligation to protect the public interest, and so environmental evaluators can be very helpful in activities that try to promote some sort of social good.
* Melvin – do we have an adequate toolkit for environmental assessment?
* Beverly – Causal loop diagramming and social network analysis have growing importance in terms of how we look at complexity. The changes we need to make are actually in how we use our tools as opposed to having to create new tools
* Juha – Agrees. Need to use the tools we have in a more meaningful way. We lack things like baselines for a lot of analyses that have very important ethical implications. We should try to tease out possible unintended consequences on the offset.
* Melvin – another problem is that organizations often think of logic models as static. We need to see them as evolving diagrams
* Jonny – Can only think of two tools to add: Data Mining (very serious, heavy-duty data mining. Very powerful technique) and Agent-based Modeling.
* Melvin – Being in circumstances where tools/resources are lacking, how do you still do useful evaluation?
* Jonny – always trade-offs in different approaches, so the real question is: Where are the trade-offs? May be necessary to have a bulletproof evaluation, so maybe we end up picking a narrow set of outcomes. Other times, it may be necessary to do more of an inventory.
* Beverly – Good to focus on utility. Also important to focus on those individuals that will be affected the most (most impacted stakeholders).
* Melvin – may be an issue of capacity-building as well for an organization with which we’re working. Can be necessary to build measuring capacity.

**Points for Discussion**:

* Comment/Question – Excellent keynotes. In reality, I deal with human and natural science systems (two systems), whereas often it’s a single-system approach. These two systems can clash frequently. Asking for advice on dealing with these two when they conflict (or, how do we best approach these situations?). Emphasis placed on those situations in which clientele may not immediately consider environmental evaluation.
* Beverly – Complex adaptive systems come out of the natural science systems, so I like to draw on those when dealing with natural science professionals. Specifically with the emphasized point – we have an opportunity to get those we help excited about what we’re doing and about environmental practice, so it’s important to recognize this
* Jonny – It is a fallacy that we need randomized experiments in social science to consider it valid. Moreover, there are a lot of externalities that we fail to take into account when evaluating a social policy, which is something we need to correct.
* Question – about sensitivity of initial conditions; how do we know when/why a project has “failed”? When taking into account all of the shareholders, some may not agree with the final goal, so they try to impede work. The program may have failed because of that, but the program may also have failed because initial conditions were bad.
* Jonny – we can be more precise about why things are working/not working by using multiple evolving logic models.
* Beverly – We have to be cautious about programs “working” because the programs may not have a great degree of scale or sustainability
* Melvin – we may need to qualify statements: “This program failed in the sense of \_\_\_\_”. Some clients have a serious phobia about partly bad news, and so often they will focus on that as opposed to the concurrent successes of the program.
* Juha – program success may be dwarfed by other program failures for a particular organization
* Question – Would like to know more about sharing definitions among diverse stakeholders, and who really needs to be at the table as a stakeholder
* Beverly – Must focus on paradigms that influence on the ways people are thinking. When we understand those, we can answer this question better.
* Juha – There are lots of different mechanisms people endorse in order to achieve a particular goal, and if people don’t agree on the tools to use to evaluate mechanisms, then we can’t discuss reaching the goal as much
* Melvin – We need to talk about how we chose certain measures (eg what values influenced our selection of measures). It’s also true that we can’t expect evidence to always trump ideology, so what are the methods that facilitate conversation and generate civil discourse regarding the issue.